

# Religions

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وَتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ فَأَقِيمُوا  
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# SOURCES OF TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE IN ISLAM

## The Case of the People of the Book

by Ibrahim Kalin

Islam's encounter with other religions is as old as Islam itself. The two sources of Islam, i.e., the Qur'an and Hadith, contain extensive discussions, narrations, and injunctions on the various religious traditions before Islam and especially Judaism and Christianity. The Muslim awareness of the multiplicity of faith traditions is evident not only in the Qur'an but also in the sayings of the prophet Muhammad as well as in the later Islamic scholarship. Historically, the first Muslim community came into being within a fairly diverse society where Jews, Christians, pagans, polytheists, monotheists, fire-worshippers (Magians or Majus), and others lived together across the Arabian Peninsula. The major and minor religions that the Islamic world

encountered from its earliest inception to the modern period make up a long list: the religious traditions of the pre-Islamic (*jahiliyyah*) Arabs, Mazdeans in Mesopotamia, Iran, and Transoxania, Christians (of different communions like Nestorians in Mesopotamia and Iran, Monophysites in Syria, Egypt and Armenia, Orthodox Melkites in Syria, Orthodox Latins in North Africa), Jews in various places, Samaritans in Palestine, Mandaean in south Mesopotamia, Harranians in north Mesopotamia, Manichaeans in Mesopotamia and Egypt, Buddhists and Hindus in Sind, tribal religions in Africa, pre-Islamic Turkic tribes, Buddhists in Sind and the Panjab, and Hindus in the Panjab.<sup>1</sup> In short, Islam is no stranger to the

challenge of other religions. The fact that Islam is the last of the three Abrahamic faiths puts it in a special relationship with Judaism and Christianity. On the one hand, the Qur'ān defines Jews and Christians as the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*) and gives them the status of protected religious communities (*ahl al-dhimmah*) under the provision of paying a religious tax called *jizya* (compare the Qur'ān, al-Tawbah 9:29). Within this legal framework, the People of the Book are accorded certain rights, the most important of which is the right of religious belief, i.e., no forced conversion. On the other hand, the Qur'ān engages the People of the Book head-on as the primary counterparts of a serious dialogue on the unity of God, the Abrahamic tradition, some biblical stories, salvation, the hereafter, and the nature of Jesus Christ. The Qur'ān is explicit and occasionally harsh in its criticism of certain Jewish and Christian themes because no serious dialogue is possible without raising the most fundamental issues.

In relation to the treatment of non-Muslims, we thus see a tension between what we might loosely call the requirements of law and theological doctrine. Islamic law grants certain rights to non-Muslims including freedom of religion, property, travel, education, and government employment. These rights extend not only to Jews and Christians but also to other faith traditions such as the Manicheans, Hindus, and Buddhists. Muslims encountered these latter communities as the borders of the Islamic world expanded beyond the Arabian Peninsula. One of the major legal adjustments in this process was the enlargement of the concept of the People of the Book to include

those other than Jews and Christians. This, however, was complemented by an economic system that allowed non-Muslims to move freely across the social strata of Muslim societies in which they lived. Following the vocation of Prophet Muhammad, Muslims always encouraged free trade and, therefore, unlike Christianity, did not have to discriminate against Jews as international merchants or money-lending usurers. Socially, there was nothing in the Islamic tradition similar to the Hindu caste system that would have led to the treatment of Hindus in discriminatory manners. Instead, Muslims treated Hindus as members of a different socio-religious community whose internal affairs were regulated by Hindu, not Islamic, laws. Politically, Muslim rulers were more or less pragmatic and used relatively lenient legal provisions to ensure the loyalty of their non-Muslim subjects. Forced conversion or economic discrimination was not in the interest of the state or the Muslim communities. This socio-economic and legal framework, thus, played a key role in the rapid spread of Islam and facilitated the development of a "culture of coexistence" in Muslim societies that had considerable non-Muslim populations from the Balkans and Anatolia to the subcontinent of India.

Legal protection, however, is not a licence to theological laxity. The Qur'ān sharply criticizes the Meccan polytheists and accuses them of failing to understand the true nature of God. Jews and Christians are not spared from criticism, some of which are general and some specific. The primary reason for the Qur'ān's constant dialogue with them is its unflinching effort to hold

them up to higher moral and religious standards than the Meccan pagans. As the two heirs or claimants to the legacy of Abraham, Jewish and Christian communities are expected to uphold the principles of monotheism and accept the new revelation sent through the prophet Muhammad. The Qur'ān calls upon them to recognize Islam as part of the Abrahamic tradition: <sup>2</sup> "Say: O People of the Book. Come to a word [*kalimah*] common between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partners unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him)." <sup>3</sup> (al-i 'Imran 3: 64)

The tension between theological certitude and legal protection is further complicated by another tension between the unity of the essential message of religions and the multiplicity of socio-religious communities. The tension is real with theological and political consequences. The problem is how to explain and then reconcile the discrepancy between the unity of the divine message and the diversity of faith communities to which the divine message has been sent. As I shall discuss below, the Qur'ān seeks to overcome this problem by defining the plurality of socio-religious communities as part of God's plan to test different communities in their struggle for virtue and the common good (*al-khayrat*).

The universality of divine revelation is a constant theme in the Qur'ān and forms the basis of what we might call the Abrahamic ecumenism of monotheistic religions. As the father of monotheism, Abraham is assigned a central role to represent the universalist



nature of the divine revelation: he is the most important figure to unite Jews, Christians, and Muslims, despite the fact that Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are also accorded special places in the Islamic tradition. While Abraham represents the pinnacle of this ecumenism, other prophets are seen as bearers of the same message, i.e., believing in the unity of God, worshipping him alone, and leading a virtuous life. "And before thy time We never sent any apostle without having revealed to him that there is no deity save Me, - [and that,] therefore, you shall worship Me [alone]!" (al-Anbiya 21:25).

The Qur'ān presents this claim to universality as a trait of not only Islam



things, which we see in some Qur'ānic verses (compare al-Rahman 55:1–18; Isra 17:44), is of particular significance since it establishes “surrendering to God” (*islam*) as both a cosmological and human-religious principle. The universality of divine message extends beyond revealed books all the way to the natural world. This universalism, however, is always qualified by a reference to true faith in God and His decision to send messengers to warn those who are mistaken. “Say: “We believe in God, and in that which has been revealed unto us, and that which has been revealed unto upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed by their Sustainer unto Moses and Jesus and all the [other] prophets: we make no distinction between any of them. And unto Him do we surrender ourselves [literally “we’re *muslims* to Him”].” (al-i ‘Imran 3:84)

but also other Abrahamic faiths and calls upon Jews and Christians specifically to renew their bond with the father of monotheism. The true religion is “islam” (with a small “i”) in the sense of “surrendering oneself to God” fully and unconditionally. Once this common denominator is secured, ritual differences and even some theological disparities can be overcome. The Qur’ān calls all to *islam* without making a distinction: “Do they seek a faith other than in God [*din Allāh*], although it is unto Him that whatever is in the heavens and on earth surrenders itself [*aslama*], willingly or unwillingly, since unto Him all must return?” (al-i ‘Imran 3:83; compare also al-Ra’d 13:15). The reference to the cosmological order of

These specific references to the prophets of Abrahamic monotheism shows Islam’s specific interest to have a constant dialogue with the People of the Book and form a kind of religious alliance with them against the Meccan polytheists. If the prophet Abraham is understood correctly as the father of monotheism, then the theological differences between Jews, Christians and Muslims can be negotiated. The Qur’ān is, thus, absolutely uncompromising on the fundamental Abrahamic principle, i.e., surrendering oneself to the one God alone: “For, if one goes in search of a religion other than surrendering to God (*al-islam*), it will never be accepted from him, and in the life to come he shall be among the lost” (al-i ‘Imran 3:85). Commenting on the verse, Ibn Kathir says that “whoever follows a path

**The universality of divine revelation is a constant theme in the Qur'an and forms the basis of what we might call the Abrahamic ecumenism of monotheistic religions.**

other than what God has ordained, it will not be accepted.”<sup>4</sup> Fakhr al-Din al-Razi quotes Abu Muslim as saying that the expression “we surrender ourselves to Him” (*muslimuna lahu*) means that “we submit to God’s command with consent and turn away from all

opposition to Him.

This is the quality of those who believe in God and they are the people of peace [*ahl al-silm*].”<sup>5</sup>

Despite the narrow interpretation of some classical and contemporary Muslims, this reading of the verse supports our rendering of *islam* as “surrendering to God.”

This emphasis on the unique nature of the Abrahamic tradition underlies Islam’s attitude towards other religions. It is by virtue of this linkage that Judaism and Christianity receive more attention in the Islamic sources than any other religion besides, of course, polytheism, which the Qur’an rejects unconditionally. Islam recognizes the reality of other religions but does so with a critical attitude in that all religious communities are called upon to (re)affirm and appropriate the main thrust of Abrahamic monotheism. Any claim to religious belief short of this is denounced as an aberration, metaphysical error, schism, and affront to God.

In what follows, I shall analyze the applications of these general principles and discuss the grounds and limits of tolerance and intolerance towards other religions in the Islamic tradition. The focus will be Judaism and Christianity, leaving aside other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism for another

discussion. I shall claim that, while Islam does not claim a monopoly on belief in God and leading a virtuous life, it sets strict conditions for accepting a faith as a legitimate path that one can follow to reach salvation. The tensions between the oneness and universality of the divine message on the one hand and the multiplicity of human communities on the other will also be discussed. The following verse is the anchor point of our discussion: “Unto every one of you We have appointed a [different] law [*shir’atan*] and way of life [*minhajan*]. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community [*ummah wahidah*]: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works!” (al-Ma’idah 5:48; see also Hud 11:118). I shall discuss the extent to which the call for “vying for the common good” can form the basis of an Islamic notion of religious tolerance.

### **Universal Revelation and Abrahamic Ecumenism**

The Qur’an presents revelation (*wahy, kitab*) as a universal phenomenon. Whether it talks about the creation of the universe or the stories of the prophets, it refers to revelation as having both historical continuity and claim to universal truth. Revelation is historically universal for God has revealed his message to different societies to remind them of faith and salvation and warn against disbelief: “Verily, We have sent thee with the truth, as a bearer of glad tidings and a warner: for there never was any community [*ummah*] but a warner has [lived and] passed away in

its midst" (al-Fatir 35:24). The same principle is stated in another verse: "And for every community there is a messenger [*rasul*]; and only after their messenger has appeared [and delivered his message] is judgment passed on them, in all equity" (Yunus 10:47). In both verses, the word *ummah* is used to refer to different communities to which messengers have been sent.<sup>6</sup> While *ummah* has come to denote specifically the Muslim community in the later Islamic scholarship, it is used in the Qur'ān and the Hadith to describe any faith community whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. The word *ummah* is also used for humanity in general (compare al-Baqarah 2:213).

While all revelation comes from God, revelation in the specific sense such as a revealed book originates from what the Qur'ān calls the "mother of the book" (*umm al-kitab*). Like all other revelations, the Qur'ān originates from this "mother book," which is the "protected tablet" (*lawh mahfuz*) in the divine presence<sup>7</sup>: "Consider this divine book, clear in itself and clearly showing the truth: behold, We have caused it to be a discourse in the Arabic tongue, so that you might encompass it with your reason. And, verily, [originating as it does] in the source, with Us, of all revelation, it is indeed sublime, full of wisdom" (al-Zukhruf 43:2–4). The word *umm*, literally "mother," means origin and source.<sup>8</sup> The word *kitab*, book, in this context refers not to any particular revealed book but to revelation as such. This comprehensive meaning applies to all revelation: "Every age has its revealed book [*kitab*]. God annuls or confirms whatever He wills [of His earlier messages]; for with Him is the source of all revelation [*umm al-kitab*]"

(al-Ra'd 13: 38–39). The Qur'ān, thus, considers the history of revelation as one and connects the prophets from Adam and Noah to Jesus and Muhammad in a single chain of prophetic tradition. The continuity of divine revelation links different socio-religious communities through the bondage of a common tradition. The following verse, while making a strong case against religious communalism and ethnic nationalism, which was rampant in the pre-Islamic Arabia, points to what really unites different communities: "O humans! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all knowing, all-aware." al-Hujurat 49:13

Commenting on the above verses, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi points out that human beings are born in total equality. They acquire the qualities that distinguish them from others as inferior or superior only "after they come into this world; and the noblest among these qualities are the fear of God [*al-taqwa*] and closeness [*al-qurb*] to Him."<sup>9</sup> All "nations and tribes" are called upon to possess these qualities and honour the primordial covenant they have made with God to worship him alone and "turn their face [i.e., whole being] to God." This "turning towards God" is also the essence of the natural disposition or state according to which God has created human beings: "And so, set thy face steadfastly towards the [one ever-true] faith [*al-din*], turning away from all that is false [*hanifan*], in accordance with the natural disposition [*fitrah*] which God has instilled into

man. No change shall there be in God's creation [*khalq*]. This is the established true religion [*al-din al-qayyim*] but most people know it not." (al-Rum 30:30)

Two words require our attention here. The word *hanif(an)*, translated by Asad as "turning away from all that is false" and by Pickthall as "upright," is used in the Qur'ān twelve times (two times in the plural) and derived from the verb *hanafa*, which literally means "inclining towards a right state." A *hanif* is a person who turns towards God as the only deity. In pre-Islamic Arabia, there was a group of people called *hanifs*, who were neither polytheists nor Jew or Christian. Their theological lineage went back to Abraham, who is mentioned seven times in the twelve verses that have the word *hanif* in them. Abraham is presented as the perfect example of those who are upright and turn their whole being towards God: "Verily, Abraham was a nation [*ummatan*] by himself, devoutly obeying God's will, turning away from all that is false [*hanifan*], and not being of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God: [for he was always] grateful for the blessings granted by Him who had elected him and guided him onto a straight way" (al-Nahl 16:120–21). Another verse stresses the same link between Abraham and monotheism: "Say: God has spoken the truth: follow, then, the creed [*millah*] of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false [*hanifan*], and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God" (al-i 'Imran 3:95). *Millat Ibrahim*, "Abraham's community," represents the transnational community that believes in the pure and simple unity of God in tandem with one's primordial nature. Muslims are urged to be Abraham's

community today and, thus, go beyond both Judaism and Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

In this sense, Abraham does not belong to any of the particular faith traditions: "Abraham was neither a 'Jew' nor a 'Christian,' but was one who turned away from all that is false [*hanifan*], having surrendered himself unto God [*musliman*]; and he was not of those who ascribe partnership to Him [*mushrikin*]" (al-i 'Imran 3:67). Commenting on the word *hanif*, Ibn Kathir describes Abraham as "turning away from polytheism [*al-shirk*] to faith [*ali iman*]." <sup>11</sup> The commentators Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti interpret it as "turning away from all other religions towards the one firmly established religion" (*al-din al-qayyim*; compare Qur'ān, al-Tawbah 9:36, al-Rum 30:30, al-Mu'min 40:12). It is only when commenting on 3:95 that they use the word *al-Islam*, meaning the religion of Islam.<sup>12</sup> The famous Andalusian commentator Qurtubi concurs: the word *hanif* means "turning away from abhorrent religions [*al-adyan al-makruhah*] towards the true religion of Abraham."<sup>13</sup> In the Qur'ānic reading of biblical history, the adjective *hanif* places all prophets including Moses and Jesus in a position beyond any particular religion including Judaism and Christianity. *The Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem*, a ninth-century polemic between a Christian monk and Abd al-Rahman, the supposed amir of Jerusalem, quotes the Muslim interlocutor as saying that "you have accredited Christ with idolatry because Christ was neither Jew nor Christian but *hanif*, surrendered to God (Muslim)."<sup>14</sup>

Another key term that points to the universal nature of belief in God is the word *fitrah*, translated as natural



disposition or primordial nature. *Fitrah* is the noun form of the verb *fatara*, which literally means to fashion something in a certain manner. It denotes the specific nature or traits according to which God has created human beings. In a famous hadith of the Prophet narrated by both Bukhari and Muslim, the word *fitrah* is used as the presocial state of humans: "Every child is born in this natural disposition; it is only his parents that later turn him into a 'Jew,' a 'Christian,' or a 'Magian.'" It is important to note that the three religious traditions mentioned here are also the three religions that are considered to be the People of the Book. The Hadith states the same principle outlined in the above verses: while belief in one God (and acting in accord with it) is universal and the revelations are sent to confirm it, it is through the multiplicity of human communities that different theological

languages develop and come to form one's religious identity as Jew, Christian, Magian, or Muslim.

In relation to the People of the Book, the Qur'ān makes specific references to the Abrahamic tradition and asks Muslims as well as Jews and Christians to recognize and appreciate the underlying unity between their religious faiths. "In matters of faith [*al-din*], He has ordained for you that which He had enjoined upon Noah - and into which We gave thee [O Muhammad] 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" (al-Shura 42:13). This is usually interpreted as referring to the doctrine of *tawhid*, unity of God, which is the same doctrine revealed to other prophets before Muhammad.<sup>15</sup> According to al-Razi, the warning about breaking



up “your unity” pertains to disunity resulting from worshipping deities other than God.<sup>16</sup> The term *al-din*, translated conventionally as “religion,” refers not to any particular religion and certainly not to “institutional religion” but to the essence of *tawhid*. The life of Abraham and his followers is a testimony to the robust monotheism of the Abrahamic

**Abraham does not belong to any of the particular faith traditions: “Abraham was neither a ‘Jew’ nor a ‘Christian,’ but was one who turned away from all that is false [hanifan], having surrendered himself unto God [musliman].**

faith: “Indeed, you have had a good example in Abraham and those who followed him, when they said unto their [idolatrous] people: “Verily, we totally dissociate ourselves from you and of all that you worship

instead of God: we deny the truth of whatever you believe; and between us and you there has arisen enmity and hatred, to last until such a time as you come to believe in the One God!” (al-Mumtahina 60:4)

Since both Judaism and Christianity trace their origin to Abraham, the Qur’ān returns to him over and over again and invites Jews and Christians to think of Abraham not within the narrow confines of their respective theologies but in light of what he represents in the history of divine revelations. The Qur’ān makes a special note of the disputes among Jews and Christians about Abraham: “O People of the Book! Why do you argue about Abraham, seeing that the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed till [long] after him? Will you not, then, use your reason?” (al-i ‘Imran 3:65). Abraham, whom “God has taken as a sincere friend (al-Nisa 4:125), is the “forefather” (*abikum*) (al-Hajj 22:78) of monotheism and, thus,

cannot be appropriated by a particular religion or community. His mission is universal as his legacy: “Behold, the people who have the best claim to Abraham are surely those who follow him - as does this Prophet and all who believe [in him] - and God is near unto the believers” (al-i ‘Imran 3:68). The Qur’ān goes even further and describes all prophets after Abraham as neither Jew nor Christian: “Do you claim that Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants were ‘Jews’ or ‘Christians’?” Say: “Do you know more than God does? And who could be more wicked than he who suppresses a testimony given to him by God?<sup>17</sup> Yet God is not unmindful of what you do” (al-Baqarah 2:140). According to the Islamic sources, this is a reference to the fact that Judaism and Christianity came into being long after Abraham and other prophets. Their claim to call Abraham Jew or Christian is, therefore, supported neither by scripture nor history.<sup>18</sup>

The figure of Abraham is central not only for the universal proclamation of divine unity but also for Muslims as the youngest members of the Abrahamic tradition. In the following verse, Abraham is presented as the “forefather” of all those who believe in one God and follow his “path” (*millah*): “And strive hard in God’s cause with all the striving that is due to Him: it is He who has elected you [to carry His message], and has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion, [and made you follow] the path [*millah*] of your forefather Abraham. It is He who has named you in bygone times as well as in this [divine writ] - “those who have surrendered themselves to God” [*al-muslimun*], so that the

Messenger might bear witness to the truth before you, and that you might bear witness to it before all mankind. Thus, be constant in prayer, and render the purifying dues, and hold fast unto God.” (al-Hajj 22:78)

This verse establishes an unmistakable link between Abraham and the Prophet of Islam. The Qur’ān narrates the story of Abraham to confirm the divinely sanctioned authority of prophet Muhammad as the last messenger. The Prophet’s legitimacy is, thus, underlined by linking him to Abraham. Yet the verse also indicates to the newly established Muslim community where they agree and part ways with the followers of the earlier revelations. On the one hand, Abraham unites all monotheist believers since he is the most important figure on whom Jews, Christians, and Muslims can agree. Despite the obvious differences in theological languages and historical narratives, his message of divine unity is essentially the same in the three traditions. On the other hand, Jews and Christians are divided over Abraham, each calling him heir own “forefather.” The Qur’ān seeks to overcome this impasse by declaring Abraham neither Jewish nor Christian but *muslim*, i.e., “he who surrenders himself to God.”

This is where the prophet Muhammad joins Abraham, and the Qur’ān invites the People of the Book to recognize the continuity between the two. The Prophet of Islam is asked to reassert the essential unity of all revelations but to do so with a sense of compassion and respect: “Because of this, then, summon [all mankind], and pursue the right course, as thou hast been bidden [by God]; and do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say:

‘I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high; and I am bidden to bring about equity in your mutual views. God is our Sustainer as well as your Sustainer. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no contention between us and you: God will bring us all together - for with Him is all journeys’ end.’” (al-Shura 42:15)

While the Qur’ān presents Abraham as the unifying father of monotheism and emphasizes the essential unity of the Abrahamic tradition, it also recognizes the multiplicity of “nations and tribes.” As we shall see below, this multiplicity is presented as part of God’s plan to test different communities in their effort to attain goodness. Yet the tension between the unity of the divine message and the plurality of different communities remains as an issue taken up by the later scholars of Islam. Whether the plurality of human communities is a natural state to be accepted or a state of disorder and confusion to be overcome would occupy the Islamic religious thought up to own day. Those who see plurality as chaos and detrimental to the unity of the community would reject all lenient measures and argue for radical orthodoxy. The Qur’ān and the Sunnah, however, present different possibilities, to which we now turn.

### **Plurality of Human Communities: A Paradox for Religions?**

According to the Qur’ān, each prophet has been sent to a particular community with a particular language while the essence of that message is the same.<sup>19</sup> The Qur’ān accepts the multiplicity of human communities as part of God’s

creation: "Now had God so willed, He could surely have made them all one single community" (al-Shura 42:8). Multiplicity is presented as contributing to the betterment of human societies whereby different groups, nations, and tribes come to know each other and vie for the common good. "O humans! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another" (al-Hujurat 49:13). Underlying all this diversity is the same message embodied in the figure of Abraham: believing in one God and leading a virtuous life. In addressing the question of plurality, the Qur'ān uses the word *ummah* in both the singular and the plural forms. *Ummah* signifies a socio-religious community bound together by a set of common beliefs and principles. Within the pagan context of pre-Islamic Arabia, it is contrasted with such communal bonds as family, group, tribe, and nation. All of these associations are based on lineages other than what makes different communities an *ummah*. According to Ibn Qayyim, an *ummah* is "a single group [*sinif wahid*] held together by a single goal [*maqсад wahid*]." <sup>20</sup> The Qur'ān says that "all mankind were once but one single community [*ummah wahidah*], and only later did they begin to hold divergent views. And had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from thy Sustainer, all their differences would indeed have been settled [from the outset]" (Yunus 10:19). The essential unity of humankind has been broken because of the inevitable differences that have arisen among people in the long course of history. The Qur'ān does not explain what these differences are, but it is not difficult to see that

they pertain primarily to the essential matters of religion and faith.<sup>21</sup> Prophets have been sent to address these differences and invite their communities back to their original faith in one God: "All mankind were once one single community (*ummah wahidah*).<sup>22</sup> [Then they began to differ] whereupon God raised up the prophets as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, and through them bestowed revelation 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." (al-Baqarah 2:213)

The plurality of socio-religious communities is accepted as divinely decreed because God has willed to make humanity composed of different "tribes and nations": "And had thy Sustainer so willed, He could surely have made all mankind one single community [*ummah wahidah*]: but [He willed it otherwise, and so] they continue to hold divergent views" (Hud 11:118). These and similar verses display a constructive ambiguity about the delicate relationship between the plurality of human communities and the differences of opinion about God. It is not clear which comes first and what it implies for the history of religions. Are the differences of opinion a natural result of the existence of different communities or have different communities come about as a result of holding divergent and often conflicting views about God? It is hard to state with any degree of certainty that the Qur'ān completely endorses or abhors the plurality of "divergent views" held by different communities.

At any rate, unity is not uniformity and the Qur'ān tries to overcome this tension by calling all communities to

renew their covenant with God and seek guidance from him. "For, had God so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community; however, He lets go astray him that wills [to go astray], and guides aright him that wills [to be guided]; and you will surely be called to account for all that you ever did" (al-Nahl 16:93). In another context, the "plurality factor" underlies one's attitude towards other communities. While it is true that God has willed communities to be different, it is also clear that the goal is to regulate plurality in such a way to reach a desirable level of unity. The absence of



unity in the sense of religious consensus or social cohesion does not nullify the good deeds of those who believe in God and seek virtue: "Verily [O you who believe in Me,] this community of yours is one single community, since I am the Sustainer of you all: worship, then, Me [alone]! But men have torn their unity wide asunder, [forgetting that] unto Us they all are bound to return. And yet, whoever does [the least] of righteous deeds and is a believer, his endeavour shall not be disowned: for, behold, We shall record it in his favour." (al-Anbiya 21: 92–94)

That plurality is not a case for

disunity is highlighted in the verses that talk about diverse laws and paths given to different communities. There is no doubt that Islam, like all other religions, would like to see a unity of believers built around its main pillars. The exclusivist believer sees anything short of this as an imperfection on the part of the community of believers and even an affront to God. This is where theologies of intolerance arise and lead to sole claims of ownership over religious truth. Oppositional identities based on narrow interpretations of core religious teachings threaten to replace the universal message of faith

traditions. Yet to look for perfect unity in a world of multiplicity is to mistake the world for something more than what it is. The following verse sees no contradiction between the oneness of God and the plurality of ways and paths leading unto Him: "Unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law [*shir'atan*] and way of life [*minhajan*]. 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." (al-Maidah 5:48)

It is important to note that the word *shir'a(tan)* is derived from the same root as the word *shar'iah*. Even though the word *shari'ah* has come to mean Islamic law, it essentially indicates the totality of the moral, spiritual, social, and legal teachings of Islam (or any religion for that matter). Even if we understand the *shari'ah* as law specific to a religion, the above verse adds the word *minhaj(an)*, implying that the combination of the two gives us a belief system, a code of ethics and a way of life. In this context, each socio-religious community has been given a "clear path in religion to follow."<sup>23</sup> According to Qurtubi, "God has made the Torah for its people, the Gospel for its people and the Qur'an for its people. This is in regards to laws [*shara'i*] and rituals [*'ibadat*]. As for the principle of divine unity (*tawhid*), there is no disagreement among them."<sup>24</sup> He then quotes Mujahid as saying that "the law [*shari'ah*] and the way of life [*minhaj*] are the religion of Muhammad; everything else has been abrogated."

According to Ibn Kathir, God has certainly sent different paths and "traditions" [*sunan*] for people to follow but all of them have been abrogated after the coming of Islam.<sup>25</sup> While this is invariably the position of the most of the classical Islamic scholars and can be seen as a clear case of theological exclusivism, it does not appear to have invalidated the policies of tolerance and accommodation towards other religions and particularly the People of the Book.

This is borne out by the fact that the treatment of the plurality of human communities in the Qur'an is not merely general or abstract. The Qur'an is deeply conscious of the presence of Jews and Christians in Mecca and Medina and sees them closer to Muslims than other communities. It is this historical and theological proximity that creates a sense of theological rivalry as to who is best entitled to the legacy of Abraham. A large number of verses talk about specific Jewish and Christian objections against the new revelation and the prophet Muhammad. Even though they focus on specific arguments, they provide general guidelines about Islam's attitude towards the People of the Book. And they display both inclusivist and exclusivist tones. They contain elements of inclusivism because Islam relates itself to Judaism and Christianity through the figure of Abraham, the story of Noah, the story of creation, and the stories of Solomon, Joseph, Moses, Mary, Jesus, and other prophets who are common to the Bible and the Qur'an. The moral and eschatological teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can also be included in this category of teachings. The focal point of such verses is the recognition of the truth of the new religion and its prophet by

acknowledging their common lineage that goes back to Abraham. Instead of rejecting *in toto* the earlier revelations and the religious communities that subscribe to them, the Qur'ān invites them to agree and eventually unite on the fundamental principles of the Abrahamic tradition.

Besides specific theological arguments that contain elements of inclusivism, it should also be mentioned that Islam did not have to quarrel with the People of the Book in the way Christianity did with Judaism. Since Islam was neither the fulfilment of a Judaic or Christian prophecy nor was the prophet Muhammad the messiah, Muslims did not have to contest Jews or Christians on issues specific to the theological traditions of these two communities. Furthermore, there was no ground for a blood libel between Islam on the one hand and Judaism and Christianity on the other. Even though Islam quarrelled with these two religions on many theological issues, it started out with recognizing and accepting their existence. Since Islam was ethnically diverse and culturally plural from the very beginning, it did not have any reason to oppose or defame Jews on account of their ethnic identity. In short, Islam did not need to establish itself at the expense of its Judaic or Christian predecessors. This explains to a large extent why there was no demonization of Jews or Christians by Muslims despite the rich literature of intense polemics, bitter arguments, and counterarguments.

Yet, despite the legal and socio-political factors that have facilitated the policies of tolerance towards the People of the Book, the Qur'ān also contains elements of exclusivism, for it calls itself

with a specific name, *Islam*, and invites its followers to be *Muslims*. No religion can be entirely inclusivist because this would destroy the spiritual integrity of any tradition. In this sense, Islam could not have called itself simply the *religion of Abraham*; it had to distinguish itself from the other contenders in a way that would give its followers a non-ambiguous sense of allegiance and integrity. This has not prevented the Qur'ān from approaching the People of the Book with differing degrees of critical engagement while calling upon them to understand the essential meaning of religious faith.

A good example of this is the treatment of non-Islamic rituals in the Qur'ān. Putting aside the polytheistic rituals of the pagan Arabs, which Islam rejects unequivocally, the Qur'ān discusses a number of ancient ritual practices and asks what purpose they are meant to serve. In its anthropological analyses of rituals, the Qur'ān draws attention to their fundamental meaning and invites non-Muslims to look for what is essential in the Muslim rituals.

I will pick up two examples to illustrate this point. The first example is from the Meccan polytheists. To show that true piety is not to perform blindly certain rituals but to seek proximity to God, the Qur'ān refers to the Meccan custom of "entering houses from the rear." The Meccans used to dig up holes and stay in them during the time of pilgrimage. As part of the customary ritual, they also used to enter their houses from the backdoors.

***The plurality of socio-religious communities is accepted as divinely decreed because God has willed to make humanity composed of different "tribes and nations".***



When the Meccans asked the prophet Muhammad about the significance of the “new moons” and the time of pilgrimage, he was told to give the following answer: “They will ask thee about the new moons. Say: ‘They indicate the periods for [various doings of] mankind, including the pilgrimage’” (al-Baqarah 2:189). While this answer addresses the specific question about the “new moons” (*ahillah*), it shifts the focus from a specific ritual to the general question of what constitutes piety and God-consciousness (*al-taqwa*), which is the essence of all rituals. The remainder of the verse refers both to a specific ritual during pilgrimage and to the larger meaning of an act deemed to be pious: “However, piety [*al-birr*] does not

consist in your entering houses from the rear [as it were] but truly pious is he who is conscious of God. Hence enter houses through their doors, and remain conscious of God, so that you might attain to a happy state” (al-Baqarah 2:189). The verse disapproves of the act of “entering houses from the rear” yet gives no specific reason for it. But it also uses a metaphorical language, for the expression “enter(ing) houses through their doors” has the meaning of doing something properly. *Al-birr*, thus, points to the spiritual meaning of ritual acts and invites the Meccan polytheists as well as the People of the Book to go beyond the narrow perspectives of their respective traditions. The second example is related to facing the Ka’ba as the direction of prayers. In the early years of the revelation, the prophet Muhammad had instructed Muslims to pray towards Jerusalem while facing the Ka’ba at the same time.<sup>26</sup> While this had certainly gained the favour of the Jews of Mecca and Medina especially against the Christians, it has also led them to boast of the fact that Muslims were facing *their qiblah*. This seems to have caused some concern for the Prophet leading him to pray to God for a new direction of prayer for Muslims: “We have seen thee [O Prophet] often turn thy face towards heaven [for guidance]: and now We shall indeed make thee turn in prayer in a direction which will fulfil thy desire. Turn, then, thy face towards the Inviolable House of Worship [*masjid al-haram*]; and wherever you all may be, turn your faces towards it [in prayer]” (al-Baqarah 2:144).

This change was probably expected because, according to the Qur’an (al-i ‘Imran 3:96), the Ka’ba is the first sanctuary devoted to the worship of



God to which Abraham (and his sons) turned (al-Baqarah 2:125–29).<sup>27</sup> The incident appears to have caused a rift between Muslims and certain members of the Jewish and Christian communities in Medina. The Qur’ān accuses them of not being sincere in their hardened positions: “And, verily, those who have been given the book aforetime know well that this [commandment] comes in truth from their Sustainer, and God is not unaware of what they do” (al-Baqarah 2:144). The People of the Book are expected to welcome such a change because they know the meaning of praying towards a certain direction: “They unto whom We have given the book aforetime know it as they know their own children: but, behold, some of them knowingly suppress the truth” (al-Baqarah 2:146). The prophet Muhammad is asked to endure any criticism or ridicule that may come from the Arabian Jews and Christians. He is also advised to distinguish his *qibla* from theirs and accept it as a fact: “... even if thou were to place all evidence before those who have been given the book, they would not follow thy direction of prayer [*qiblah*], and neither mayest thou follow their direction of prayer [*qiblah*], nor even do they follow one another’s direction. And if thou shouldst follow their errant views after all the knowledge that has come unto thee, thou wouldst surely be among the evildoers.” (al-Baqarah 2:145)

The Qur’ān addresses the *qibla* incident to give assurances to the Muslim community in Medina on the one hand and draw attention to the futility of taking rituals to be an absolute indicator of piety on the other. Against religious sectarianism, God asks all believers to put aside their petty

differences: “... every community faces a direction of its own, of which He is the focal point.<sup>28</sup> 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” (al-Baqarah 2:148). The expression “every community faces a direction of its own” gives a similar meaning stated in al-Maidah 5:48, quoted above. Just as Muslims accept the *qiblah* of Jews and Christians, they also should recognize the Muslim *qiblah* as valid for turning towards God during ritual prayers. The Qur’ān chastises those who ridicule the Prophet of Islam for turning towards Ka’ba after praying towards Jerusalem: “The weak-minded [or the foolish, *sufaha*] among people will say ‘What has turned them away from the direction of prayer which they have hitherto observed?’ Say: ‘God’s is the east and the west; He guides whom He wills onto a straight way’” (al-Baqarah 2:142–43).

In these and other verses, the Qur’ān warns against the danger of causing friction on the basis of differences in ritual acts. While this is an attempt to safeguard the newly established Muslim community against the accusations of the Jews and Christians of Medina, it is also a call for transcending religious and sectarian differences. The following verse makes a strong point about this: “True piety [*al-birr*] does not consist in turning your faces towards the east or the west. But truly pious is he who believes in God, and the Last Day; and the angels, and revelation, and the prophets; and spends his substance - however much he himself may cherish it - upon his near of kin, and the orphans, and the needy, and the wayfarer, and the beggars, and for the freeing of

human beings from bondage; and is constant in prayer, and renders the purifying dues; and [truly pious are] they who keep their promises whenever they promise, and are patient in misfortune and hardship and in time of peril: it is they that have proved themselves true, and it is they, they who are conscious of God." (al-Baqarah 2:177)

The word *al-birr*, translated as virtue and righteousness, signifies a virtuous act conducted with the fear and consciousness of God. The person who has the *birr* is the person who is in constant vigilance and mindfulness of God.<sup>29</sup> The Qur'ān defines true piety as having full consciousness of God, believing in his books and prophets, and doing such virtuous acts as praying, almsgiving, and helping the poor and the needy.<sup>30</sup> Virtue requires constant vigilance, and the believers are not excepted: "[But as for you, O believers] never shall you attain to true piety [*al-birr*] unless you spend out of what you cherish yourselves; and whatever you spend, verily God has full knowledge thereof" (al-i 'Imran 3:92). The People of the Book are also reminded: "Do you enjoin other people to be pious while you forget your own self; and yet you recite the Book [*al-kitab*]" (Al-Baqarah 2:44).

In addressing specific rituals, the Qur'ān does not belittle their significance but points to what is essential in them. As later Muslim scholars and especially the Sufis would elaborate, this generic rule holds true for all ritual practices. The Qur'ān insists that true piety and goodness (*al-birr*) are the ultimate goal of religious acts and that all communities should seek to attain it. Furthermore, vying for piety and goodness is a solid basis for

an ethics of co-existence: "... help one another in furthering virtue [*al birr*] and God consciousness, and do not help one another in furthering evil and enmity" (al-Mai'dah 5:2).

### **Religious Tolerance and the People of the Book**

There are no other two religions on which the Qur'ān spends as much time as on Judaism and Christianity. Given Islam's claim to be the last revelation and completion of the Abrahamic tradition, this should come as no surprise. A large number of verses speak about various Jewish and Christian themes. These Qur'ānic conversations concentrate, among others, on three issues. The first is the disputes among Jews and Christians about issues such as Abraham, revelation, salvation, and the hereafter. Some verses describe these disputes as futile, selfish, and ignorant (al-Baqarah 2:111), referring, at the same time, to the stiff opposition of Jewish and Christian leaders to the prophet Muhammad. The second is the political alliances which the Jews and some Christians of Medina had formed with the Meccan polytheists against the newly established Muslim community. The most severe statements in the Qur'ān and the Hadith collections against the Jews pertain to this historical fact. The only incident in the history of Islam where a particular group of Jews has been ordered to be killed is related to the violation of a treaty of political alliance between certain Jewish tribes and Muslims in Medina. The third issue is the recognition of the validity of the new revelation and the prophet Muhammad, which remains a difficult issue for Christians up to our

own day. The Qur'ān brings up the disputes between Jews and Christians to indicate to them that while claiming to be heirs to the legacy of Abraham, they are engaged in destructive quarrels and petty fights. With such bitter disunity and bickering, they cannot be proper models of what Abraham stood for. The Qur'ān seems to imply that the intractable opposition of Jews and Christians of Madina to the prophet Muhammad is similar to their internal disputes and thus cannot serve as a basis for a serious dialogue: "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 Book! 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." (al-Baqarah 2:113)

Following this line of argumentation, the Qur'ān addresses Jews and Christians directly because they are different and more special from the polytheists, Magians, or Zoroastrians. In some cases, they are described as behaving worse than the disbelievers of Mecca. It is usually these verses that Muslim exclusivists take up as a basis for classifying the People of the Book together with the Meccan polytheists. The Qur'ān, however, does not fail to make a distinction between those who have completely turned against God and those whose hearts are filled with reverence for God among Jews and Christians. There is also a distinction between those who have betrayed the Prophet and his community and those who have honoured their promises.

The following verse, for instance, is extremely harsh on the People of the Book: "Overshadowed by ignominy are they wherever they may be, save [when they bind themselves again] in a bond with God and a bond with men; for they have earned the burden of God's condemnation, and are overshadowed by humiliation: all this [has befallen them] because they persisted in denying the truth of God's messages and in slaying the prophets against all right: all this, because they rebelled [against God], and persisted in transgressing the bounds of what is right." (al-i 'Imran 3:112)

This is followed by another verse which reflects the careful discernment of the Qur'ān regarding the People of the Book: "[But] they are not all alike: among the People of the Book are upright people [*ummah*], 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." (al-i 'Imran 3: 113–15)

While the classical commentators usually read this verse as referring to Jews and Christians who converted to Islam, there is no compelling reason that we should accept it as abrogated (*mansukh*). In fact, it would not make

***"True piety [al-birr] does not consist in turning your faces towards the east or the west. But truly pious is he who believes in God, and the Last Day; and the angels, and revelation, and the prophets."***

sense to call them the People of the Book if they had already converted to Islam. Such subtle distinctions are not hard to find in the Qur'ān. Yet in al-Maidah 5: 82:84, we find a clear favouring of Christians over Jews: "Thou wilt surely find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe [in this divine writ] are the Jews as well as those who are bent on ascribing divinity to aught beside God; and thou wilt surely find that, of all people, they

***Even though the Qur'an's harsh treatment of Jewish tribes in Medina has not been lost to the Prophet and his followers, it has not led to an anti-Semitic literature in the Islamic tradition.***

who say "Behold, we are Christians" come closest to feeling affection for those who believe [in this divine writ]: this is so because there are priests and monks among them, and because these are not given to arrogance. For, when they come to understand what has been bestowed from on high upon this Apostle, thou canst see their eyes overflow with tears, because they recognize something of its truth; <sup>31</sup> [and] they say: "O our Sustainer! We do believe; make us one, then, with all who bear witness to the truth. And how could we fail to believe in God and in whatever truth has come unto us, when we so fervently desire that our Sustainer count us among the righteous?" (al-Ma'idah 5:82–84)

The "closeness" to which the verse refers is a reference to both the social and political proximity which the Christian communities of the period felt towards Muslims. The famous expedition of a group of companions of the Prophet to the Christian king of Abyssinia and the warm welcome they had received can also be seen as a factor in this clearly favourable description of Christians.

As a number of early Muslim historians have noted, Muslims were hoping for the eventual success of the Byzantine Empire over the Persians because the former were Christian.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the Christians of Medina had remained loyal to the Medinan Treaty against the Meccans, thus gaining the favour and affinity of Muslims. Commenting on the verse above, Ibn Qayyim quotes al-Zujjaj as saying that Christians are praised for they have been "less inclined towards the Meccans than the Jews."<sup>33</sup>

The harsh assessment of the Jews is, thus, a response to the political alliance of the Jews of Medina with the Meccan polytheists and in violation of the Medinan Treaty to which we referred above. According to the treaty, the Jewish tribes in Medina and Muslims had agreed to defend each other against aggressors, i.e., the Meccans. It is clear that the prophet Muhammad was concerned to secure a strong political alliance with the Jews and Christians of Medina against the Meccans. While the Christians remained mostly loyal to the agreement and did not fight or plot against Muslims, the Meccans were able to get some prominent Jewish leaders on their side in their military campaigns against Muslims.<sup>34</sup> Those who violated the treaty and thus betrayed the Muslim community included not only Jews but also those whom the Qur'ān calls the "hypocrites" (*al-munafiqun*). The Qur'ān uses an extremely harsh language against them because they claim to be part of the Muslim community while forming alliances with the Meccan polytheists. The Qur'ān is so stern on this point that the prophet Muhammad is banned from praying for their soul.

Even though the Qur'ān's harsh

treatment of Jewish tribes in Medina has not been lost to the Prophet and his followers, it has not led to an anti-Semitic literature in the Islamic tradition. Since the Jewish communities, unlike Christianity, did not pose a political threat that had, at least by association, the backing of the Byzantine Empire, they were hardly part of political conflicts in later centuries. For both political and theological reasons, the great majority of Muslim polemical works in the medieval period have been directed against Christianity more than Judaism.<sup>35</sup> The socio-political and economic structure of Muslim societies has been conducive to a largely successful integration of Jewish communities. As I mentioned above, the Jewish merchants were never ostracized for their profession or prevented from practicing it because the economic system of Muslim societies allowed greater flexibility for international trade and finance. Furthermore, the Jews in the Near East where Muslims came to rule were the indigenous communities of the area, not immigrants as they were in Western Christendom. This has given them a right of property and communal freedom that we do not see in Europe. In fact, this can be compared only to the position of Hindus after India came under Muslim rule. Finally, the ethnic composition of Muslim societies was so diverse that the Jewish communities did not have to stand out as different or "strange."<sup>36</sup>

Even though the Qur'ān approaches Christians more favourably than Jews, it does not shy away from criticizing them for introducing a number of "inventions" or "corruption" (*tahrif*) into their religion. As mentioned before, there are many such criticisms the most

important of which concern the nature of Jesus Christ and the Christian claim that he was the son of God. This is not the place to go into a discussion of the place of Jesus in Islam. It suffices to say, however, that the Qur'ān and the prophetic tradition reject (compare al-Nisa 4:171–73 and al-Ma'idah 5:72–77) the divinity of Jesus as formulated by the later Christian doctrine. Besides theology, one specific practice for which the Qur'ān criticizes the Christians is "monasticism" (*rahbaniyyah*). Christians are praised for their fear and veneration of God but criticized for going to the extreme of inventing a monastic life not enjoined by God: "And thereupon We caused [other of] Our apostles to follow in their footsteps; and [in the course of time] We caused them to be followed by Jesus, the son of Mary, upon whom We bestowed the Gospel; and in the hearts of those who [truly] followed him We engendered compassion and mercy. But as for monasticism [*rahbaniyyah*]; We did not enjoin it upon them: they invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance. But then, they did not [always] observe it as it ought to have been observed: and so We granted their recompense unto such of them as had [truly] attained to faith, whereas many of them became iniquitous." (al-Hadid 57:27)

The classical commentators interpret this verse as pointing to the harsh conditions of early Christians to protect themselves against the persecutions of the Roman rulers. Monasticism (and celibacy, we should add) could be seen as a temporary solution in

*The underlying principle behind the attitudes of accommodation is that the overall interests of human beings are served better in peace than in conflict.*

times of extreme measures but cannot be a general rule for attaining piety because religions are meant to save not just the elect but everyone. It is also important to note that the mainstream Islamic tradition does not posit any intermediaries between God and the ordinary believer. There is no need for a monastic institution to train spiritual leaders to provide religious guidance for the average person. The commentators, thus, take this opportunity to stress that Islam has come to establish a balance (*wasatah*) between worldly indulgence and extreme asceticism. This point is reiterated in the following verse: "And ordain Thou for us what is good in this world as well as in the life to come: behold, unto Thee have we turned in repentance!" [God] answered: "With My chastisement do I afflict whom I will - but My grace overspreads everything: and so I shall confer it on those who are conscious of Me and spend in charity, and who believe in Our messages those who shall follow the [last] Apostle, the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah that is with them, and [later on] in the Gospel: [the Prophet] who will enjoin upon them the doing of what is right and forbid them the doing of what is wrong, and make lawful to them the good things of life and forbid them the bad things, and lift from them their burdens and the shackles that were upon them [aforetime]. Those, therefore, who shall believe in him, and honour him, and succour him, and follow the light that has been bestowed from on high through him-it is they that shall attain to a happy state." (al-A'raf 7:156-57)

While Jews and Christians are usually thought to be the People of the Book, the Qur'an also mentions

several other communities as part of the non-Islamic religious traditions under protection. The mention of "Sabians" in the following shows that the concept of the People of the Book was set to be flexible and ever-expanding from the very beginning: "Verily, those who have attained to faith, as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians<sup>37</sup>; 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" (al-Baqarah 2:62).<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that the status of "no fear" mentioned in the above verse legally refers to the protection of the People of the Book as part of *ahl al-dhimmah*. While the *dhimmi* status was initially given to Jews, Christians, Sabians, and Zoroastrians, its scope was later extended to include all non-Muslims living under Islam especially in the subcontinent of India.<sup>39</sup> This is exactly what happened in India when Muhammad b. al-Qasim, the first Muslim commander to set foot on Indian soil in the eighth century, compared Hindus to Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians and declared them as part of the *ahl al-dhimmah*.<sup>40</sup> This decision, which was later sanctioned by the Hanafi jurists, was a momentous event in the development of the Muslim attitude towards the religions of India.

That the People of the Book were accorded a special status is not only attested by the various Qur'anic verses but also recorded in a number of treatises signed by the prophet Muhammad after his migration to Medina in 622. The "Medinan Treatise" (*sahifat al-madina*), also called the "Medinan Constitution," recognizes the Jews of Banu 'Awf,



Banu al-Najar, Banu Tha'laba, Banu Harith, and other Jewish tribes as distinct communities: "The Jews of Banu 'Awf are a community [*ummah*] together with Muslims; they have their own religion, properties and lives, and Muslims their own except those who commit injustice and wrongdoing; and they only harm themselves."<sup>41</sup> Another treatise signed with the People of the Book of Najran reads as follows: "They [People of the Book] shall have the protection of Allāh and the promise of Muhammad, the Apostle of Allāh, that they shall be secured their lives, property, lands, creed, those absent and those present, their families, their churches, and all that they possess. No bishop or monk shall be displaced from

his parish or monastery no priest shall be forced to abandon his priestly life. No hardships or humiliation shall be imposed on them nor shall their land be occupied by [our] army. Those who seek justice, shall have it: there will be no oppressors nor oppressed."<sup>42</sup> 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph of Islam, has given a similar safeguard (*aman*) to the people of Jerusalem when he took the city in 623: "In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate! This is the safeguard granted to the inhabitants of 'Alia [Jerusalem] by the servant of God, 'Umar, commander of the faithful. They are given protection of their persons, their churches, their crosses - whether these are in good state or not - and their cult in general. No constraints

will be exercised against them in the matter of religion and no harm will be done to any of them. The inhabitants of 'Alia will have to pay the *jizya* in the same way as the inhabitants of other towns. It rests with them to expel the Byzantines and robbers from their city. Those among them the latter who wish to remain there will be permitted on condition that they pay the same *jizya* as the inhabitants of 'Alia."<sup>43</sup>

The poll tax called *jizya* was imposed on *ahl al-dhimmah* as compensation for their protection as well as for their exemption from compulsory military service. Contrary to a common belief, the primary goal of *jizya* was not the "humiliation" of the People of the Book. While most contemporary translations of the Qur'an render the words *wa hum al-saghirun* (al-Tawbah 9: 29) as "so that they will be humiliated," Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, who has written the most

extensive work on the People of the Book, reads it as securing the allegiance of the People of the Book to laws pertaining to them (*ahkam al-millah*). According to Ibn Qayyim, *wa hum al-saghirun* means making all subjects of the state obey the law and, in the case of the People of the Book, pay the *jizya*.<sup>44</sup> Despite Ibn Qayyim's relatively

lenient position, his teacher, the famous Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyya, takes a hard position against non-Muslims and calls for their conversion or submission.<sup>45</sup> Yet, Abu Yusuf, the

student of Abu Hanifa, the founder of the Hanafi school of law, advises the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (d. 803) to "treat with leniency those under the protection of our Prophet Muhammad, and not allow that more than what is due to be taken from them or more that they are able to pay, and that nothing should be confiscated from their properties without legal justification."<sup>46</sup> To substantiate his case, Abu Yusuf narrates a tradition in which the Prophet says that "he who robs a *dhimmi* or imposes on him more than he can bear will have me as his opponent." Another well-known case is the Prophet's ordering of the execution of a Muslim who had killed a *dhimmi*. In response to the incident, the Prophet has said that "it is most appropriate that I live up fully to my (promise of) protection."<sup>47</sup>

While these examples show the complexities of Islamic history, the underlying principle behind the attitudes of accommodation is that the overall interests of human beings are served better in peace than in conflict.<sup>48</sup> In dealing with the People of the Book, the prophet Muhammad is instructed to take a special care: "Hence, judge between the followers of earlier revelation in accordance with what God has bestowed from on high" (al-Mai'dah 5:49). Yet he is also warned against the temptation of compromising his mission in order to gain their favour: "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" (al-

**While we can find divergent policies of tolerance and intolerance in the Islamic religious tradition and social history, the contemporary Muslim world has to confront the challenge of religious pluralism in a way that would avoid the extremes of intolerant exclusivism on the one hand and a rootless pluralism at the expense of all orthodoxy on the other.**



Ma'idah 5:49). None of these measures would have made sense had they not been complemented by a clear rule about the problem of conversion. It is one thing to say that people are free to choose their religion, but it is another thing to set in place a legal and social system where the principle of religious freedom is applied with relative ease and success. This is what al-Baqarah 2: 256 establishes with its proclamation that "there is no compulsion in religion." The verse and the way it states the principle are crucial for understanding the policies of conversion that have developed in early and later Islamic history. Both the overall attitude of the Qur'ān and the Prophet toward non-Muslims and the legal injunctions regarding the People of the Book stipulate against forced conversion. Furthermore, the Arabic command form *la ikraha* can be read not only as "there is no compulsion" but also as "there should be no compulsion." The subtle difference between the two is that, while the former implies that the proofs and foundations of Islam are clear and therefore the non-believer should accept its truth without difficulty, the latter states that no non-Muslim can be forced to convert even if the proofs are clear to him or her. Like Christianity, Islam encourages its followers to spread the word and argue with peoples of other faiths "in the best possible way" so that they understand and, it is hoped, embrace the message of Islam. This leads us to yet another tension in Islam between claims to universality and policies of protection and accommodation. Furthermore, some later jurists have claimed that Baqarah 256 has been abrogated by other verses after the

conquest of Mecca.<sup>49</sup> According to Qurtubi, Sulayman ibn Musa has defended this argument because "the Prophet of Islam has forced the pagan Arabs into Islam, fought them and refused to accept from them anything but professing the Islamic faith."<sup>50</sup> The second view is that the verse has not been abrogated because it has been sent specifically for the People of the Book. This interpretation is supported by the famous incident, for which Baqarah 256 has been revealed, when Bani Salim b. 'Afw, one of the companions of the Prophet from Medina, had forced his Christian sons to accept Islam.<sup>51</sup> According to Ibn Kathir, the verse is a command "not to force anyone to enter the religion of Islam because it is clear and evident."<sup>52</sup> Another incident cited by Qurtubi involves Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph of Islam, who asks an old Christian woman to embrace Islam. The old lady responds by saying that "I am an old lady and death is nearing me." Upon this answer, Umar reads the verse Baqarah 256 and leaves her.<sup>53</sup>

Fakh al-Din al-Razi opposes compulsion of any kind on intellectual grounds. According to him, not just the People of the Book but no one should be forced to believe because "God has not built faith upon compulsion and pressure but on acceptance and free choice." Even though al-Razi considers this "free will defence" to be the position of the Mutazilites, to whom he is always opposed, he rejects al-Qifal's argument that, since all of the proofs of the true religion have been made clear to the disbeliever, he may be forced to accept it. For al-Razi, compulsion in matters of faith annuls the principle of free will (*taklif*) and goes against God's

plan to try people.<sup>54</sup>

The last point I will take up here concerns the verse al-Ma'idah 5:51, which has led many Western students of Islam to claim that the Qur'an advises Muslims against developing friendly relationship with Jews and Christians. The verse reads as follows: "O you who have attained to faith! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for your *awliya'*: they are but *awliya'* of one another. Whoever among you takes them as his *wali* is one of them." The word *awliya'* is the plural of *wali*, which is rendered in most of the English translations of the Qur'an as "friend." According to this interpretation, the verse reads as "do not take Jews and Christians as friends." Even though the word *wali* means friend in the ordinary sense of the term, in this context, it has the meaning of protector, legal guardian, and ally. This rendering is confirmed by al-Tabari's explanation that the verse 5:51 was revealed during one of the battles (the battle of Badr in 624 or Uhud in 625) that the Muslims in Medina had fought against the Meccans. Under the circumstances of a military campaign, the verse advises the new Muslim community not to form political alliances with non-Muslims if they violate the terms of a treaty they had signed with them.<sup>55</sup> It is important to note that Muslims, Jews, or Christians to whom the verse refers represent not only religious but also socio-political communities. The meaning of "ally" or "legal guardian" for *wali/awliya'* makes sense especially in view of Ibn Qayyim's explanation that "whoever forms an alliance with them through a treaty [*'ahd*] is with them in violating the agreement."<sup>56</sup>

## Relations with Non-Muslims

The Islamic code of ethics for the treatment of non-Muslims follows the overall principles discussed so far. As far as the Islamic attitude towards Judaism and Christianity is concerned, there is a delicate balance between treating them with respect and refusing to compromise the essential features of the Abrahamic tradition. Among the non-Muslim communities, the only exception is the Meccan polytheists, which Islam rejects *in toto*. The "sword verses" of the Qur'an that aim at the Meccans are misinterpreted as a declaration of war on all non-Muslims. The fact is that the Qur'an calls upon Muslims to take up arms against the Meccans and explains the reasons in nonambiguous terms:

And fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression - for, verily, God does not love aggressors. And slay them wherever you may come upon them, and drive them away from wherever they drove you away - for oppression [*fitnah*]<sup>57</sup> is even worse than killing. And fight not against them near the Inviolable House of Worship unless they fight against you there first; but if they fight against you, slay them: such shall be the recompense of those who deny the truth. But if they desist - behold, God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace. Hence, fight against them until there is no more oppression and all worship is devoted to God alone; but if they desist, then all hostility shall cease, save against those who [wilfully] do wrong. (al-Baqarah 2:190-93)

According to Ibn Hisham, there are primarily two reasons for Islam's

extremely hostile attitude towards the Meccan pagans. The first is the impossibility of reconciling paganism and polytheism with the central Islamic doctrine of divine unity (*tawhid*). Numerous Qur'ānic verses and prophetic traditions describe the ignorance and arrogance of Meccan polytheists in vivid detail. Their lack of respect for God and human dignity and such social evils as slavery, infanticide (compare al-Mumtahinah 60:12; al-Takwir 81:8–9), and tribal racism are results of their fundamental theological error: taking partners unto God (*shirk*). The second reason, which Ibn Hisham emphasizes more than the first, is their total denial of the messenger of God and the political plots they created to destroy the new Muslim community. Early Islamic history is filled with incidents of the inhuman treatment of Muhammad and his followers. That the Meccans tried to kill the Prophet of Islam has only added to the sense of outrage and hostility towards them.<sup>58</sup> Abu Hanifah and others have pointed out that the only community that will not receive mercy on the day of judgment are the Meccan polytheists to whom the last Prophet has been sent. According to the majority of the classical commentators, the famous "slay them ..." verse refers exclusively to pagan Arabs who fought against the Prophet and his followers.<sup>59</sup> While military combat is not completely ruled out but kept as a last resort, war, when it becomes inevitable, has to be conducted under certain restrictions.<sup>60</sup>

That the verses of war are specifically for those who have declared war against Muslims is also confirmed by the verses al-Mumtahinah 60:8–9. It is important to note that the chapter cites two main reasons for taking up

arms against the Meccan polytheists: suppression of faith and expulsion from homeland.<sup>61</sup> Both actions were taken against the early Muslim community in Mecca and later in Madina. Muslims are ordered not to take the Meccans as allies or protectors (*awliya'*) and show them any "kindness": O you who have attained to faith! Do not take My enemies - who are your enemies as well - for your allies, showing them affection even though they are bent on denying whatever truth has come unto you, [and even though] they have driven the Apostle and yourselves away, [only] because you believe in God, your Sustainer! If [it be true that] you have gone forth [from your homes] to strive [*jihad*] in My cause, and out of a longing for My goodly acceptance, [do not take them for your friends,] inclining towards them in secret affection: for I am fully aware of all that you may conceal as well as of all that you do openly. And any of you who does this has already strayed from the right path. al-Mumtahinah 60:1

The verses bring up the example of Abraham who had a similar experience with his community. Abraham is mentioned to have prayed for his father: "I shall indeed pray for [God's] forgiveness for thee, although I have it not in my power to obtain anything from God in thy behalf" (al-Mumtahinah 60:4). This reminder was presumably meant to give moral support to the first Muslims who were persecuted and expelled from their homeland. In fact, the verses draw attention to the weakness of some among them for their desire to approach the Meccans to protect their children and relatives who were still in Mecca. Yet the Qur'ān also warns that the enmity in which they

find themselves is not unconditional: "[But] it may well be that God will bring about [mutual] affection between you [O believers] and some of those whom you [now] face as enemies: for, God is all-powerful and God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace" (al-Mumtahinah 60:7). These provisions and examples are summed up in the following verse, which lays the ground rules for dealing with non-Muslims in times of war and peace:

"As for such [of the unbelievers] as do not fight against you on account of [your] faith [*al-din*], 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. God only forbids you to turn in friendship towards such as fight against you because of [your] faith, and drive you forth from your homelands, or aid [others] in driving you forth: and as for those [from among you] who turn towards them in friendship; it is they, they who are truly wrongdoers!" (al-Mumtahinah 60:8–9)

According to Ibn al-Qayyim, the verse "permits [*rukhsah*] to have good relations with those who have not declared war against Muslims and allows kindness towards them even though they may not be allies."<sup>62</sup> Al-Tabari interprets the verse along similar lines: "The most credible view is that the verse refers to people of all kinds of creeds and religions who should be shown kindness and treated equitably. God referred to all those who do not fight the Muslims or drive them from their homes without exception or qualification."<sup>63</sup> In granting permission to Muslims to fight against the Meccans, the Qur'an stresses that the kind of fight Muslims are allowed to engage is not only for themselves but for all those who believe in God:

"Permission [to fight] is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged and, verily, God has indeed the power to succour them - those who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying. "Our Sustainer is God!" For, 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]." (al-Hajj 22: 39-40)

Thus, putting aside the Arab pagans during the time of the Prophet, the Qur'an proposes a number of lenient measures for the treatment of the People of the Book and other non-Muslim communities. One verse states this as follows: "Call thou [all mankind] unto thy Sustainer's path with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner" (al-Nahl 16:125). The Jews and Christians are mentioned specifically as partners of a serious and respectful dialogue:

"And do not argue with the People of the Book otherwise than in a most kindly manner - unless it be such of them as are bent on evildoing and say: "We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you: our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that We [all] surrender ourselves." (al-'Ankabut 29:46)

While we can find divergent policies of tolerance and intolerance in the Islamic religious tradition and social history, the contemporary Muslim world has to confront the challenge of religious pluralism in a way that would avoid the extremes of intolerant exclusivism on the one hand and a rootless pluralism at the expense of all orthodoxy on the other. Reading our foundational texts and history must be guided by a set of principles that would remain true to the spirit of the tradition while having enough

suppleness to deal with the current challenges. We can cite countless cases from the military conquests of the Ottomans to the employment of Jewish and Christian professionals in various positions across the Islamic world. We can remind ourselves that Muslim empires have had periods of peace and stability as well as conflict and disorder. There have been many confrontations between Muslim and Christian communities in the Balkans, Asia Minor, or North Africa. There is no doubt that all of these factors have had an impact on the development of the Islamic legal tradition and shaped the framework of socioreligious practices in the Muslim world. The historical and contextual reading of Islamic law is, therefore, indispensable for distinguishing between what the contemporary scholar Taha Jabir Alwani calls the "fiqh of conflict" and the "fiqh of coexistence."<sup>64</sup>

A case in point is the question of apostasy in Islam. The classical jurists have usually ruled that apostasy in Islam is punishable by death. The Qur'an does not mention any penalty for the apostate but warns of divine punishment on the Day of Judgment (compare al-Baqarah 2:217; al-Ma'idah 5:54). The ruling for death penalty is based on the hadith in which the Prophet says to "kill those who change their religion." At its face value, this is an extremely harsh statement and goes against the principle of free choice in Islam. The hadith, however, makes perfect sense when we understand the context in which it has been said. The hadith refers to changing one's political alliance and betraying the Muslim community especially during times of war. This includes taking arms against

the Muslim state. That is why the Hanafi jurists have ruled that women apostates cannot be killed because they are not considered soldiers in the army.<sup>65</sup> Contemporary Muslim scholars have applied this approach and concluded that the classical rulings on the death penalty for apostasy are based on socio-historical circumstances and do not apply today.<sup>66</sup>

Based on the textual evidence gathered from the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions, we can assert that other religions, and especially Judaism and Christianity, play a significant role in Islam. Islam's self-view as the seal of the Abrahamic tradition links it to the Jewish and Christian faiths in a way that we don't find in relation to any other religion. Much of the interreligious dialogue we find in the sacred sources of Islam is addressed to these religions. Islam acknowledges the plurality of human societies and faith traditions but insists on reaching a common ground between them. As we discussed above, each socio-religious community is recognized as an *ummah*, as potentially legitimate paths to God, but invited to reassert the unity of God and commit themselves to upholding the principles of a virtuous life. Different communities and thus different religious paths exist because God has willed plurality in the world in which we live. This should not be a concern for the believer because the ultimate goal of multiplicity is a noble one: different communities vying for the common good of humanity.

While this is a solid basis for a theology of inclusivism, it does not necessarily lead to moral laxity and social incoherence. Each socio-religious community is bound to have some level

of exclusivism theologically, ritually, and socially; otherwise, it would be impossible to maintain the integrity of any religious tradition. Each religious universe must claim to be complete and absolute in itself; otherwise, it cannot fulfil the purpose for which it stands. A genuine culture of tolerance and accommodation is possible only when the principles of respect are observed without compromising the integrity and orthodoxy of a religion. This is in no way far from the infinite mercy that God has written upon himself: "And when those who believe in Our messages come unto thee, say: 'Peace be upon you. Your Sustainer has willed upon Himself the law of grace and mercy - so that if any of you does a bad deed out of ignorance, and thereafter repents and lives righteously, He shall be [found] much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace.'" (al-An'am 6:54)

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. **J. Waardenburg**, "World Religions as seen in the Light of Islam" in *Islam Past Influence and Present Challenge*, eds. A. T. Welch and P. Cachia (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), 248–49. See also **J. Waardenburg**, *Muslims and Others: Relations in Context* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> All translations of Qur'ānic verses are from **Muhammad Asad's** *The Message of the Qur'ān*. I have occasionally made some revisions in the translations.

<sup>3</sup> **As Fakhr al-Din al-Razi** points out, the verse refers to some Christians groups that have had veneration for their clergy to the point of worshipping them. Cf. *al-Tafsir al-Kabir* (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, 2001), 3:252. Qurtubi makes the same point; cf. **Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Ansari al-Qurtubi**, *al-Jami' li'l-Ahkam al-Qur'ān* (Riyadh: Dar al-'Alam al-Kutub, 2003), 2:106. As I shall discuss below, the Christian tendency to extreme monasticism is criticized in several verses of the Qur'ān.

<sup>4</sup> **Ibn Kathir**, *Tafsir* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 2006), 290. According to **Mujahid** and **al-Suddi**, this verse was revealed for **al-Harith b. Suwayd**, the brother of **al-Hulas b. Suwayd**, one of the companions of the Prophet. **Al Harith** was one of the *ansar* (Muslims of Medina); then, he left Islam and joined the Meccans. At that time, this verse was revealed. Upon hearing the verse, **al-Harith** sent a message to his brother and expressed his regret for leaving Islam and joining the Meccans. Cf. **Qurtubi**, *al-Jami'*, 2:128.

<sup>5</sup> **Al-Razi**, *Tafsir*, 3:282.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 6:261.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, *Tafsir*, 9:617.

<sup>8</sup> In 3:7, the expression *umm al-kitab* refers to the clearly established and nonallegorical verses of the Qur'ān (*ayat muhkamat*). This is contrasted to the allegorical ones (*mutashabihat*), which may create confusion and lead some astray: "Those whose hearts are given to swerving from the truth go after that part of the book [al-kitab] which has been expressed in allegory, seeking out [what is bound to create] confusion, and seeking [to arrive at] its final meaning [in an arbitrary manner]; but none save God knows its final meaning." When confronted with such a situation, the believers are asked to follow the example of those "who are deeply rooted in knowledge [who] say: We believe in it; the whole [of the divine book] is from our Sustainer - albeit none takes this to heart save those who are endowed with insight." Only those whose hearts are pure can comprehend the whole of the Qur'ānic verses whether allegorical or not because the Qur'ān is ultimately a well-protected book: "Behold, it is a truly noble discourse [conveyed unto man] in a

well-guarded book (*kitab maknun*) which none but the pure (of heart) can touch" (56: 78–79). **Fakhr al-Din al-Razi** provides an extensive analysis of these points with his usual precision; cf. *Tafsir*, 3:137–148.

<sup>9</sup> **al-Razi**, *Tafsir*, 10:113.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. **Waardenburg**, *Muslims and Others*, 99–101.

<sup>11</sup> **Ibn Kathir**, *Tafsir*, 285.

<sup>12</sup> **Tafsir al-Jalalayn** (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 1995), 62.

<sup>13</sup> **Qurtubi**, *al-Jami'*, 2:109. cf. also pp. 139–140 where **Qurtubi** says that "Abraham was called *hanif* because he turned to the religion of God, which is Islam."

<sup>14</sup> *The Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem*, in *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632–900 A.D.) Translations with Commentary*, ed. N. A. Newman (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 285.

<sup>15</sup> **Ibn Kathir**, *Tafsir*, 1414; *Tafsir al-jalalayn*, 484.

<sup>16</sup> **al-Razi**, *Tafsir*, 9:587.

<sup>17</sup> According to **M. Asad**, this is "a reference to the Biblical prediction of the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, which effectively contradicts the Judaeo-Christian claim that all true prophets, after the Patriarchs, belonged to the children of Israel." **M. Asad**, *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), 29.

<sup>18</sup> **Ibn Kathir**, *Tafsir*, 285. This point is reiterated in almost all of the classical commentaries. Cf. **Qurtubi**, *al-Jami'*, 2:107 where **Qurtubi** quotes **al-Zujjaj** as saying that "this is the clearest proof against Jews and Christians. The Torah and the Gospel were revealed after him (Abraham) and the name of these religions is not mentioned in them. But the name Islam is in all the books." **Fakhr al-Din al-Razi** adds that "the religions brought by prophets cannot be different in principles." *Tafsir*, 3:254.

<sup>19</sup> This is a theme repeated throughout the Qur'ān: "Never have We sent forth any apostle otherwise than [with a message] in his own people's tongue" (14:4).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. **Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah**, *Zad al-Masir fi ilm al-tafsir* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 2002), 1335.

<sup>21</sup> **Ibn Qayyim** says that they pertain to "matters of religion"; *Zad al-Masir*, 124.

<sup>22</sup> Some early scholars interpret this as referring to Adam alone because he is the first man and the source of all later genera-

tions. Others, however, insist that it refers to both Adam and Eve. The underlying idea is that we are all children of Adam and Eve. Cf. Qurtubi, *al-Jami'*, 2:30.

<sup>23</sup> *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, 116.

<sup>24</sup> **Qurtubi**, *al-Jami'*, 2:211. Cf. *al-Razi*, *Tafsir*, 4:373, and Muhammad al-Ghazali, *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000), 102. See also Ibn Qayyim, *Zad al-Masir*, 388.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibn Kathir*, *Tafsir*, 506.

<sup>26</sup> As Fazlur Rahman points out, this was also due to the fact that, while in Mecca, Muslims were not allowed to pray in the Ka'ba. There was no reason for them not to face the Ka'ba when they migrated to Medina. The argument that the change of direction came after the so-called "Jewish-Muslim break out" is, therefore, unsubstantiated. Cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1989), 147–48.

<sup>27</sup> **Ibn Qayyim**, *Zad al-Masir*, 93.

<sup>28</sup> **Pickthall** translates *wa li-kullin wijhatun huwa muwalliha* as "and each one hath a goal toward which he turneth," interpreting *huwa* as referring to the person who prays, not God to whom one turns in prayers. Yusuf Ali translates as "to each is a goal to which Allāh turns him." Other translations give different interpretations. While all these readings are linguistically possible, Asad's rendering of *huwa* as "He", i.e., God seems to be in keeping with the classical commentaries. *Tafsir Jalalayn* renders *huwa* as "his direction in ritual prayer" and "his Master"; cf. p. 23. Cf. *Ibn Qayyim*, *Zad al-Masir*, 94.

<sup>29</sup> The plural *abrar* refers to those who have attained salvation because of their godly acts. See the references in the *Qur'an*: 3:193, 197, 56:5, 82:13, 83:18, 22.

<sup>30</sup> **Ibn Qayyim**, *Zad al-Masir*, 102.

<sup>31</sup> According to **Ibn 'Abbas**, the verse is a reference to Najashi, the king of Abyssinia. Cf. *Ibn Kathir*, *Tafsir*, 521. As a Christian king, Najashi had received a delegation of Muslims from Mecca before the migration of the Prophet to Medina and given them asylum, despite the demands of the Meccans for their deportation. See also *Ibn Qayyim*, *Zad al-Masir*, 401.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. **al-Ghazali**, *A Thematic Commentary*, 111–12.

<sup>33</sup> **Ibn Qayyim**, *Zad al-Masir*, 402.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. **Ibn Kathir**, *Tafsir*, 521.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. **Waardenburg**, *Muslims and Others*, 176. This is not to deny the existence of the relatively rich literature of Jewish-Muslim polemical works. Cf. Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) and Moshe Perlmann, "The Medieval Polemics Between Islam and Judaism," in *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. Solomon Dob Goitein, 103–138 (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1974).

<sup>36</sup> For a well-informed discussion of these points, see **Mark Cohen**, "Islam and the Jews: Myth, Counter-Myth, History," in *Jews among Muslims: Communities in the Pre-colonial Middle East*, eds. Sholomo Deshen and Walter P. Zenner, 50–63 (New York:

New York University Press, 1996).

<sup>37</sup> The exegetical tradition has identified the Sabians in various ways. *Imam Shafi'i* considers them a Christian group. Cf. *Ibn Qayyim*, *Ahkam*, 1:92. *al-Razi* mentions several possibilities: a group from among the Magians; a group that worships angels and prays to the sun; still, a group that worships the stars (a reference to the Sabians of Harran). Cf. *al-Razi*, *Tafsir*, 1:536. They have also been described as Mandaeans, a Baptist sect of Judaeo-Christian origin. The etymology of the word *s-b-* gives the meaning "baptizing." Cf. "Sabi'a," *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), VIII, 675a. For other interpretations, see J. D. McAuliffe, "Exegetical Identification of the Sabian," *The Muslim World* 72 (1983): 95–106. It is a notorious fact that the Harranians, an obscure religious sect with gnostic inclinations from the Harran region, have identified themselves as Sabians during the time of the Abbasid caliph *al-Ma'mun*. They have traced their origin back to the prophet Enoch (Idris in the Islamic sources) and claimed to have been related to the Hermetic tradition. Cf. *Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1987), 31.

<sup>38</sup> Another verse makes the same point, but this time criticizes the People of the Book for their obstinacy: "Say: 'O followers of the Book! [ahl al-kitab]. You have no valid ground for your beliefs - unless you [truly] observe the Torah and the Gospel, and all that has been bestowed from on high upon you by your Sustainer!' Yet all that has been bestowed from on high upon thee [O Prophet] by thy Sustainer is bound to make many of them yet more stubborn in their overweening arrogance and in their denial of the truth. But sorrow not over people who deny the truth: 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" (*al-Ma'idah* 5:68–69).

<sup>39</sup> There is a consensus on this in the Hanafi and Maliki schools of law as well as some Hanbali scholars. For references in Arabic, see *Yohanan Friedmann*, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 85–86. For the inclusion of Zoroastrians among the People of the Book, see *Friedmann*, *Tolerance and Coercion*, 72–76.

<sup>40</sup> The incident is recorded in *Baladhuri's Futuh al-buldan*. Cf. *Friedmann*, *Tolerance and Coercion*, 85.

<sup>41</sup> *al-Sirat al-Nabawiyah li-Ibn Hisham*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2004), 255. The full text of the *Medinan Treatise* is also published in *Muhammad Hamidullah*, *Documents sur la Diplomatie a l'Epoque du Prophete et des Khalifes Orthodoxes* (Paris, 1935), 9–14. For an English translation, see *Khadduri*, *War and Peace*, 206–209.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in *Khadduri*, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam*, 179. The original text of the *Najran treatise* is quoted in *Abu Yusuf's Kitab al-kharaj and Baladhuri's Futuh al-buldan*.

<sup>43</sup> From the *Treaty of Capitulation of Jerusalem (633)* recorded by *al-Tabari*, *Tarikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk*, quoted in *Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues*, *Christians and Jews under Islam*, translated from the French by *Judy Mabro* (London/New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), 1. Another treaty of safeguard given to the people of Damascus follows the same rules: "In the name of Allāh, the compassionate, the merciful. This is what *Khalid ibn al-Walid* would grant to the inhabitants of Damas-



cus if he enters therein: he promises to give them security for their lives, property and churches. Their city wall shall not be demolished; neither shall any Moslem be quartered in their houses. Thereunto we give to them the pact of Allāh and the protection of His Prophet, the caliphs and the believers. So long as they pay the poll tax, nothing but good shall befall them." Baladhuri, *Futuh al-buldan*, quoted in Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1960, 150.

<sup>44</sup> **Ibn Qayyim**, *Ahkam ahl al-dhimmah*, 1:24. For the amount of jizya and the treatment of Jews and Christians in Islamic history, see my "Islam and Peace: A Survey of the Sources of Peace in the Islamic Tradition," *Islamic Studies* 44, no. 3 (2005): 327–62.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. **Ibn Taymiyyah**, *al-Siyasat al-Shar'iyyah* (Beirut: Dar al-Rawi, 2000), 127–28.

<sup>46</sup> **Khadduri**, *War and Peace*, 85.  
47. Quoted in Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion*, 40.

<sup>48</sup> Contemporary applications of this can be followed from the growing literature on Islam, nonviolence, and conflict-resolution. For an overview, see Muhammad Abu-Nimer, "Framework for Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islam," in *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, not Static*, eds. A. Aziz Said, M. Abu-Nimer and M. Sharify-Funk, 131–172 (London/New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. **Ibn Qayyim**, *Zad al-Masir*, 157.

<sup>50</sup> **Qurtubi**, *al-Jami'*, 2:280.

<sup>51</sup> **Ibn Kathir**, *Tafsir*, 239–40.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>53</sup> **Qurtubi**, *al-Jami'*, 2:280.

<sup>54</sup> **Al-Razi**, *Tafsir*, 3:15.

<sup>55</sup> For an analysis of this point, see **David Dakake**, "The Myth of a Militant Islam," in *Islam, Fundamentalism and the Betrayal of Tradition*, ed. Joseph Lumbard (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004), 5–8.

<sup>56</sup> **Ibn Qayyim**, *Zad al-Masir*, 390.

57. The word *fitnah* has a wide range of meanings: trial, calamity, disorder, civil strife, sedition, and even persecution in the particular verse above.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *al-Sirat al-Nabawiyah li-Ibn Hisham*, 332

<sup>59</sup> For full references, see **David Dakake**, "The Myth of a Militant Islam," 9–11.

<sup>60</sup> For "just war" (*jus ad bellum*) and conditions of war (*jus in bello*), see my "Islam and Peace," 342–50. Not surprisingly, Osama bin Laden quotes the "slay them . . ." verse in his infamous 1998 fatwa for the "killing of Americans and their allies - civilian and military." For the text of this fatwa and its critique based on the Islamic sources, see Vincenzo Oliveti, *Terror's Source: The Ideology of Wahhabi-Salafism and its Consequences* (Birmingham, AL: Amadeusbooks, 2002).

<sup>61</sup> War is also waged to defend the rights of "those who are weak, ill-treated, and oppressed among men, women, and children, whose cry is: 'Our Lord! Rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors'" (*al-Nisa* 4: 75).

<sup>62</sup> **Ibn al-Qayyim**, *Zad al-Masir*, 425. Qurtubi has a similar interpretation; cf. *al-Jami'*, 10:43.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in **Taha Jabir al-Alwani**, *Towards a Fiqh for Minorities* (London/Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2003), 26.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Numerous studies have been undertaken by contemporary Muslim scholars to address the question of how to engage Islamic law in the face of the contemporary challenges the Muslim world faces. Imam Shatibi's concept of the "purposes of Islamic law (*maqasid al-shari'ah*), which he has developed in his *al-Muwafaqat*, has been the subject of many studies in recent years. One fine example is Ahmad al-Raysuni, *Imam Shatibi's Theory of the Higher Objectives and Intent of Islamic Law*, trans. Nancy Roberts (London/Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2005). Taha Jabir al-Alwani has dealt with the sources and development of Islamic jurisprudence in his *Source Methodology in Islamic Jurisprudence*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., trans. and ed. Yusuf Talal Delorenzo and Anas al-Shaykh Ali (London/Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2003). Another contemporary scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi has adopted a similar point of view in his *Approaching the Sunna: Comprehension and Controversy*, trans. Jamil Qureshi (London/Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2006). Other works with a similar approach and scope include Shaykh al-Tahir ibn Ashur, *Maqasid al-Shari'ah al-Islamiyyah* (Tunis: al-Dar al-Tunisiyyah, 1972), and Yusuf al-'Alim, *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1991).

<sup>65</sup> **Abu Bakr ibn Sahl al-Sarakhsi**, *al-Mabsut* (Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari, 1983), 10:109.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. **Taha Jabir al-Alwani**, *La ikraha fi'l-din: ishkaliyat al-riddah wa'l-murtaddin min saqr al-islam ila'l-yawm*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cairo/Herndon VA: IIIT and Maktab al-Shuruq al-Duwaliyyah, 2006).