

# The Qur'anic Perspective on Religious Pluralism

Prior to engaging in any discussion of specific issues pertaining to religious pluralism with reference to Islam, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the framework of normative Muslim ethics. Given the widespread negative stereotyping of Islam in the West, particularly the United States, especially since September 11, 2001, I think that it is critically important to state the normative Islamic view on religious and ethical pluralism. My presentation, therefore, focuses on identifying major teachings of the Qur'an—which to Muslims is the primary source of the Islamic tradition—that are relevant in this context.

The cardinal principle of Islam is belief in the absolute oneness of God, or *Tawhid*. In the opening chapter of the Qur'an, *Al-Fatiha*, God is described as "Ar-Rahman" (The Most Merciful), "Ar-Rahim" (The Most Gracious), and as "Rabb al-'alamin" (The Lord of all the peoples and universes). As pointed out by Fathi Osman, in the Qur'an God is not related to any particular place or people but to all creation.<sup>1</sup> In this context it is interesting to note that while the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament refers to God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Qur'an does not refer to God as the God of any particular prophet. God is the one and only creator of everything that exists and from the unity of God comes the unity of creation. The Qur'an points out that God not only creates and sustains all creatures but also gives moral guidance to humanity, which has been made "in the best of moulds" (Surah 95: *At-Tin*: 4).

The Qur'an affirms that God "cares for all creatures" (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 268) and testifies that the message it contains is universal, as may be seen from the following verses:

Hallowed is He who from on high, step by step, has bestowed upon His servant the standard by which to discern the true from the false, so that to all the world it may be a warning. (Surah 25: *Al-Furqan*: 1)<sup>2</sup>

(The Qur'an) is but a reminder and a divine discourse, clear in itself and clearly showing the truth, to the end that it may warn everyone who is alive (of heart). (Surah 36: *Yasin*: 69–70)<sup>3</sup>

This (divine writ) behold, is no less than a reminder to all the worlds. (Surah 38: *Sad*: 87)<sup>4</sup>

This (message) is no less than a reminder to all mankind—to every one of you who wills to walk a straight way. (Surah 81: *At-Takwir*: 27–28)<sup>5</sup>

The universal mission of the Prophet of Islam is also affirmed by the Qur'an as, for instance, in Surah 34: *Saba'*: 28, which states, "Now (as for thee Muhammad,) We have not sent thee otherwise than to mankind at large, to be a herald of glad tidings and a warner."<sup>6</sup>

The nonexclusive spirit of Islam also comes through the oft-repeated teaching of the Qur'an contained in verses such as the following:

Verily, those who have attained to faith (in this divine writ), as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians—all who believe in God and the Last day and do righteous deeds—shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 62; this verse is repeated in almost identical form in Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 69)<sup>7</sup>

And they claim, "None shall ever enter paradise unless he be a Jew"—or "a Christian." Such are their wishful beliefs! Say: "Produce an evidence for what you are claiming, if what you say is true!" Yea, indeed: everyone who surrenders his whole being unto God, and is a doer of good withal, shall have his reward with his Sustainer; and all such need have no fear, and neither shall they grieve. (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 111–12)<sup>8</sup>

And be conscious of the Day on which you shall be brought back unto God, whereupon every human being shall be repaid in full for what he has earned, and none shall be wronged. (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 281)<sup>9</sup>

Since God is the universal creator who sends guidance to all humanity, Muslims are commanded by the Qur'an to affirm the divine message given to all the previous Prophets. It is stated in Surah 40: *Ghafir*: 78,

“And, indeed, (O Muhammad,) We sent forth apostles before thy time; some of them We have mentioned to thee, and some of them We have not mentioned to thee.”<sup>10</sup> While only twenty-five prophets are mentioned in the Qur’an, the above-cited verse indicates that there have also been other prophets. Indeed, Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 84 tells us that God “shall raise up a witness out of every community”<sup>11</sup>

Muslims are required to affirm the continuity of Islam with previous revelations and Prophets and not to make a distinction among them, as can be seen from the following verses:

Say: “We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed to Moses and Jesus, and that which has been vouchsafed to all the (other) prophets by their Sustainer: we make no distinction between any of them. And it is unto Him that we surrender ourselves” (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 136).<sup>12</sup>

Step by step has He bestowed upon thee from on high this divine writ, setting forth the truth which confirms whatever there remains (of earlier revelations): for it is He who has bestowed from on high the Torah and the Gospel aforetime as a guidance to mankind, and it is He who has bestowed (upon man) the standard by which to discern the true from the false. (Surah 3: *Al-’Imran*: 3)<sup>13</sup>

Say: “We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed 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.” (Surah 3: *Al-’Imran*: 84)<sup>14</sup>

Behold, We have inspired thee (O Prophet) just as We inspired Noah and all the Prophets after him—as We inspired Abraham, and Ishmael. And Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants including Jesus and Job, and Jonah, and Aaron, and Solomon; and as We vouchsafed unto David a book of divine wisdom; and (We inspired other) apostles whom We have mentioned to thee ere this, as well as apostles whom We have not mentioned to thee; and as God spoke His Word unto Moses: (We sent all these) apostles as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, so that men might have no excuse before God after (the coming of) these apostles: and God is indeed almighty, wise. (Surah 4: *An-Nisa*: 163)<sup>15</sup>

In matters of faith, He has ordained for you that which He enjoined upon Noah—and into which We gave thee (O Muhammad) insight through revelation—as well as that which We had enjoined upon Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus: Steadfastly uphold the (true) faith, and do not break up your unity therein. (Surah 42: *Ash-Shura*: 13)<sup>16</sup>

One major reason why the Prophet Abraham is so important in the Islamic tradition is that he is seen as a symbol of the unity of all believers implicit in Qur'anic teaching. Not only is he the Prophet most often mentioned in the Qur'an after Muhammad, but he is also regarded in a significant way as the first "Muslim" because he surrendered his whole self to God. The Qur'an repeatedly describes Abraham as "hanif"—the true in faith—or one who turns away from all that is not-God to submit to God's law and order. It also emphasizes the point that Abraham was "neither a Jew nor a Christian." Abraham is regarded as a model monotheist whom the Qur'an refers to as "a friend of God" ("khalil Allah"):

Who can be better  
In religion than one  
Who submits his whole self  
To God, does good,  
And follows the way  
Of Abraham the true in faith?  
For God did take  
Abraham for a friend. (Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 125)<sup>17</sup>

Surah 37: *Al-Saffat*: 83 and 84 point out that Abraham approached God with a heart and mind in total accord with the will of the creator and that God recognized and rewarded the faith of Abraham. In his poetry, Muhammad Iqbal—modern Islam's most outstanding poet-philosopher—frequently pictures Abraham as an iconoclast who is shown breaking his father's idols. To Iqbal it is necessary to negate all that is not-God (signified by the "la" in the "la ilaha illa Allah": "There is no god but God" in the Islamic Shahadah or confession of Faith) before God's existence can be affirmed. Iqbal's motif captures the spirit of the Qur'anic epithet "hanif," which refers not only to a belief in the one God but also a complete refusal to associate anything or anyone with God. Abraham is "hanif" precisely because he upheld the oneness and allness of God in the face of all opposition and obstacles.

According to the Qur'an, it is the spirit of Abraham that would enable Muslims (and other believers in God) to become "witnesses for humankind" as stated in Surah 22: *Al-Hajj*: 78:

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 creed 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", so that the Apostle might bear witness to truth before you, and that you might bear witness to it before all mankind.<sup>18</sup>

Among the rights given by God to all human beings that are strongly affirmed by the Qur'an, the following may be regarded as particularly pertinent in the context of ethical pluralism:

*Right to Life:* The Qur'an upholds the sanctity and absolute value of human life and states in Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 151: "Do not take any human being's life—(the life) which God has declared to be sacred—otherwise than in (the pursuit of) justice: this has He enjoined upon you so that you might use your reason."<sup>19</sup> In Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 32, the Qur'an points out that, in essence, the life of each individual is comparable to that of an entire community and, therefore, should be treated with the utmost care:

We ordained  
For the Children of Israel  
That if any one slew  
A person—unless it be  
For murder or for spreading  
Mischief in the land—  
It would be as if  
He slew the whole people:  
And if any one saved a life,  
It would be as if he saved  
The life of the whole people.<sup>20</sup>

*Right to Respect:* In Surah 17: *Al-Isra'*: 70, the Qur'an says: "Now, indeed, worthy of esteem because of all creation they alone chose to accept the "trust" of freedom of the will (Surah 33: *Al-Ahzab*: 72). Human beings can exercise freedom of the will because they possess the rational faculty, which is what distinguishes them from all other creatures (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 30–34). Though human beings can become "the lowest of the low," the Qur'an declares that they have been made "in the best of moulds" (Surah 95: *At-Tin*: 4–6), having the ability to think, to have knowledge of right and wrong, to do the good and to avoid the evil. Thus, on account of the promise that is contained in being human, namely, the potential to be God's vicegerent on earth, the humanness of all human beings is to be respected and considered an end in itself.

*Right to Freedom:* A large part of the Qur'an's concern is to free human beings from the chains that bind them: traditionalism, authoritarianism (religious, political, economic), tribalism, racism, classism or caste system, sexism, and slavery.

The greatest guarantee of personal freedom for a Muslim lies in the Qur'anic decree that no one other than God can limit human freedom

(Surah 42: *Ash-Shura*: 21) and in the statement that "Judgment (as to what is right and what is wrong) rests with God alone" (Surah 12: *Yusuf*: 40).<sup>21</sup> As pointed out by Khalid M. Ishaque, an eminent Pakistani jurist:

The Qur'an gives to responsible dissent the status of a fundamental right. In exercise of their powers, therefore, neither the legislature nor the executive can demand unquestioning obedience. . . . The Prophet, even though he was the recipient of Divine revelation, was required to consult the Muslims in public affairs. Allah addressing the Prophet says: "and consult with them upon the conduct of affairs. And . . . when thou art resolved, then put thy trust in Allah" (Surah 3: *Al-Imran*: 159).<sup>22</sup>

The Qur'anic proclamation in Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 256. "There shall be no coercion in matters of faith"<sup>23</sup> guarantees freedom of religion and worship. This means that, according to Qur'anic teaching, non-Muslims living in Muslim territories should have the freedom to follow their own faith-traditions without fear or harassment. A number of Qur'anic passages state clearly that the responsibility of the Prophet Muhammad is to communicate the message of God and not to compel anyone to believe. For instance:

If it had been God's Plan  
They would not have taken  
False gods: but We  
Made thee not one  
To watch over their doings,  
Nor art thou set  
Over them to dispose  
Of their affairs. (Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 107)<sup>24</sup>

If it had been thy Lord's will  
They would have all believed,  
All who are on earth!  
Will thou then compel mankind,  
Against their will, to believe? (Surah 10: *Yunus*: 99)<sup>25</sup>

But if they turn away,  
Thy duty is only to preach  
The clear message. (Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 82)<sup>26</sup>

If then they turn away,  
We have not sent thee  
As a guard over them.  
Their duty is but to convey  
(The Message). (Surah 42: *Ash-Shura*: 48)<sup>27</sup>

The right to exercise free choice in matters of belief is unambiguously endorsed by the Qur'an in Surah 18: *Al-Kahf*: 29, which states:

The Truth is  
From your Lord:  
Let him who will  
Believe, and let him  
Who will, reject (it).<sup>28</sup>

The Qur'an also makes clear that God will judge human beings not on the basis of what they profess but on the basis of their belief and righteous conduct, as indicated by Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 62 and Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 69, cited earlier.

The Qur'an recognizes the right to religious freedom not only in the case of other believers in God, but also in the case of nonbelievers in God (if they are not aggressing upon Muslims). For instance, Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 108 states:

Revile not ye  
Those whom they call upon  
Besides God, lest  
They out of spite  
Revile God  
In their ignorance.  
Thus have We made  
Alluring to each people  
Its own doings.  
In the end will they  
Return to their Lord,  
And We shall then  
Tell them the truth  
Of all that they did.<sup>29</sup>

In the context of the human right to exercise religious freedom, it is important to mention that the Qur'anic dictum "Let there be no compulsion in religion" applies not only to non-Muslims but also to Muslims. While those who renounced Islam after professing it and then engaged in "acts of war" against Muslims were to be treated as enemies and aggressors, the Qur'an does not prescribe any punishment for non-profession or renunciation of faith. The decision regarding a person's ultimate destiny in the hereafter rests with God.

The right to freedom includes the right to be free to tell the truth. The Qur'anic term for truth is *Haqq*, which is also one of God's most important attributes. Standing up for the truth is a right and a responsibility that a

Muslim may not disclaim even in the face of the greatest danger or difficulty (Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 135). While the Qur'an commands believers to testify to the truth, it also instructs society not to harm persons so testifying (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 282).<sup>30</sup>

The Qur'an regards diversity of peoples as well as religious and ethical perspectives as a part of God's design. In a remarkable passage in which reference is made both to the unity and diversity of humankind, the Qur'an states: "O men! 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" (Surah 49: *Al-Hujurat*: 13).<sup>31</sup> From this verse it is clear that one of the basic purposes of diversity is to encourage dialogue among different peoples and also that a person's ultimate worth is determined not by what group he or she belongs to but how God-conscious he or she is.

That plurality of religions (and ethical viewpoints) is sanctioned by God is attested by the Qur'an in a number of verses. For example:

To each is a goal  
To which God turns him;  
Then strive together (as in a race)  
Towards all that is good.  
Wheresoever ye are,  
God will bring you  
Together. For God  
Hath power over all things. (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 148)<sup>32</sup>

To each among you  
Have We prescribed a Law  
And an Open Way.  
If God had so willed,  
He would have made you  
A single People, but (His  
Plan is) to test you in what  
He hath given you: so strive  
As in a race in all virtues.  
The goal of you all is to God;  
It is He that will show you  
The truth of the matters  
In which ye dispute. (Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 51)<sup>33</sup>

And (know that) all mankind were once but one single community, 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 have been settled (from the outset). (Surah 10: *Yunus*: 19)<sup>34</sup>



The Qur'an advocates gracious conduct and tolerance toward persons who hold different religious and ethical views as a life-attitude. This can be seen clearly from verses such as the following:

When a (courteous) greeting  
Is offered you, meet it  
With greeting still more  
Courteous, or (at least)  
Of equal courtesy,  
God takes careful account  
Of all things. (Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 86)<sup>35</sup>

. . . If the enemy  
Incline towards peace,  
Do thou (also) incline  
Towards peace, and trust  
In God: for He is the One  
That heareth and knoweth  
(All things). (Surah 8: *Al-Anfal*: 61)<sup>36</sup>

If one amongst the Pagans  
Ask thee for asylum,  
Grant it to him,  
So that he may hear the word  
Of God; and then extort him  
To where he can be secure. (Surah 9: *At-Taubah*: 6)<sup>37</sup>

Call thou (all mankind) unto thy Sustainer's path with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner: for, behold, thy Sustainer knows best as to who strays from His path, and best knows He as to who are the right-guided. Hence, if you have to respond to an attack (in argument), respond only to the extent of the attack leveled against you; but to bear yourselves with patience is indeed far better for (you, since God is with) those who are patient in adversity. (Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 125–26)<sup>38</sup>

And do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner—unless it be such 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: for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we (all) surrender ourselves." (Surah 29: *Al-Ankubut*: 46)<sup>39</sup>

The ethical imperative central to Qur'anic teaching and the normative Islamic worldview is to enjoin the good—"al-mar'uf"—and forbid the evil—"al-munkar." Within the parameters of this categorical imperative,

Islam is open to accepting and cooperating with any ethical perspective. As pointed out by Fathi Osman in his encyclopedic work, *The Concepts of the Qur'an*, "God is not biased with or against any race, ethnicity, or gender, so His guidance secures absolute justice."<sup>40</sup>

## NOTES

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