

The Right of Diversity and Pluralism: The basis for our Co-existence in a Divided World

Oliver McTernan

London

Pluralism, whether we are willing to acknowledge it or not, is a fact of life both East and West. But pluralism in society is not a new phenomenon; a quick glance at history offers numerous examples of how people of different faiths and cultures learnt out of necessity to co-exist in a limited shared space. The scale of the diversity, cultural and religious, in Western societies in particular has increased significantly in the past half century, due in part to the growth of migration for economic and political reasons, and in part due to the greater ease with which people can travel today. For the most part peoples of different faiths and cultures have learnt to live alongside one another with a remarkable degree of tolerance, if not respect. When communal strife does occur, it is frequently due to

the failure of the political, communal and religious leadership, both at a global and local level, to address the faith, cultural and linguistic differences that at least some of their followers perceive as a threat to their identity or belief. Intolerance of and indifference towards the other are perhaps the greatest threat to our human existence today. The battles associated with faith identity in various part of our world today highlight the urgent need for believers to re-evaluate their own attitudes towards diversity and pluralism. History shows that religion has the potential to be a force for good or for evil.

The focus of our conference today is to look at the concept of pluralism and diversity from an Islamic perspective. As a Christian, I am acutely aware of how my own faith tradition has frequently failed to live up to its own beliefs and traditions in this respect. It is an indisputable fact that Christians frequently have resorted to violence to impose a uniformity both in belief and culture.

It is with the most profound respect for Islam and its traditions that I offer these observations from a

historical and philosophical perspective.

The Qur'an describes Muslims as 'the best community ever brought forth by God for the benefit of humanity'. This self-image, combined with the belief that the message of the Qur'an is God's complete and final revelation to mankind, inspired the Muslim poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, the advocate of Pakistani independence, to see the Muslim community as a 'model for the final unification of mankind'. He believed that the Qur'an contains foundational principles essential for a coherent system of life, giving perfect harmony, balance and stability to society while at the same time providing the individual with freedom of choice and opportunity for personal development. Iqbal's dream was that an independent Pakistan would become a living embodiment of these Quranic principles, a shining example of a message that had universal application and that the world greatly needed to hear.

It is my perception, and I do hope you will correct me if I am this perception is wrong or distorted, that Muhammad Iqbal's conviction that Islam alone can bring a durable peace to the world is

widely shared and in great part prescribes the relationship that frequently exists between Muslims and non-Muslims. Early political and military triumphs convinced Muslims that ‘Islam and political power go together’. ‘Almighty God’, writes the Muslim scholar Khalid Duran, ‘came to be seen as rewarding the believers with supremacy over others’. This ingrained belief has led some Muslims at least to the conclusion that their loss of political supremacy is the result of a lack of commitment to faith, and that the remedy lies in stricter observance. A return to their former glory requires motivation and avoiding ‘foreign’ influences that can dilute the purity of the faith. Muslims, according to Duran, are burdened with a triumphalist past legacy ‘that makes it difficult for them to integrate into a pluralist society where all are equal partners and no single community rules supreme’.¹ Many believe that Islam cannot be fully implemented if the government is not in the hands of Muslims and shari‘a law enforced.²

The key to understanding the Muslim psyche is, according to Khalid Duran, the migration of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions from

Mecca, where they had met with opposition, to Medina, where they set up the first Muslim polity.

This migration, or hijra as it is called in Arabic, was entirely religiously motivated; they chose to become ‘refugees in the path of God, not migrants for worldly gains’. It was the beginning of Islamic history, thus setting the example for all ‘oppressed Muslims’ to follow. It is every Muslim’s religious obligation to seek a safe place to practice their faith without restriction. This belief, Duran claims, enforces separatism. A devout Muslim is expected to move from the dar al-harb – the abode of war, areas outside Muslim control- to dar al-islam – the abode of peace, areas where Muslims have control and can practice their faith freely.³ It is the inability to fulfil this obligation, Duran believes, that has led many economic migrants to set up their own islands of dar al-islam, that is self-imposed, self-sufficient ‘ghettos’, in the midst of what they perceive to be hostile western environments.⁴

Whether or not Duran is right in claiming that these particular beliefs influence present day Muslim attitudes to outsiders and therefore to pluralism and diversity, Islam in thought and practice has a

long record of tolerance.

The Qur'an itself is unequivocal in its condemnation of forcible conversion: 'Let there be no compulsion in religion',⁵ it declares, and again 'if the Lord had pleased, all who are in the world would have believed together. Will you then compel men to become believers? No soul can believe without the permission of God.'⁶ It singles out Jews and Christians for special treatment because they believe in the same God as Muslims. Consequently, the relationship with these faith communities should be friendly: 'God is your Lord and our Lord; we have our works and you have your works; between us and you let there be no strife: God will make us all one'⁷. It also prescribes that those of other faiths seeking to know more about 'the word of God' should be given that opportunity and granted asylum. The prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, observed these injunctions in his own dealings with peoples of other faiths. He wrote to the bishops, priests and monks of Najran, promising them the protection of God and his apostle for their churches, religious services and monastic institutions. He guaranteed them their rights and free-

dom from interference as long as they were faithful to their obligations. Muhammad also allowed the Jews of Medina to practice undisturbed. It was only when they became openly hostile to his leadership that they were expelled.⁸

As the Muslim empire expanded efforts were made to find accommodation with the diversity of faiths and practices they encountered. Although the Qur'an condemns idolatry, there is evidence that idol, fire and stone worshippers were tolerated if they were willing to pay a special tax. T.W.Arnold records the account of a 9th-century Muslim general who ordered an imam and a mu'adhdhin to be flogged for destroying a fire-temple in Sughd and building a mosque in its place.⁹ Hindus were also protected provided that they too paid the tax which guaranteed non-Muslims immunity for life, property and religion. In practice it seems that each protected community was allowed to manage its own affairs. Christian sects like the Nestorians, it would seem, enjoyed greater toleration and freedom under Muslims than they had for centuries previously under the Byzantine rule. A 7th-century Nestorian patriarch wrote: 'The Arabs to whom God at this

time had given the empire of the world... attack not the Christian faith, but, on the contrary they favour our religion, do honour to our priests and the saints of the Lord and confer benefits on churches and monastries'.¹⁰ The Nestorians used their new opportunities under Muslim rule to expand its missionary activity to Persia, China, India and Egypt.

The 10th-century Saxon nun, Hroswitha, described the most celebrated example of Islamic colonizing as 'the brilliant ornament of the world'.¹¹ She was writing about caliphate based in Cordoba, which had become renowned for its wealth, culture, learning and religious tolerance. Under this enlightened leadership, Muslims, Jews and Christians had moved beyond mere co existence to engage in a new level of cross culture interaction. Jews and Christians 'embraced nearly every aspect of Arabic style' from philosophy to architecture.¹² Synagogues and churches reflected the architectural style of Muslims and often had Arabic writing adorning their walls.¹³ Christians and Jews had been assimilated into different levels of government, acting as ambassadors and ministers as the Cordoba caliphate reached out diplomatically to

their more hostile Christian neighbours. Its eventual downfall was not due so much to outside aggression but to a challenge from their North African Muslim neighbours, the Almoravids, who viewed the cultural openness of the 'Andalusian Muslims' a threat to traditional Muslim identity.¹⁴

Tolerance was not always, however, the hallmark of relationships between Muslim rulers and their non-Muslim subjects. The same fanatical streak that destroyed the milieu of tolerance and cross cultural cooperation created in Andalusia was operative in the destruction of Hindu and Buddhist temples and the mistreatment of Jews and Christians at various times and in different places.¹⁵ Periods of persecution under certain rulers were such that at times Jews and Christians felt forced to convert. But even in these darker moments it seems that the prescriptions guaranteeing requiring that non-Muslims be treated 'kindly and sympathetically' were never fully lost sight of. This is well illustrated in a story, which, it must be said, some dispute, about the Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides, who under the fanatical rule of the Almoravids is said to have feigned conversation and recanted when

he fled to the safety of Egypt. A Muslim jurist, later on in his life, accused Maimonides of apostasy and demanded the death penalty. It is said that the case was dismissed by an immanent judge and prime minister of Saladin, who declared that a man forced to convert ‘could not be rightly considered a Muslim’.

A similar story is told of Buddhist monks who in the 13th-century converted to Islam when their temples were destroyed, but were later allowed to return to Tibet and to practice their own faith.¹⁶

But in the 18th-century some Arab scholars called for a rejection of past scholarship. Their worldview was divided by what they saw as good and bad, belief and unbelief, Muslim and non-Muslim. Those who did not share their vision, Muslim or non-Muslim, were to be subdued, and killed if necessary, in the name of Islam.¹⁷ In their quest for religious purity they destroyed many venerated sites, giving rise to further tensions and resentments within the Muslim family.

Despite the fact that the majority of scholars and

clergy are products of a more conservative and inward looking education, there are Muslim scholars who recognize the need for reform and to rethink Islam's role in the modern world. Abdullah Ahmed An-Na'im, the Sudanese scholar, sees no incompatibility between Islam and modern day human rights claims. Nurcholish Madjid, the prominent Indonesian scholar, is another example of someone who seeks to promote a more inclusive form of Islam. He believes that religion should remain in the realm of the transcendent. World religions for him have more in common than not 'As we all come from the same fountain of wisdom, God'. The idea of an Islamic state, he believes, is contrary to the teachings of the Qur'an.¹⁸

To whatever faith tradition we belong it is so important to know our history and to understand the context in which our ancestors in the faith acted out their beliefs and values. This can help us to avoid the risk of allowing immediate circumstances or perceived threats to our identity to overshadow the fundamental core beliefs of our faith tradition. In each faith tradition there is an affirmation of life that extends beyond the physical boundaries of their

own communities. We recognize also an inherent respect for individual choices and the acknowledgment that there should be no coercion in matters of religion, a precept based on the belief that faith rests essentially in the freedom of the individual to say yes or no to what is proposed as truth. In each tradition, crossing boundaries of culture and ethnicity, there is clearly a seminal presence of the right of the individual, both to seek truth and to dissent – principles that lie at the very heart of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the application of these beliefs, however, competing claims on the exclusivity or superiority of one interpretation of truth over the other have frequently led to abandonment or outright violation of these principles.

The important point to note is that rights claims are not, as it is sometimes suggested, the intervention of a group of 17th and 18th century European philosophers. The right to think and to act differently in the quest for truth is also implicit in the teachings of world faiths that represent a diversity of cultures, east and west. Locke, Bayle, Voltaire and others undoubtedly contributed to the devel-

opment of these concepts and perhaps even more importantly helped to lift them out of a ‘sectarian milieu’ that had clearly failed to practice in all circumstances what it claimed to believe.

The French Catholic existentialist philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, believed that far from embattling people with negative attitudes towards others, a genuine religious experience or conviction mandates a person to be pro-active in defending the right of others to believe differently. He maintained that the ‘intense conviction’ a religious person experiences and which is so much part of who he or she is, should enable that person to empathise with another’s convictions that are different but equally intense. This ability to identify or empathise should enable believers to move beyond that state of passive acceptance that is usually referred to as tolerance.¹⁹ To uphold and to defend actively the right of others to make truth claims, different from our own, and to act upon them, provided that these are not detrimental to the rights and well being of others, would be an important first step that takes people beyond ‘the sectarian milieu’ in which their own convictions have been formed.

End Notes

- 1- Ibid Duran pages 82-85.
- 2- Ibid page 88.
- 3- Ibid page 91-93
- 4- Ibid page 94
- 5- Qur'an 2: 256
- 6- Ibid 10: 99,100.
- 7- Ibid xlii 13-14.
- 8- T W Arnold, Toleration (Muhammadan), page 366.
- 9- Ibid page 366.
- 10- Cited by Arnold page 367.
- 11- Maria Rosa Menocal, The Ornament of the World, How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created A Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 2002 pages 32-34.
- 12- Ibid page 11.
- 13- Ibid page 328 -9.
- 14- Ibid page 43.
- 15 Ibid Arnold page 368.
- 16- Ibid pages 368-9.
- 17- Ibid page 50.
- 18- Jane Perlez, An Islamic Scholar's Lifelong lesson: Tolerance, New York Times March 16 2002.
- 19- Gabriel Marcel, Creative Fidelity, Trans by Robert Rosthal, The Noonday Press, New York, 1964 pages 210 –221.