Islam in a plural society *

ISLAM'S greatest strength is also the source of perhaps its greatest challenges, the pluralistic appeal of its message. From the very first, the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) appealed to those members of his community who sought in their lives a greater good and a higher authority than the idols which they and their ancestors were accustomed to worshipping.

Islam, unlike the revealed religions that preceded it, brought what in some ways was a new, as opposed to a renewed, message. No more were the Children of Israel the particular target of God's grace: Muhammad was to be the Prophet of all humanity and Islam the true path of salvation for all humanity, just as the Almighty was the God of all humanity, to the exclusion of none. This emphasis on the prophet Muhammad's and Islam's attention to the diversity of the world, offered an egalitarian attraction to the hundreds, thousands, and then millions that heeded the message, a message that was to legislate the lives of all Muslims while at the same time accomodating the beliefs of non-Muslims.

As early as twenty years after the Prophet's death, Islam had, by virtue of its appeal, and aided by the geopolitical acumen of its leaders, made its way across the vast expanses of Asia and the desert strongholds of Berber Africa. Even earlier, the appeal of this message had united the disparate and warring tribes of the Arabian peninsula and various clans of the Hijaz.

Indeed, the plurality of Meccan society is confirmed in the Holy Quran's own references to «tales purchased from abroad» (wa min an-nas man yashtari lahw al-hadith), recognized by most commentators as referring to the Persian tales found in the books brought from Ctesiphon (Zamakhshari, III, 210). It was the confederation of these clans that permitted the later economic and political expansion of a world community — the *ummah* — the likes of which had not hitherto been seen. The closest analogue was the *oikoumene*, most especially in its manifestations as the Holy Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium), two eminently powerful imperia that brought under their banners a plurality of peoples and regions.

Byzantium stretched from the Turkic hinterland across the Mediterranean, into and through Saharan Africa and across the garrisoned islands of the Mediterranean. Rome controlled, or exercised control over, a dominion that as late as the 17th century, was to extend West, as far as the South American Andes and East, as far as the Pacific islands of the Philippines. But the critical difference between Rome and Constantinople on the one hand, and Islam on the other, was the nature of this dominion.

More often than not, the rulers of these territories — popes, patriarchs and politicos alike — tolerated little if any deviation from a state-established theological norm; but there are admirable exceptions in, for example, King Alfonso X, The Wise of Castile and Léon (d. 1284), Emperor Frederick II Höhenstaufen (d. 1250), and Emperor Alexius I Comnenus (d. 1118).

Occasionally a ruler would flaunt his opposition to that norm. A particularly famous example of such opposition is that of King Henry VIII of England (d. 1547). It is noteworthy that his own resistance was met with eloquent contempt in the person of Thomas More (d. 1535). Though Lord Chancellor to Henry, More withstood the King's demands that he acknowledge him supreme head of the Church in England and refused to take an oath that would in any way impugn the Pope's authority. For this impunity, he was beheaded and the Anglican Church was born.

In many startling ways, More's trial for high treason mirrors and is mirrored by a similar trial in the history of Islam, namely the inquisition of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), whose resistance to the Mu'tazili belief in the createdness of the Quran, as promulgated by the caliph al-Ma'mun (d. 833) and his successors, was to mark the victory and ascendance of the ahl assunnah wa al-jama'ah (adherents of the Tradition [the Prophet Muhammad's example] and the community's consensus) over the rationalists (Tabari, 1112 ff.). This inquisition, *mihnah*, lasted from about 813 to 849 when its policies were reversed and tribulation was brought upon those who continued to prosecute its cause.

The triumph of tradition and traditionalism over the rationalist theology of the Mu'tazilah guaranteed the primacy of the Sunni legal rites (madhhab, pl. madhahib), the number of which was to dwindle to the four in evidence today — Hanafi, Maliki, Hanbali and Shafi'i — and ensured a plurality of legal opinion. In fact, the mechanism that permitted the coexistence of the sometimes diametrically opposed determinations of these four rites, namely the doctrine of mutual and orthodox recognition, was a mechanism that preserved plurality of interpretation (cf. Makdisi, 1-9). The subsequent so-called closing of the doors of ijtihad (the scholarly use of independent reasoning in matters of law) was also a mechanism of sorts, put in place to guarantee that tampering, especially by the State, could not take place (Hallaq, 341). It was not a way to reduce or downplay plurality. Indeed, the entire question of the validity of the determinations of the Shi'i jurist has remained open to this day. This apparent nonchalance in the face of a system based on a somewhat different methodology with regard to the sources of law (usul al-fiqh), one which also incorporates the theory of the imamate (legitimate succession to the Prophet in the persons of his descendants via his daughter Fatima) and its attending legal jurisdictions, is another example of the pluralism inherent in the Islamic system.

These are all examples of how Islam is systemically pluralistic. How does this translate in practice in modern day society? The answer to this, as with the answers to many of the question the latter-day Muslim poses, has its roots in the history of the emergence of an Islamic identity. Perhaps a good place to start in order to gain an understanding of Islam in a plural society, a situation that is true of Islam in the majority of those areas in which it plays a significant or visible role — the Middle East and North Africa, the Subcontinent, Central Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia, Africa, the United Kingdom and Europe, the Balkans, and parts of the Caribbean — is to invert the question and to look at the way Islam has historically dealt with its minorities, to look at non-Muslims in a plural society, plural by virtue of the presence or dominance of Islam. This strategy necessitates an inquiry into the status of the Dhimmi.

A dhimmi is a beneficiary of the dhimmah, «a sort of indefinitely renewed contract through which the Muslim community accords hospitality and protection to members of other revealed religions», the ahl al-kitab (or people of the book), provided they acknowledge the dominance of Islam (Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition, II, 227). The revealed religions are taken by Muslim legists to mean Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians (Magians), Samaritans and Sabeans. The authorized treatment of dhimmis by Muslims and by the Muslim administration is based on passages in the Quran, on hadith reports — that is the words, deeds and tacit approvals and disapprovals of the Prophet Muhammad — and on the actions of a number of the illustrious companions and intimates of the Prophet.

Of special importance is the Caliph "Umar"s promulgation of a covenant (preserved in Tabari, 2405; analysed in Faruqi, 58 ff.) which outlined the duties and obligations of the dhimmis. The key Quranic passage (9:29, Repentance) reads: «Fight those who do not believe in Allah and the Day of Reckoning, and those who do not forbid what Allah and his Messenger have forbidden, and those who do not believe in the true faith, from among the people of the book, until they pay the jizyah ...» The Arabic hatta, "until", makes it clear that once jizyah, poll-tax, is paid, the need for fighting is unnecessary. On the other hand, because of the inter-community relations in Medina during the Prophet's time and because of various encounters with the Arab Jews of Medina, much has been made of the conflicts between the nascent Muslim community and the Jewish one (Fattal, 10).

But inasmuch as Jews and Christians are legal equals vis-à-vis dhimmi legislation, a contradiction existed, a contradiction that found further elaboration in the contrasting views of the political administration, on the one hand and the Fuqaha or jurisconsults, on the other. Often, doctrinaires from among the jurisconsults developed and called for a repressive program, "which, if not one of persecution, [was] at least vexatious and repressive." (New EI, II, 227). The administration sometimes had to pay lip-service to the jurisconsults and the judges by acceding to their pleas for a systematic persecution. Punishment of one sort or another was inflicted for reasons of political expediency and the jurisconsults and judges were pacified.

The 14th century theologian and jusrisconsult Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah (d. 1350), in his treatise on the dhimmis, the Ahkam a~li ad~l-dhimma, insists that the high positions in the Muslim financial administration ought to be in the hands of the Muslims themselves, not in those of potentially untrustworthy Christians or Jews. This fear of embezzlement, financial overthrow, or malevolence was not uncommon. But the Christian poet Abu Zubayd, a friend of the third caliph "Uthman (d. 6S6), was in charge of alms (sadaqah) collection; and under the fourth caliph "Ali (d. 661), the South Arabian city of Najran was under the governorship of a Christian.

Although the State did sometimes accede to pleas for persecution, widespread persecution seldom took place in Islamic lands. Even from the volatile time of the Crusades, there are no recorded repercussions on the dhimmis. According to the traveler Frescobaldi, when the Muslims offered their prayers in the Holy Land, all the Frankish Christians, i.e. the enemy, were locked up in a building called a khan, but the dhimmis were not locked up and simply remained at home. Plurality and diversity were cultivated, not condemned.

The Spanish scholar and biographer ad-Dabbi writes, for example, that academic gatherings in Baghdad were attended not only by Muslims of all sects, orthodox and heterodox, but also by people of all kinds of belief. He specifically names unbelievers, Zoroastrians, materialists, atheists, Jews, and Christians. He adds, significantly, that «whenever the leader of one of the [above] groups entered the hall, everyone rose out of respect and no one sat down again until he had taken his place» (quoted in Vernet, 24).

The 9th century littérateur al-Jahiz writes that one of the reasons for the respect of the masses for the Christians was that they were secretaries to kings and physicians to noblemen. The late 11th/early 12th century polymath al-Ghazali writes in his magisterial work on the revival of religious sciences, the Ihya' "ulum ad-din, that the one physician in his district was a dhimmi. The 10th century geographer al-Muqaddasi, in his geographical work, the Ahsan at-taqasim fi ma"rifat al-aqalim, mentions that in Syria most of the administrators and physicians were Christians. The fact that all three, mention physicians is not accidental. As a look at Ibn Abi Usaybi'ah's 13th century biographical dictionary of physicians reveals, the non-Muslim physician was not a marginal minority participant in a repressive majority régime but a central and integral part of Islamic society (Toorawa, 16-19). Even a cursoly look at Ibn an-Nadim's 10th century bio-bibliographical catalogue al-Fihrist, reveals a wide-ranging spectrum of beliefs and practices.

From a legal viewpoint, certain forms of power had to be kept from the dhimmi: power arising out of control over land, property, slaves, Muslim women, inheritances and endowed trusts (waqfs). To distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims, especially with regard to what may perhaps be termed intimate contact, regulations concerning dress, appearance and comportment were enforced. But trade, commercial ventures, interaction, the sharing of quarters, and proximity inevitably dissolved many of the lines of distinction.

I suggested above that a look at the way Muslims treated non-Muslims would shed light on the ways in which Muslims today might face the challenges of a plural society. This is true for two main reasons. First, because it provides guidance for nations where the Muslim majority must grapple with a just incorporation of non-Muslim minorities into the fabric of society. Second, because it provides examples for those Muslims that live as minorities — roughly one-third of the Muslim world — about the ways in which minority populations are expected by Islam to survive in such an environment. There are numerous examples of countries facing the former situation but it is especially instructive to look at Malaysia, where Muslims constitute 52% of the population, in other words a fragile majority. A secular, constitutionally guided, federation of Islamic states, Malaysia daily grapples with the issue of balancing an Islamic ethic with the need — if for no other reason than economic and cultural survival — for a competitive edge.

Successor to such administrations as those of 7th century Medina, 9th century Baghdad, and 11th century Cairo, the Malaysian parliament has attempted to emulate its predecessors by putting into place a system that sustains the Muslim cultural identity and yet that recognizes that a harmonious and equitable existence consists in not merely tolerating, but in accepting the diversity and differences that are presented by its significant Christian, Buddhist and Hindu populations.

This policy of acceptance and mutual respect, makes for some remarkable scenes: the mini-skirted Chinese secretary and the Islamically attired Malay one, waiting side-by-side at a bus-stop, for instance; the presence of halal foods and non-halal ones, side-by-side, in supermarkets nationwide; the national — and the word is carefully chosen — observance of religious holidays. The critical factor is mutual acknowledgment of mutual rights. With the exception of the Kelantan State parliament, reactionary by Malaysian standards — wishing, for instance, to impose the hudud laws even on non-Muslim residents — this is a modus vivendi pleasing to the society. Based on rule of law, it permits all of its members to function within their own belief-systems and guarantees respect for those belief-systems.

In the case of minority non-Muslim populations, the challenge is how to ensure the formation of a Muslim who is also a contributing member of secular, multicultural, multiracial, multireligious society, rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's, as it were. This boils down to the issue of how to combine rigorous and comprehensive religious instructions with non-religious education. In Mauritius and many other countries where the Muslim minority lives and operates with a high degree of religious liberty — mosques may be built, religious gatherings held, and foreign speakers and'ulama' invited — religious instruction has been almost completely displaced by the demands of nonreligious education.

Imams and madrasah teachers are constantly trying to find ways to get parents to view the time investment in Islamic education with the same demanding and watchful eye as they do primary and secondary schooling. In this regard, the province of Québec, Canada, provides a startlingly good model. In Montréal, and elsewhere, Muslim primary schools have been set up by the Muslim minority populations and fully incorporated into the Québecois school system. For religious subjects, teachers are trained, funded, and provided by the community, and for secular subjects the State sends its own teachers, seconded to the Muslim school. This guarantees a high degree of exposure to Islam for the first 4 to 6 years of schooling.

Needless to stress, a fair amount of accomodation to majority demands is required — as is the case for non-Muslim minorities under Islamic rule — but, as Syed Abedin writes, «within the framework of the unquestioned primacy of our allegiance to Islam, we need to determine what should be our proper attitude towards this social reality. We need to... see how some of the political and social effects of this stance can be softened and mitigated, and learn to live with those that cannot» (Abedin, 21 ff).

For the leaders of minority Muslim communities, then, the struggle is to face conflicting needs: on the one hand, partly via the medium of religious instruction, «to encourage Muslim communities to strengthen and reinforce their cultural identity in a multi-cultural society so that they may not be absorbed and assimilated. On the other hand... to somehow make the same group realise that physical traits, cultural traditions, dress, food, customs, and habits are subordinate or subsidiary to their main doctrinal identity, that God created differences in people in order to facilitate recognition, that the true identity is determined by the manner in which a person or group of any race, colour or physical type approaches the business of living, uses his faculties, selects ends and means for his worldly endeavours, and so on» (Abedin, 24-25).

The constitution of a Muslim identity necessarily involves embracing difference, accepting diversity, and contributing to plurality. These impulses — embracing, accepting, contributing —are decisive in Islam. They prefigure in the Prophet's own example and are presaged in the words of the Almighty to humanity: «And we created you as nations and tribes that you might know one another» (49:13, Private Apartments).

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