



The Place of Pluralism and Democracy in Islam

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The recent experience of the LGBTQIA population in America arguably parallels that of the Muslim American community inasmuch as they both struggle for political and social inclusion and acceptance within their own communities and the broader American society. Yet while the LGBTQIA community has been able to make momentous strides towards these goals through greater cohesion, positive media imaging, political access, and informative public communication, Muslim Americans face increasing anti-Muslim rhetoric. The current global socio-political climate is one in which terrorism and violent radicalism are typically regarded as commensurate solely with Islam.

As Islamophobia both in the United States and globally heightens, Muslims need to place themselves at the forefront of a new approach to successfully understand and re-engage with Islam and reclaim their heritage of pluralism, respect for other religions, and history of harmonious interfaith co-existence. Moreover, while it is imperative to understand the variations in Muslim cultural-historical identity within the United States, Muslim Americans may nevertheless participate wholly and united in accessing national equal rights and civil liberties as both Americans and Muslims fully practicing their religion and their civic duty, precisely because Islam's core precepts protect diversity and cultivate non-judgment, encouraging each person to live one's life as one chooses.

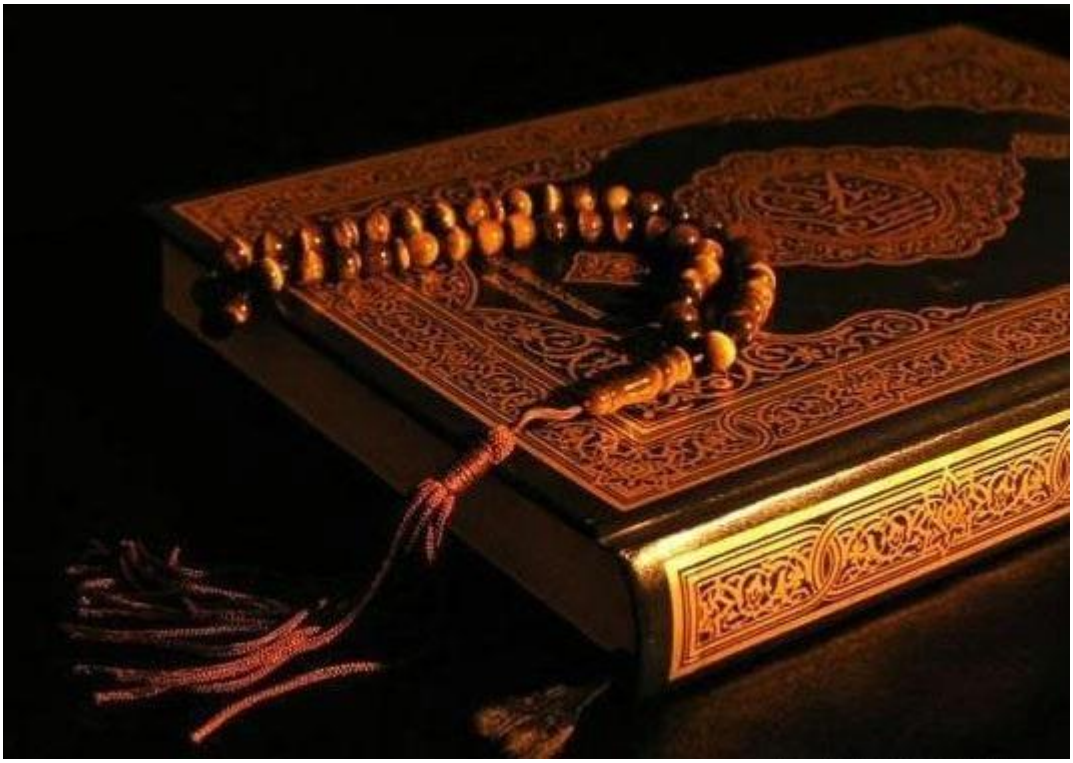
The dichotomous, adversarial paradigm of 'Islam versus the West' that serves to fortify seemingly incompatible postures should be rendered obsolete. It must give way to one common identity—that of 'Islam is the West'—that focuses on the principles of education, community, fairness, diversity, and compassion that are inherent to *both* of these cultural systems.

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Religious pluralism has always held a unique place in the history of the United States. From the diverse religions practiced by Native Americans and African slaves to the waves of colonists and immigrants escaping from religious persecution throughout the country's history, grappling with religious pluralism has been a significant part of America's effort to understand and define itself. America, like Islam, embraces people of diverse backgrounds based not on the color of their skin or their ethnicity, but because they contribute to the core values of democracy, rights, freedom, and fairness.

Islam Validates the Sanctity of Other Traditions

Muslims believe in the spiritual succession of all religions through various prophets and messengers over time. This is because Islam sees itself as the final version of the religion that was revealed to all the prophets, everywhere: from Adam, who Muslims believe to be the first human being and first prophet, to Muhammad, the last prophet. Muslims are taught that even though the other scriptures were changed over time and are no longer in their original form, the God who is worshipped and revered in these traditions is one and the same, the message of *Tauheed* (humility, patience, and perseverance) being constant throughout all of the scriptures. The last of these is the Qur'an, revealed to Muhammad who personifies its principles. Moreover, rather than being a wellspring of intolerance and hatred, the Qur'an invites humanity to inter-religious and intercultural understanding and cooperation in striving to achieve social justice for all people.



Ahl al-Kitab: People of the Same Message

The spirit of this inclusivity extends to the *Ahl al-Kitab*, commonly translated as People of the Book, most commonly referring to the Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Sabians, people of the Abrahamic faiths.[1] This title also arguably extends to other peoples touched by the Islamic civilization, such as the Zoroastrians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists,[2] since the singular *al-Kitab*, or "the Book," endorses the Islamic acceptance of previous scriptures such as Old and New Testaments, Psalms, and Gospel.

The term is used to stress that Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Sabians, but arguably also Zoroastrians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists, were sent the message that is contained in the Qur'an, namely *Tauheed* and the validity of the Last Day. In this way, the Qur'anic term *Ahl al-Kitab* signifies the importance of pluralism in Islam.

Another verse in the Qur'an informs Muslims and other *Ahl al-Kitab* that they worship the same God:

> But say, "We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our God and your God is one; and it is to Him we surrender." (29:46)

Diversity is God's Design

Furthermore, Islam also respects the pluralism evident in people's ethnicities, colors and languages, teaching that God has created these variations as a sign of what He is able to do—not as a source of conflict or as a means of making one people superior to another. This acceptance of cultural pluralism is underscored in the following two ayats (verses):

> And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colors: verily in that are Signs for those who know. (30:22)

and

> O humanity! Truly We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might know each other. Truly the most honored of you in the sight of God is the most God-conscious of you. Truly God is Knowing, Aware. (49:13)

The first verse above (Qur'an 30:22) emphasizes that acceptance can only come from those who are educated, enlightened, and who understand. Differences, from the variety of species to diversity in skin color and language, are not to be exploited, but are part of God's design. The second verse (Qur'an 49:13) is addressed to all of humankind, without reference to religion or any subset, teaching that the differences amongst mankind are a fact to be appreciated as an educational opportunity. The verb *taʿārafū* is in the sixth form in Arabic, which denotes activity that is reciprocal and ongoing.[3] Therefore, this verse does not simply refer to people of some groups learning about others, but various groups actively engaged in relationships that are continuing and mutual, in which they are learning about one another, thus underscoring the interconnectedness of humanity.



Ultimately, no people can be master of another, or one race superior to another, since they descend from the same origin and turn to the same God. It is clear from the Qur'an that it is people's behavior, intentions, and actions that determine who is most noble in the sight of God—not their gender, nation, tribe, language, color, geographic region, or even particular religious denomination, or sect.[4]

Islam versus the West: Changing the Paradigm

The fundamental issue facing Muslims worldwide is the American and European framing 'Islam versus the West.' This construction of a vast and seemingly unbridgeable divide only perpetuates stereotypes and fears about Muslims, exacerbated by post-9/11 media and political positioning and partisanship. Despite the sources of pluralism in Islam just discussed and the long and rich history of Muslims in the West, there is still profound ignorance about Muslims and Islam.

Many Muslim Americans have been silent—a silence, as they view it, of the repressed. Similarly detrimental, public conversation about Muslim Americans appears to lack a genuine attempt to listen and understand. Many Muslims are still perceived as foreigners in a land they have called home for generations. There is a

sense of profound miscommunication and lack of meaningful dialogue in an atmosphere in which the global media is saturated with negative imagery and misinformation about Islam. Eventually, however, their voices need to be heard if meaningful public discussion about the role of Islam in public and social life in America and the West is to be had.

Notes

All Qur'an translations are from the Sahih International version:

https://quran.com/1

[1] Juan Campo. "People of the Book," In *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. Juan Campo. (New York:

Facts on File, 2009), 548.

[2] ibid.

[3] W. Wright. *A Grammar of the Arabic Language vol. 1* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1996), 39B.

[4] See Qur'an 49:13

Tags

Islam

democracy

equality



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