DIVERSITY AND PLURALISM: A QUR'ĀNIC PERSPECTIVE

*Mohammad Hashim Kamali**

Abstract: This article begins with a review of the meaning and concept of pluralism and such of its allied words as diversity and tolerance. Then it discusses a set of general premises of Islam such as divine oneness (*tawḥīd*), juristic disagreement (*ikhtilāf*) and disunity (*tafarruq*) that have a bearing on pluralism. Human dignity (*karāmah*), the moral autonomy of the individual (ikhtiyār) also substantiate the essence of pluralism in Islam. The rest of the article addresses the various manifestations of pluralism ranging from its ethno-linguistic, to religious, political, cultural and legal varieties. The concluding section argues, with reference to Malaysia, that issues pertaining to ethno-religious pluralism call for deeper and more refined approaches to meet new challenges Malaysia is currently facing. The multi-religious and multicultural features of Malaysian society can be enriched by greater policy focus on integration that brings different religious and ethnic groups in closer proximity and contact in their places of residence, learning and work.

Pluralism: Meaning and Concept

The term 'pluralism' is used very frequently these days, and like many words so freely and often employed it tends to become a cliché, which is why I have attempted in this article to divide and discuss pluralism into several varieties. This approach also implies that discussing pluralism as a composite whole, or discussing only one aspect of it in isolation from its other applications, tends to invite ambiguity.

Critics have often equated pluralism with moral relativism that mixes all religious and cultural traditions into one and thus demolishes genuine differences between them. The proponents of pluralism have, on the other hand, underlined the inevitability of its recognition. People of different races, religions and cultures live side by side almost everywhere and pluralism as such punctuates the demographic contours of every nation. Factual pluralism may in a sense be distinguished from deep pluralism that implies commitment to its fuller recognition in the various

* Professor Dr Mohammad Hashim Kamali is the Chairman and CEO of the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia.

walks of life. Far from ignoring the differences of various religions and cultures or any attempt to assimilate them, deep pluralism recognises these differences and then engages in them in order to gain a sound understanding of the values and commitments of the different other.

Pluralism is not the same as diversity. People of different religious or cultural backgrounds may well be present in a place, but unless they actively engage with one another, there is no pluralism. Similarly, pluralism does not simply aim at *tolerance* of the other but entails active effort to gain an understanding of the other. One can tolerate a neighbour about whom one remains thoroughly ignorant. That may well be preferable to conflict, yet it still falls short of active pluralism – which means acknowledging and engaging differences without any attempt to impose hegemony.[1]

The inner dimension of pluralism also merits a mention, especially when pluralism is viewed in conjunction with personal identity: one's religious identity or one's ethnic identity is not a person's only identity. A person professing the Sikh religion in Malaysia, for instance, is also part of the larger Indian Malaysian community. He may belong to a particular profession, a literary association, recreations club, a political party and so forth. Each group that he is part of endows him with a specific identity. Taken together it means that the Sikh gentleman has multiple identities of which his religious identity is one.[2] Pluralism is thus a positive appreciation of plurality and implies its promotion. Real pluralism also implies equal treatment of citizens before the law without any distinction being made on the basis of religion and race.[3]

Our examination of the history and sources of Islam in the following pages supports this comprehensive understanding of pluralism. Islam began as a minority movement in the polytheistic setting of Mecca and remained so until two years before the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, may peace be upon him. From the time he received his first revelation in 610 to the year 622, Muslims were a persecuted minority in Mecca. After the Prophet's migration in that year to Medina, the number of Muslims increased but they were still a minority until the conquest of Mecca in 630. Under such circumstances, Islam could not but recognise the pluralist reality of its environment, and it could not have developed without actively engaging with the polytheists, and then the followers also of Christianity, Judaism, and Zoro-

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1. Cf., Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a Christian Country Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 70–1, as quoted in Amir Hussain, "Muslims, Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue", in: Omid Safi (ed.), *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 252.
2. Cf., Chandra Muzaffar, "Religion and Identity in a Globalised World", *Seminar Report* 3 [Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations, IDFR] (April 2008), 1.
3. Jacques Waardenburg, "Religious Pluralism and Citizenship", *Encounters* 4 (1998), 126.

astrianism etc. through disputation (*jadal*, *mujādalah* – frequently used qur'ānic words) and other persuasive methods of engagement. A North American Muslim thus emphasised:

> We need to commit ourselves to pluralism, [...] [for] it is a part of the vision imparted to us by the Qur'ān and the example of the Prophet [...]. It is important for progressive Muslims, and Muslim communities in general, to return to the pluralistic vision of the Qur'ān and establish cooperative relations with other religious communities.[4]

Notwithstanding Islam's support for pluralism, we do not find a precise equivalent expression for it in the Qur'ān or *ḥadīth*. The nearest Arabic word that occurs in these sources is *al-samḥah* and *al-tasāmuḥ*, often translated as 'tolerance', which is, however, less than accurate. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'tolerance' as "the action or practice of enduring or sustaining pain or hardship; the power or capacity of enduring".[5] The Prophet is reported to have said that God's most favoured religion is the tolerant true religion (*al-ḥanīfiyyah al-samḥah*). *Samḥah* and *tasāmuḥ* thus signify two distinctive meanings, namely generosity (*jūd wa karam*), and ease (*al-tasāhul*). This would distinguish *samḥah* from 'tolerance', which indicates a superior party grudgingly 'bearing' or 'putting up with' the different other. "*Tasāmuḥ* denotes generosity and ease from both sides on a reciprocal basis."[6] "Would it be accurate to say", as one observer posed the question, "that Islam wants its adherents to merely tolerate living side by side with the adherents of other religions and to endure the pain and hardship of such co-existence?" The answer given is that "the view of the Islamic stance as one of mere tolerance is untenable [...] the Islamic model goes beyond tolerance".[7] The more precise Arabic equivalent of pluralism which is employed by many contemporary writers is, however, *al-taʿaddudiyyah*,[8] which is accurate yet still fails to encapsulate the fuller meaning of *tasāmuḥ*. One may combine the two terms in a composite expression that characterises the pluralism of Islam as *al-taʿaddudiyyah al- samḥah*, that is, pluralism which implies recognition and engagement inclined towards facilitation and ease.

4. Amir Hussain, as quoted in Safi (ed.), *Progressive Muslims*, 266–7.
5. *Oxford English Dictionary*, available online at http://www.oed.com/ (accessed on 24 February 2009).
6. Cf., Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'ān: Themes and Style* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 74; see also *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1921), 12: 360.
7. Syed Farid Alatas, *An Islamic Perspective on the Commitment to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies, 2008), 14.
8. See, for instance, the title of one of al-Qaraḍāwī's articles, "Al-Taʿaddudiyyah fī naẓar al-Islām" (Pluralism from the Islamic Perspective), which I have discussed in some detail below. This article was incidentally presented in July 2005 at a conference in Amman, Jordan, where the present writer as well as a number of renowned Arab scholars, including Wahbah al-Zuhaylī, Saʿīd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, Ḥasan Hanafī, and Kamāl Abū 'l-Majd, were also present. No one present at that conference questioned the accuracy of this relatively new Arabic word for 'pluralism'.

General Premises

Two of the basic premises of Islam to be stated at the outset are oneness of the Creator (*tawḥīd*), and multiplicity of His creation. *Tawḥīd* embodies a worldview of its own, which is not, however, amenable to the notions of plurality and pluralism.[9] As a governing principle of Islam, *tawḥīd* is focused on essential unities: unity between the human being and his natural environment, unity of the humankind, unity within the family, unity of the state and society, of government and politics, of economy and culture, law and policy and so forth.[10]

The second and equally important premise of Islam is that of the multiplicity of God's creation. Pluralism thus permeates the entire breadth and depth of the created world. He alone is one but His creation is moulded in inalienable pluralism, which is embedded in the inner make-up of the human person, and then the outer manifestations of how he relates to his fellow humans and the wider world around him. Humans are created in the image of multiplicity and pluralism ranging from their inner abilities and talents, to the outer manifestations of race and religion, language and culture, tribe and nation, and so forth.

Plurality and pluralism are sometimes said to be incompatible with the unity that Islam demands of its followers. Verses are thus quoted from the Qur'ān asking Muslims to unite and let not separation (*tafarruq*) to destroy their unity (3:103; 3:105). And then also the *ḥadīth*: "Do not disagree, for those who came before you disagreed (over trivialities) and consequently perished."[11] In response it may be said that *ikhtilāf* (difference, disagreement), is an entrenched feature of Islam. Of the two main varieties of *ikhtilāf,* namely *ikhtilāf al-tanawwu'* (disagreement that implies diversity), and *ikhtilāf al-taḍādd* (disagreement verging on contradiction), the former is not only accepted but considered praiseworthy (*maḥmūd*). The blameworthy *(madhmūm)* variety of *ikhtilāf* is that which violates the spirit of unity and should be avoided.[12] Acceptable *ikhtilāf* includes differences of opinion, interpretation and *ijtihād*. The Prophet's leading Companions are known to have disagreed over a variety of issues and it was not considered to be harmful. Some have considered this kind of disagreement is a source of blessing, and quote in

  9. Cf., Qur'ān 1:5; 3:64; 16:36; and the entire short 103rd *sūrah, Al-Ikhlāṣ*.
 10. See for a discussion of *tawḥīd*, Aḥmad Shalabī, *Muqāranāt al-adyān: Al-Islām* (Cairo, 1997, 12th ed.), 93f.
 11. ʿAbd Allāh al-Khaṭīb al-Tabrīzī, *Mishkāt al-maṣābīḥ*, ed. Muḥammad Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Albānī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1399 AH/1979, 2nd ed.), vol. 1, *ḥadīth* no. 2,212. For the fuller version of this *ḥadīth* and also on *ikhtilāf* in general see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1997), 143–7.
 12. Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, "Al-Taʿaddudiyyah fi naẓar al-Islām", in the conference proceedings volume *Niẓām al-ḥukm al-islāmī wa 'l-dīmūqrātiyyah: al-furūq wa imkāniyyāt al-taʿāyush* (Amman: Mu'assasat Āl al-Bayt li' l-Fikr al-Islāmī, 1424 AH/2004), 25.

support the purported *ḥadīth* that "disagreement among my *ummah* is a blessing – *ikhtilāf ummatī raḥmah*".[13] Instances of acceptable *ikhtilāf* would also include differences that peoples and cultures exhibit in their knowledge, skills, industries, abilities and achievements.

Another qur'ānic guideline of note here is that to God alone belongs the final reckoning: when people differ in the matter of belief or disbelief, guidance or misguidance, one must refrain from being judgmental of them, as that is to be postponed to the hereafter. The Qur'ān thus tells the Prophet Muḥammad: "And if they (disbelievers) dispute with you, you tell them that God knows best about what you do. Only God will judge among you on the Day of Resurrection in respect of what you differed" (22:68–9). And again: "On the Day of Judgment, God will most certainly judge among those who believe, and those who became Jews, the Sabaeans, Christians, Magians and those who associate other deities with God. Surely, God watches over everything" (22:17).

Furthermore, the dignity of the human person places a demand on one's fellow humans to respect one's freedom of choice, freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Freedom as such becomes the source of different choices that the individual makes and the consequent pluralism of choices that is bound to materialise as a result. Since dignity (*karāmah*) is a prerogative of all individuals by the express affirmation of the Qur'ān (17:70), respect for freedom of choice, diversity and pluralism also becomes an extension of respect for human dignity.[14]

Varieties of Pluralism

The following sections explore the evidence in Islam on ethno-linguistic, religious, political, cultural, and legal varieties of pluralism.

Ethno-Linguistic Pluralism

Ethnicity and language, national and tribal groupings are recognised in Islam as bases of identity and recognition, but not of distinction and privilege. Mankind's unity of origin in Islam is the basis of people's equality regardless of their racial and linguistic particularities. To quote the Qur'ān (4:1):

> O mankind! Keep your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and created its mate of the same [kind], and then created from them multitudes of men and women. And keep your duty to your Lord by whom you demand your rights of one another, and [observe] the ties of kinship.

13. Some commentators, including al-Qaraḍāwī, have considered this to be the saying (*athar*) of a Companion and not a *ḥadīth* proper. Neither al-Bukhārī nor Muslim has recorded this as a *ḥadīth*.
14. See for details on this issue Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *The Dignity of Man: An Islamic Perspective* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2002), 1f.

This passage begins with an affirmation of the unity of origin and equality in creation of mankind. Their descent from a single soul signifies fraternity, and then a set of obligations that arise from it within the larger human family. The first reminder to all is of their unity in origin and a shared predicament that it ensues. Then comes the notion of claims, rights, and obligations that gives substance to human fraternity. The verse begins with an address to mankind, and ends by a reference to the ties of kinship (*al-arḥam*, pl. of *raḥīm*, 'mother's womb', an expression that is reserved for a class of relatives entitled to inherit from one another).[15] In another passage, the Qur'ān (13:49) speaks of the pluralism of groups, tribes and nations:

> O mankind! Behold, We have created you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another. Verily the most noble of you in the sight of God is one who is the most deeply conscious of God.

The address is again to the humankind, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and then it speaks of their divisions into tribes and nations for purposes of recognition and friendship. Yet the inherent worth of every individual is judged by the single evaluative standard of *taqwā* (moral integrity, dignity and decorum). Membership of a particular race, tribe or nation does not set the standards of nobility and personal worth. Elsewhere the Qur'ān also affirms that the essence of *taqwā* transcends the religious divides.[16] In a renowned *ḥadīth* uttered on the occasion of the conquest of Mecca in 630, the Prophet said:

> O people! Your Creator is one, and you are all descendants of the same ancestor. There is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab, nor of the black over the red, except on the basis of righteous conduct (*taqwā*).[17]

At a moment of triumph, the Prophet spoke to the people (*yā ayyuhā 'l-nās*) and not only to his Muslim followers, and then uttered the most explicit affirmation of human equality beyond colour and race, which are to be seen as bases only of identity and recognition. *Taqwā* alone set the evaluative standards of human conduct. According to yet another *ḥadīth*: "People are as equal as the teeth of a comb" – *al-nās sawāṣiyyatun ka-asnān al-masht*.[18] The Islamic outlook on equality thus marked a departure from the Hellenistic thought and Judaism which considered some as

15. Cf., Muḥammad al-Bahīy, *Al-Dīn wa 'l-dawlah min tawjīhāt al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1391 AH/1971), 350. See also Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Al-Kasā'is al-ʿāmmah li 'l-Islām* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 1409 AH/1989), 84.
16. See for a discussion of *taqwā* in the Qur'ān Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom, Equality and Justice in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2002), 51f.
17. Extract from the Prophet's 'Farewell Sermon', see Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 6: 570.
18. Muḥammad b. Yazīd b. Mājah al-Qazwīnī, *Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1407 AH/1987).

inherently superior to others, or subscribed to the notion of 'God's chosen people'. The only other criterion of distinction that the Qur'ān recognises is knowledge – ʿilm (cf., 39:9), but this too is of a moral kind which is not meant to have legal consequences of any significance to the basic notion of equality.

Ethnicity and race are often closely associated with language, as is the case in Malaysia, but also in many other countries where a distinctive ethnic identity is often shaped around a separate language. Ethno-linguistic pluralism is the subject of the following qur'ānic passage (30:22):

> And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours. Indeed there are signs in this for those who know.

To speak the same language nurtures a sense of unity with one's fellow speakers, but then it becomes an instrument also of diversity in relationship to those who do not speak it. Linguistic pluralism in the Qur'ān acquires the more earnest tone of a divine commitment: "Never have We sent a Messenger except (to teach) in the language of his (own) people that he may fully expound his Message to them" (14:4). Elsewhere it is declared that the Qur'ān itself has been revealed in clear Arabic. Since the whole of humanity are naturally not Arabic speakers, those who know this language would need to master other languages for them to be able to communicate with others about Islam. This manifests an aspect of the divine signs (āyāt) that can be seen in the linguistic diversity of people.

Islam sees pluralism as a God-ordained feature of human existence: "If God had willed, the whole of mankind would have been one *ummah* […]" (11:18). It is an integral part, in other words, of divine wisdom (ḥikmah). It would be arbitrary then, from the Islamic viewpoint, to argue against the spirit of God's will and wisdom, who indeed is the best of Creators and Most Wise.

Ethnicity and language play a crucial role in the self-identity of Malays and inter-community relations in Malaysia. Islam is a fundamental aspect of Malay identity, a sentiment that was further accentuated by the Islamic resurgence of recent decades. Yet it was the Malay ethnic consciousness that determined the course of Islamic resurgence in Malaysia. "This is why", as Chandra Muzaffar puts it, "very few Islamic resurgents in Malaysia have criticised ethnic-based policies in the economy or education from an Islamic perspective."[19] Note also Farid Alatas' observation of an inter-religious roundtable held at the Centre for Public Policy Studies (4 June 2008): "I was horrified to learn that some Christian religious leaders in the State of Selangor were told by Selangor state authorities that they would not be allowed to display their crosses on newly constructed church buildings." Alatas' examination

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19. Chandra Muzaffar, "Religion in Our Time", *Seminar Report* 1 [Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Strategic and International Studies, ISIS] (13 August 2007), 15.

of the Islamic evidence clearly permits what has not been permitted by the Selangor authorities. He then observed: "I would assert that Muslims in Malaysia today ought to take it upon themselves to defend the right of Christians to erect crosses on their places of worship."[20]

Ethnicity has also been on the ascendant among the other religious communities of Malaysia. Alatas stated that "religious leaders seldom emphasise inter-religious perspectives in their sermons, and provide instead narrow interpretations to the universal values and principles embodied in their faiths".[21] If an initiative begins to open up the scope of ethno-linguistic pluralism in this country, one would expect it to be by the Malays, who are the majority group. The broader teachings of Islam on diversity and pluralism would need to be brought into the picture. Time is ripe, perhaps, for change as the March 2008 general elections brought Malaysia face-to-face with the realities of ethno-religious polarisation that had taken a turning for the worse in recent years. The government, civil society and the media in this country would do well to formulate fresh approaches and policies that integrate the best teachings of all of its major religions and penetrate the racial barriers further toward genuine pluralism.

It is important also for non-Muslims to see Islam for what it is, instead of the stereotyped images that are rife yet often inaccurate. When good information is disseminated about Islam, non-Muslim citizens may legitimately expect government leaders in Malaysia and other majority Muslim countries to align their policies with the teachings of Islam on diversity and pluralism.

Religious Pluralism (al-taʿaddudiyyah al-dīniyyah)

In the context of theology and religious studies, religious pluralism is often treated under the three headings of exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist. The exclusivists believe that only their faith is true and all others are false, whereas the inclusivists believe that their faith is true and others are included within it in some sense. The pluralists believe on the other hand that all faiths are true and show different paths to the same Truth.[22] Religious pluralism of this third variety may be difficult to maintain under most world religions, including Islam. Islam admittedly accommodates the existence of other monotheistic religions but may not go as far as to say that all religions are true. Then it remains to be said that Islam is inclusivist in its assertion of the truth of itself yet extending legitimacy to many others and taking an attitude of co-existence with the rest. But if one takes the more simplified characterisation of religious pluralism as to saying: "When different religions co-exist within the

20. Alatas, *An Islamic Perspective*, 53–4.
21. Ibid., 13.
22. Cf., Rowan Williams, "Islam, Christianity and Pluralism", *Zaki Badawi Memorail Lecture Series* (London: Lambeth Palace and The Association of Muslim Social Sciences, 2007), 2.

same society, it is religious pluralism",[23] then Islam is pluralist. Chandra Muzaffar wrote that "no civilization in history has demonstrated a more resolute commitment to pluralism than Islam". For not only the Qur'ān itself but also the 'Charter of Medina' and the acts and deeds of the Prophet himself attest to Islam's affirmative stance on pluralism.[24]

The onset of modernism and its secularist bias provoked some very vocal Muslims to espouse radically exclusivist views on Islam's relation with other religions. But for the vast majority of Muslims, the universality of revelation and the plurality of prophets still resonates deeply in their hearts and souls, and they remain ever mindful of the many verses of the Qur'ān concerning the reality of One God and the multiplicity of revelations sent by him.[25] Some verses even imply that the content of all revealed messages is one and the same: "Nothing has been said to you save what was said to the messengers before you" (41:43).

From the Islamic perspective, all prophets have professed the first testimonial (*shahādah*): "We never sent a messenger before thee save that We revealed to him, saying, there is no god but I, so worship Me" (21:25). In contrast with the first *shahādah*, which attests to divine guidance espoused by all prophets, the second *shahādah* refers to the domain of specific messages conveyed by each prophet:

> Every nation has its messenger. (10:47)

> For each of you, We have appointed a right way and an open road. (5:48)

Muslims are enjoined that they should not differentiate among the prophets of God since the primary message they all received was the same:

> Say: We have faith in God, and in that which has been sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Tribes, and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and the prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and to Him we have submitted. (2:136; cf. 2:285; 3:84)

The Qur'ān further confirms that the later prophets came to endorse the principal messages of their predecessors (3:3; 61:6), yet it is also made clear that the details of the messages sent to various prophets were different, and it is in this regard that they may be distinguished from one another (2:253; 17:55). None of this, however, binds the people to acceptance: "He it is Who created you; some from among you are disbelievers and some of you are believers" (64:2). This is a clear

23. Chandra Muzaffar, "What Pluralism Means to Islam", *Sunday Star* [Kuala Lumpur] (18 June 2006), 28.
24. Ibid.
25. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam's Attitude Toward Other Religions in History", in: Muhammad Suheyl Umar (ed.), *Towards a Muslim Theology of Other Religions in a Post-Prophetic Age* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2008), 133–4.

qur'ānic affirmation that people are bound to differ in respect of the religion they wish to follow.

Religious pluralism is a corollary of the freedom of religion in Islam: "If God had willed," as the Qur'ān proclaims, "He would have created all mankind as one faith community – *ummah* – but they do not cease to differ among themselves" (11:118). And again: "Had thy Lord so willed, all those who are on earth would have believed. Will you then force people into believing" (10:99). The Qur'ān is nothing less than emphatic on freedom of religion:

> One who accepts guidance does so for one's own benefit and one who refuses it does so to one's own peril. (10:108)

> And proclaim: this is the truth from your Lord. Now let him who will, believe; and let him who will, disbelieve. (18:29)

> There shall be no compulsion in religion; guidance has been made clear from misguidance […]. (2:256)

While speaking of freedom of religion as a qur'ānic mandate, al-Qaraḍāwī observes that anyone who violates this freedom and compels people into embracing any religion commits an act of *fitnah* (sedition) that must be resolutely avoided.[26] Islam's commitment to freedom of religion and religious pluralism was put to the test at a time when the Prophet was still in Mecca. A group of the Meccan idolators proposed to the Prophet that they would be prepared to worship Allah for a year if he would also reciprocate by worshiping their deities; in this way both sides would gain insight into each other's religions. The short 109th Qur'ānic *sūrah*, *Al-Kāfirūn*, was then revealed, ordering the Prophet to tell the disbelievers: "I do not worship those that you worship, nor do you worship Him Whom I worship […]. To you is your religion, and to me, my religion." This is a clear acceptance of religious pluralism in Islam. It would have been fanaticism had the response been that everyone must follow Islam to the exclusion of other religions. That kind of fanaticism was clearly not to be a part of Islam as the Prophet confirmed in a *ḥadīth*: "One who promotes fanaticism (ʿaṣabiyyah) is not one of us, nor is one who fights for ʿaṣabiyyah, nor the one who dies for ʿaṣabiyyah."[27]

The universality of the qur'ānic message is often suppressed, however, by the orthodox exegetes who have interpreted the exclusivist verses of the text more literally than its inclusivist verses. Thus the two verses: "Verily the religion with God is Islam – *inna 'l-dīn ʿind Allāh al-Islām*" (3:19); and "Who seeks other than Islam as a religion, it will not be accepted from him – *wa man yabtaghi ghayr al-Islām*

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26.   Al-Qaraḍāwī, "Al-Taʿaddudiyyah", 8.
27.   Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaghīr min aḥādīth al-bashīr wa 'l-nadhīr* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1954, 4th ed.), vol. 2, *ḥadīth* no. 7,684.

dinan fa-lan yuqbal minhu" (3:85) – are cited as incontrovertible evidence that only those who follow Islam shall be saved. *Islām* is in one sense the exclusive name for the religion revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad. But *Islām* is also the primal religion of submission preached by Adam to all his posterity, who accepted God as their Lord, as in the divine invocation: *alastu bi rabbikum*? *Qālū balā shahidnā* (Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes, we do testify – 7:172). All humankind then, before time began, professed Islam in its widest sense of *submission*. Understood in this way, the two verses (3:19 and 385) recognise the validity of every religion that entails submission to the divine will. Al-Qaraḍāwī has also made a point to say that even if the orthodox exegesis of the two verses under review is given preference, they still do not deny the truth of other religions. They merely entitle the Muslims, as indeed the followers of other faiths, to hold on to their own religion.[28]

The essence of submission as a common denominator of all religions is featured frequently in the Qur'ān: "And We have sent to every people a messenger that they may worship God" (16:32); and (10:48): "And for every people there is a messenger. When their messenger comes, they are judged with equity and are not wronged." But instead of taking these verses as affirmation of the validity of all religions prior to Islam, they are presented as declarations in support of Islam's finality that override and abrogate other religions. The universalist verses of the Qur'ān are thus rarely allowed to stand alone as the unencumbered word of God.[29]

Toshiko Izutsu has convincingly demonstrated that in several qur'ānic verses *Islām* can be taken to present every previous revelation as a way of submitting. Such verses present *Islām* as a universal religion. The first to declare himself a Muslim in the Qur'ān is the Prophet Noah: "I was commanded to be among the submitters (*muslimīn*)" (10:72). Concerning Abraham: "His Lord said to Abraham: submit. He said I submit to the Lord of the worlds" (2:131). The succeeding verse recounts that both Abraham and Jacob advised their sons: "God has chosen the way for you. So do not die but that you are submitters" (2:132). Seen from this perspective, every prophet of the Judaeo-Christian tradition has taught a different mode of submission to God. If *Islām* is taken to mean submission in the Qur'ān rather than an institutionalised creed, it provides the raw material for "a very eloquent understanding of religious pluralism, one wherein all revelations throughout history are seen as

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28. Cf., al-Qaraḍāwī, "Al-Taʿaddudiyyah", 9.
29. Cf., Joseph Lumbard, "Qur'ānic Inclusivism in an Age of Globalisation", in: Muhammad Suheyl Umar (ed.), *The Religious Other*, 154. Lumbard also quotes Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also Anthony H. John and Abdullah Saeed, "Nurcholish Madjid and the Interpretation of the Qur'ān: Religious Pluralism and Tolerance", in: Suha Taji-Farouki (ed.), *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'ān* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 86–7.

different ways of giving to God that which is most difficult to give – our very selves".[30] Note also that faith (*īmān*) is a major theme of the Qur'ān that occurs hundreds of times in the sacred text. In comparison, *Islām* is relatively less common, which only occurs eight times in the text.[31] If *Islām* were to be understood as a universal religion and common denominator of all religions, then it would give rise to a legal consequence whereby the state would have no justification to put one religion in a privileged position over others.[32]

Within the global religious context, it is, of course, Judaism and Christianity with which Islam has the greatest affinity. The Hebrew prophets and Christ are deeply respected by Muslims. The Virgin Mary is given the most exalted spiritual position in the Qur'ān; a chapter of the Qur'ān is named after her, and she is the only woman mentioned by name. The tombs of the Hebrew prophets, who are also Islamic prophets, are revered by Muslims to this day.

Islam sees itself as the third of the Abrahamic religions, which are bound together by countless theological, ethical and eschatological beliefs. To speak of Judaeo-Christian tradition against which Islam is pitted as "the other" is, in Nasr's phrase, "an injustice to the message of Abraham and also theologically false, no matter how convenient it might be for some people".[33] With reference to the People of the Book, there are verses in the Qur'ān that criticise some of their dogmatic errors, yet there are clear verses indicating that they are nonetheless saved on account of their faith and virtue (cf., 2:262; 4:163; 16:32; 41:33; 42:13).

On the subject of disputation (*jadal*) and *daʿwah* (invitation to Islam), in reference particularly to the 'People of the Book', the Qur'ān (29:46) enjoins the Muslims to engage "with them not except in the best possible manner – *bi-llatī hiya aḥsan*". Should there be different approaches to disputation, the one to choose must, in other words, be the best in all respects: reason, courtesy, sincerity and standards. This manner of discourse does not mean a refusal to differ; it means to differ with dignity and respect. It also means recognition of all that is best in the discourse of the different other (see also 16:25).[34] The fine thread of religious pluralism is thus seen to be running throughout these passages. Of the two terms that occur in these

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30. Toshiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran*, 199, quoted in Lumbard, "Qur'ānic Inclusivism", 157.

31. See for a discussion, Carl Ernst, "Demystifying the Rhetoric of Civilisation Conflict", in: Thomas W. Simon and Azizan Baharuddin (eds), *Dialogue of Civilisations and the Construction of Peace* (Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, 2008), 2.

32. Cf., John and Saeed, "Nurcholish Madjid", 81.

33. Nasr, "Islam's Attitude", 123.

34. Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Thaqāfatunā bayn al-infitāḥ wa 'l-inghilāq* (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1425 AH/2005, 2nd ed.), 50. See also Reza Shah Kazemi, "Illumination and Non-Delimitation: Lessons for Inter and Intra Faith Dialogue from the Wisdom of the Prophet of Islam", in: Muhammad Suheyl Umar (ed.), *The Religious Other*, 174.

passages, *daʿwah* is to be employed, "among the agreeable members of the *millah*" (*muwāfiqīn min ahl al-millah*, i.e., the followers of the Abrahamic faiths) whereas *jadal* and disputation is employed with the different other, except for those among them who commit acts of aggression toward Muslims. This exception would apply, according to al-Qaraḍāwī, to Zionists and to Christians with a certain 'crusader attitude': "There is no religious engagement between us and them, we engage in dialogue with the *ahl al-kitāb* who are not aggressive nor have committed acts of injustice toward us."[35]

It is striking to note how little interaction there seems to be between different religious communities in different countries and continents. Waardenburg thus observed: "My general impression is that most members of religious communities are scarcely aware of the presence of members of other communities. Religious leaderships also exhibit an attitude of 'everyman-for-himself' going as far as competition and rivalries in certain cases."[36] This was even truer for the mid twentieth century, and it placed a serious handicap on the new religious communities of immigrants who were looking for contacts in the wider society.[37] This is also the case, in the present writer's view, in many Muslim countries, including Malaysia, where the easy social climate that existed even 20 years ago has now been constrained thanks to the spread of radicalism, foreign occupation of Muslim lands, Washington's hegemony, and the negative fallout of globalisation. To quote HRH Raja Nazrin Shah, the Crown Prince and Regent of the northern Malaysian State of Perak: "What the world needed now was a serious study of diversity and multiculturalism. We need to reclaim religion from those who would distort its truth, and reject all forms of radicalism."[38]

Another facet of the same issue in Malaysia is, in Chandra Muzaffar's phrase, "an exclusive notion of Muslim identity which eschews an interactive relationship with non-Muslims, and emphasises that dimension of theology that promotes Islamic distinctiveness".[39] The results of the March 2008 election brought Malaysia face to face with the realisation that all is not well with the state of inter-community relations in this country. The issue has since become the talk of the day and the common message is that more earnest and penetrating initiatives are called for to minimise the scope and scale of polarisation in schools and universities, in the workplace and government institutions. This is notwithstanding the positive international profile of Malaysia's pluralist society and government, and also a good internal track record

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35. Al-Qaraḍāwī, *Thaqāfatunā*, 52.
36. Waardenburg, "Religious Pluralism", 132.
37. Ibid.
38. Raja Nazrin Shah, "Reject all Forms of Radicalism", *New Straits Times* [Kuala Lumpur] (20 November 2008), 6, reported by Sajahan Abdul Waheed.
39. Muzaffar, "Religion and Identity", 8.

of multiculturalism in this country. Yet the challenge is greater here in so far as the three main communities, namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians, are divided by all the most challenging lines of division (race, religion and language) simultaneously. If genuine pluralism succeeds in Malaysia, it would have, in my estimation, set new milestones of achievement for others to emulate.

The spirit of openness that emerges from our study of the Islamic evidence on religious pluralism has also been constrained by the demands of nationalism and the Muslim world's post-colonial experience in constitution making. Constitutions after constitutions were introduced by the countries of Middle East and Asia, which singled out Islam as the state religion, while some also declared Islamic law as the basic source of legislation. This experience is still with us and is not likely to change in the foreseeable future. Notwithstanding the guarantee of freedom of religion to non-Muslims under these constitutions, their clauses on state religion could be said to be ahistorical, and a response to colonialist aggression that impinged on the self-identity of Muslims.

Prior to the era of constitutionalism, which is of western origin, scholastic teachings and praxis in Muslim lands aimed at upholding religious symbols and observances (*al-sha'ā'ir)*, such as the call to prayers (*adhān*) in public mosques, Friday congregational prayers, and also closure of restaurants in Muslim residential areas during Ramadan. The imam would also recite, toward the end of his Friday sermon, the name of the head of state and invoke God's grace and protection for him and the rest of the *ummah*. One can envisage the possibility of taking these rather than formal constitutional declarations on state religion as the index of Islamic identity of states in highly pluralistic Muslim societies – if this would indeed serve the desired purpose of genuine religious pluralism within the given conditions of each country.

Political Pluralism

Political pluralism is concerned with the space Islam provides for freedom of political thought and action, political parties and associations within and outside government. In twentieth-century political thought, *pluralism* is often used to describe a political culture of non-centralised action, which endows civic centres of activity with initiative rather than imagining that the state has to license and delegate everything from the top. Pluralism in this sense signifies an anti hierarchical and non-centralist view of social order that even challenges an uncritical view of the sovereignty of the nation state as the be all and end all in political structure. Civil society is thus vested with legitimacy that need not be always conferred by an all-powerful state. Political pluralism also nurtures plurality of political parties and associations, a free press, freedom of expression and a minimalist approach to censorship. One of the negative features of European modernity of concern to us

is its over-emphasis on state sovereignty as an all-important source of legitimacy that controls the possibilities for the individual.[40]

Our review of the Islamic evidence is broadly affirmative on political pluralism in that the citizens are granted the freedom to express their views, be it for or against those of the ruling authorities, and also to take issue with their leaders, both individually and collectively. The precedent of the first two caliphs of Islam, Abū Bakr and ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, is often cited in support. In his inaugural speech upon taking office, Abū Bakr addressed to the people of Medina: "O people! I have been entrusted with authority over you but I am not the best of you. Help me if I am right, and rectify me when I am wrong."[41] ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb followed suit and asked the people in his own inaugural speech to "rectify an aberration any of you sees in me".[42] The two caliphs reiterated in fact the substance of what the Prophet had himself said: "There is no obedience in transgression. Obedience is enjoined only in righteousness."[43] According to another *ḥadīth*, "The best of jihad is to tell a word of truth to an oppressive ruler."[44]

The emergence of the Kharijites (lit. 'outsiders'), who challenged the legitimacy of the fourth caliph ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, signified a political movement that put to the test the capacity of the nascent state and its respect for political pluralism. The Kharijites had developed their own ideas about religion and governance and went so far as to challenge the legitimacy of the caliph ʿAlī. When the caliph decided to fight them, he sent ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās to discuss their ideas with them within the framework of the accepted qur'ānic principles. Ibn ʿAbbās was successful in so far as he persuaded about 4,000 of the Kharijites to return to the mainstream community but the rest remained defiant. ʿAlī then informed the Kharijites: "You have three rights that we shall observe in our dealings with you: (1) We shall not prevent you to pray with us in the mosques; (2) We shall not deprive you of your share in booty for as long as you fight together with us; and (3) We shall not start fighting you so long as you have not resorted to criminality and violence."[45] This manner of engagement is evidently indicative of tolerance and respect for diversity and partisan pluralism.[46]

When the Muʿtazilite rationalists became prominent under the Abbasid caliphs, al-Ma'mūn, al-Muʿtaṣim and al-Wāthiq in the mid ninth century, the state tried to

40.   Williams, "Islam, Christianity and Pluralism", 8.
41.   ʿAbd al-Malik b. Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-nabawiyyah* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1936), 4: 262.
42.   Quoted in al-Qaraḍāwī, "Al-Taʿaddudiyyah", 17. See also Kamali, *Freedom, Equality and Justice in Islam*, 24.
43.   Al-Tabrīzī, *Mishkāt*, vol. 2, *ḥadīth* no. 3,665.
44.   Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, *ḥadīth* no. 4,011.
45.   Cf., al-Qaraḍāwī, "Al-Taʿaddudiyyah", 18.
46.   Ibid., 19.

compel the people to embrace the Muʿtazilite doctrines over whether the Qurʾān was the created or uncreated speech of God.[47] This led to what is known in Islamic history as the *Mihnah* ('inquisition') that entailed persecution of many leading *ʿulamāʾ*, including the Imām Ahmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 869). The Imām resisted intense pressure due to his belief that the state had no authority to impose its views on anyone, let alone resorting to coercive action over speculative issues. Islamic history has recorded this as a violation of the freedom of expression that everyone must enjoy.[48]

Al-Qaraḍāwī subscribes to the view that the leading 'schools' of Islamic law (i.e the *madhhabs*) bear close resemblance to political parties. For the *fiqh* schools manifest distinctive frameworks of thought and principles which are embraced by their followers in large numbers. This is similar to political parties, which also revolve around a set of principles, membership and self-image of its own opinion and interpretation in preference to others. Some followers of the legal 'schools' thus believe that consultation (*shūra*) is binding on the head of state, that the latter is designated into office through election for a limited period, who may be returned to office for a second term only; that women are entitled to vote and candidacy for elective office; that the state may intervene in market activities, determination of wages, price control, the rate of permissible profit in trade and so forth. Some may embrace the view that taxation may exceed the rate of *zakāh*, that non-Muslim citizens may be exonerated from the payment of poll-tax (*jizyah*), and that peace is the norm in international relations, and so forth.

Then a more conservative group of people may regard the former as free thinking liberals and hold that *shūra* is only persuasive, not binding, that the head of state is installed into office by an electoral college, the *ahl al-ḥall wa 'l-ʿaqd*, and hold office for life, that election is not a *sharīʿah* requirement, that women are not entitled to vote or candidacy, that private ownership is absolute and is not subject to state intervention, and that war, not peace, is the norm in international relations. Then there may be a third group that side with neither but accept some of the views of each. These may well be the kind of disagreements that differentiate the *fiqh madhhabs* from one another. Suppose that one of these groups accede to power, would it then have the right to outlaw the others simply because it is the party in power? Would it have the authority to deny them the right to exist? The correct Islamic answer to these questions is in the negative, simply because all of them have the right to draw their own conclusions from the available evidence, just as

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47.   Whereas the Ashʿarites subscribe to the view that the Qurʾān is the 'uncreated' or 'eternally pre-existing' speech of God (*qadīm*) in the sense that God the Most High had preserved the Qurʾān on the *Lawḥ al-Maḥfūẓ*, the 'Preserved Tablet', from time immemorial, the Muʿtazilites believed that the Qurʾān was His 'created' or 'incidental' speech (*ḥādith*) in the sense that God spoke only as and when the revelation came to the Prophet.

48.   Cf., al-Qaraḍāwī, "Al-Taʿaddudiyyah", 20–1.

their supporters are entitled to follow them, provided such interpretations stand on their own justification. The position here is not very different whether one speaks of politics or of *fiqh*.[49]

Many have advocated the view that since the state in Islam applies the *sharī'ah*, its rulings must be obeyed in all religious matters. This is an erroneous view simply because Islam does not endow the state with sanctity of any kind. The State in Islam is civilian in character; the head of state is elected by the people. He is not immune to error and he is accountable for his conduct like anyone else. In the event of crime or blatant violation of the trust of office, he may be sued and subjected to the authority of the courts without any claim to privileged treatment.[50] "It is the greatest aberration (*akbar al-khaṭā'*)", in al-Qaraḍāwī's phrase, "for the state or its supporters to think that it has a monopoly over legitimacy and truth, or to think that anyone who opposes them is necessarily wrong."[51] We listen to everyone who makes a contribution and we are entitled to decide for ourselves as to whose version is convincing and justified.

Honourable exception apart, political pluralism is not in evidence in the great majority of Muslim countries which apply censorship over the media and also restrictions on political parties and associations. Yet evidence shows that Islamic parties and movements in the Muslim world have begun to reduce their ideological rhetorics and pay greater attention to democratic principles and people's welfare issues.[52] There is evidently scope for policy makers and opinion leaders to work toward genuine political pluralism that strikes a note of harmony not only with Islam but also the demands of their own people for accountable and service-oriented governance.

Cultural Pluralism

I use *cultural pluralism* synonymously with *multiculturalism*, although the latter may be said to be a more participatory expression than the former. For cultural pluralism can imply the existence simply of a plurality of cultures with or without any interactive engagement between them. Multiculturalism on the other hand signifies the acceptance in principle of interactive cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism in both these capacities relates to religious pluralism: when people subscribe to different religions they are likely also to differ in their cultural preferences. This is

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49. Ibid., 23–4.
50. See for details on this Mohammad Hashim Kamali, "Civilian and Democratic Dimensions of Governance in Islam", *Al-Shajarah. Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization* [ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur] 9 (2004), 125–45.
51. Al-Qaraḍāwī, "Al-Ta'addudiyyah", 20.
52. For details on Islamic parties and movements, see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Sharī'ah Law: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), ch. 10 on "Democracy, Fundamental Rights and the Sharī'ah", 199–225.

because the notions of right and wrong, virtue and vice etc., are often influenced by religion. Cultural pluralism is manifested in the customary practices of people, from daily social encounters to celebrations – wedding, birth, burial and the like. People also differ in their choice of dress, self-image and sense of identity they portray in their dealing with others. Then, also variation in cuisine, as well as residential patterns of housing are reflective of cultural predilections. Language and culture are often mutually influenced by one another. Even the written form of languages shows a great deal of variation that is not altogether devoid of cultural input. Some are written from right to left, others from left to right, some from top to bottom, and others integrate pictorial elements into their script and so forth. Then the higher attainments of culture in knowledge, industry and arts, work ethics and refinements in lifestyle are all expressive of the natural diversity of peoples and cultures.

Some cultures are open to external influences more than others, yet in the age of globalisation, one might expect that differences are likely to be less and less. This is, however, not a foregone conclusion by any means when one reflects on the brief history of globalisation, which is now widely seen to be playing in the hands of the dominant powers. Hence the pull in the opposite direction whereby people have become more assertive of their own identities and cultures. The negative facets of the era of globalisation are noted in the grim reality that none of the major world conflicts – Israeli–Palestinian, Hindu–Muslim in Kashmir, Sinhalese–Tamil in Sri Lanka, Buddhist–Muslim in southern Thailand, or Christian–Muslim in Mindanao, Philippines – appear to be moving in the direction of a just and amicable solution. Cultural pluralism is thus not likely to melt itself in the cauldron of globalisation.

Islam's normative teachings are not always reflected in the culture and custom of Muslim communities, as one often finds aspects of culture and custom to show divergence, even run counter, the religious guidelines of the religion. Having said this, the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* are widely seen to be influential on the cultural proclivities of Muslims. Broadly, Islamic teachings depict differences of language, colour and custom in positive lights, often receiving the seal of divine approval that they should be seen, not as divisive barriers, but as means of recognition and friendship among people.

Some aspects of the scholastic teachings of Islam on non-Muslims and women have admittedly moved further away from its universal principles on human dignity and justice. Much of this traditional legacy has, however, come under scrutiny, and twentieth-century scholarship has provided fresh interpretations of the source evidence on many subjects. Some of these are refreshingly different from traditional *fiqh* rulings that bore the traces of medieval society values. The *dhimmī* and the *jizyah* are no longer supported due to the introduction of national charters and constitutions guaranteeing citizens equality before the law. If a non-Muslim pays the same amount of tax as the Muslim and contributes to the public treasury on

an equal basis, then the effective cause or ʿillah, of jizyah has to all intents and purposes collapsed. Some have even advocated change of the expression dhimmī (covenantees) to muwāṭinūn (compatriots).[53]

Islamic history also shows that Muslim communities co-existed peacefully with other traditions and cultures. Muslims have always had non-Muslims of different origins in their midst. Exceptionally severe circumstances have sometimes marred the climate of understanding, but even so, religious minorities in the Islamic world usually fare better than Muslim minorities do in other lands – except perhaps in America and some western countries – where Muslim minorities are better off. One may compare the situation of the Christian minorities of Syria, Iraq and Iran, three states not known for their leaning toward the West, with Muslim minorities in China, India, the Russian Caucasus, not to speak of the Balkans, where the horrors inflicted by Christian Serbs upon Muslim Bosnians and Kosovars are still fresh in the memory.[54]

"No civilization in history has demonstrated", as Chandra Muzaffar wrote, "a more resolute commitment to pluralism than Islam. The principles of pluralism are anchored in the Qur'ān itself […]."[55] The qur'ānic teachings on pluralism were reflected, in turn, in the 'Charter of Medina', which the Prophet formulated in an attempt to bring together different religious and ethnic communities, bestowing upon them equal rights and responsibilities. The document defines specific relations of mutual aid between the Muslims and Jews, and devised punitive measures against those who broke the treaty. Clauses 1 and 2 of the Charter declared the Muslims of the Quraysh and Yathrib and those who comply with them and adhere to them and strive with them as "one single Qur'ān, with the exclusion of the rest". We also learn that for most of the lifetime of the Prophet, the term ummah was not restricted to Muslims alone.[56] Then, in 631 (10 AH), when a Christian delegation from Najrān in the Yemen came to engage the Prophet in a theological debate over the nature of Christ, an exchange of views took place over a period of three days. The parties did not agree over doctrinal matters, but they did agree on a formal treaty of peace. It was accordingly agreed that the Prophet would not interfere in the religious and property affairs of the people of Najrān. It was significant also that when the bishop wished to perform the liturgy for the delegation, the Prophet allowed him to do so in his own mosque.[57]

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53. See for details on the series of fresh interpretations on women's status and also non-Muslims my *Freedom, Equality and Justice in Islam*, 61–97, where I have reviewed the contributions of Maḥmūd Shalṭūṭ, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, Subhi Mahmassani (Ṣubḥī Maḥmassānī), Rached al-Ghannouchi (Rāshid al-Ghannūshī), Murtaḍā Muṭahharī and others.
54. Nasr, "Islam's Attitude", 127–8.
55. Muzaffar, "What Pluralism Means to Islam", 28.
56. Ahmad Barakat, *Muhammad and the Jews: A Re-Examination* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1979), 38, quoted in Alatas, *An Islamic Perspective*, 15.
57. Kazemi, "Illumination", 173. See also Alatas, *An Islamic Perspective*, 14.

Despite its Arabian origins, "no pre-modern civilisation embraced more cultures than that of Islam […]. The many-coloured fabric of the traditional *ummah* […] demonstrates the divine purpose that this Ishmaelite covenant was to bring a monotheism that uplifts rather than devastates cultures."[58] The particular character of Islamic monotheism leads to a universalism in which religion itself seeks to integrate and enrich cultures other than the one into which it was born. Historical records show that Islam has been largely successful in this endeavour.[59]

Islam was the only revealed religion to have had direct contact with nearly all other major religious traditions of the world. It encountered Christianity and Judaism in their birthplace in Arabia, and then in Palestine, Syria and Egypt. It met Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism in the Sassanid Empire, met Buddhism in northwest Persia, Afghanistan and Central Asia, and Hinduism in Sind and other parts of the Subcontinent. It met the Chinese religions through the Silk Route, and the African religions soon after the spread of Islam in Africa some 14 centuries ago.[60]

On Islam's engagement with modernity, there are strong affinities between the qur'ānic notion of the human individual, humanity on a universal level, the material/profane worlds, and the Enlightenment ideals of individualism, universalism and materialism. George Makdisi's research on the rise of colleges, Marcel Boisard on the rise of humanism, and Richard Bulliet on the rise of modern culture in the West suggest that there is a causal link between the Islamic affirmation of these ideals and the emergence of these ideals in post-Renaissance Europe. A growing body of research suggests that these affinities are not mere theoretical possibilities, but historical realities – offering grounds on which future prospects can be envisaged.[61]

The fact that Islam contains the resources to be an affirming witness from outside the modern world is an attractive possibility for the present and the future. Robert Bellah and Ernest Gellner are puzzled by Islam's encounter with the modern world, precisely because they see the qur'ānic event anticipating certain 'modern' ideals, being open to them and affirming them. Gellner goes so far as to note that Islam appears to be better suited than any other pre-modern religious tradition

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58. Tim Winter (alias Abdul Hakim Murad), "Faith in the Future: Islam After the Enlightenment", First Annual Altaf Gauhar Memorial Lecture, Islamabad, Pakistan, 23 December 2002, available online at http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahmpostEnlight.htm.8 at p. 2 (accessed on 24 February 2009), also quoted in Basit Bilal Koshol, "Studying the Western Other, Understanding the Islamic Self: A Qur'ānically Reasoned Perspective", in: Muhammad Suheyl Umar (ed.), *The Religious Other*, 181.
59. Koshol, "Studying", 181.
60. Cf., Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam and the Encounter of Religions", in: Muhammad Suheyl Umar (ed.), *The Religious Other*, 94–5.
61. See for details Koshol, "Studying", 190–1.

to integrate itself into the modern world while maintaining the integrity of its foundational principles.[62]

Astute thinkers since the very birth of the Enlightenment – Pascal, Blake, Goethe, Rousseau – have warned of its darker side long before world wars, death camps, mutually assured destruction etc. Richard Rubenstein analyses the Nazi Holocaust:

> The Holocaust was an expression of some of the most significant political, moral, religious, and demographic tendencies of western civilization in the twentieth century. The Holocaust cannot be divorced from the very same culture of modernity that produced the two world wars and Hitler.[63]

Humanity needs three things today – a spiritual interpretation of the universe, spiritual emancipation of the individual, and the basic principle of a universal import directing the evolution of society on a spiritual basis. Modern Europe has no doubt built idealistic systems along these lines, but experience shows that truth revealed through pure reason is incapable of bringing that fire of living conviction that personalised revelation can bring. This is why pure thought has so little influenced men while religion has transformed societies. The idealism of Europe, as Iqbal wrote, "never became a living factor in her life, and the result is a perverted ego seeking itself through mutually intolerant democracies whose sole function is to exploit the poor in the interest of the rich".[64] Iqbal continued: "The Muslim, on the other hand, is in possession of these ultimate ideas on the basis of a revelation, which, speaking from the innermost depth of life, internalises its own apparent externality and manifests the most spiritually emancipated on earth."[65]

In its current predicament, the humanistic ideals of Enlightenment can hardly survive the assault from unrestrained quest for economic profit, technological domination and manipulation of the environment. Islam can render a meaningful service to modern humanity through its affirmation of the ideals of human dignity, universal equality, and revelational vision of material/profane. Islam's self-understanding of *īmān*, *islām* and *iḥsān* (faith, submission and grace) can scarcely be accomplished within the perimeters of reason alone. Yet to realise its objectives, Islam cannot afford to change itself to imitationist modernity's

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62. See Robert Bellah, "Islamic Tradition and the Problems of Modernisation", in: *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in the Post-Traditional World* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1991), 146–67. See also Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 18f.
63. Richard Rubenstein, *Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1987), 6.
64. Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1992), 142.
65. Ibid.

demands. It has to observe its own truth if it is to make a meaningful contribution to modern humanity.

It was largely due to Islam's inclusive stance on cultural diversity that generations of Muslim scholars from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries opened their minds to the vast corpus of knowledge found in other traditions: Greek, Hindu, Roman and Confucian. It was a Muslim, Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī (d. 1051), who undertook the first comprehensive scientific analysis of another religion in his magnum opus *Kitāb al-Hind*. The empathy that he displayed for the Hindus of India was echoed even earlier in the *Kitāb al-Fihrist* (The Catalogue) of Abū 'l-Faraj Isḥāq Ibn Nadīm (d. 995), which listed written works in Arabic that dealt with Christian doctrines. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahristānī (d. 1153) and Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh (d. 1318) studied Buddhism and Buddhist communities. It was Shahristānī who authored the first encyclopaedia of religions.[66] Renowned scholars such as Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) have made significant contributions to cultural pluralism through their cosmopolitan thinking and contributions.

Where are we now? In a two-day United Nations interfaith meeting of 80 nations in Riyadh in late 2008, King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia pointed at the prevailing state of religious and cultural intolerance, whereas Malaysia's then Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, warned that if humans did not learn to live in harmony, they will inevitably be consumed by the "flames of misunderstanding, malice and hatred".[67]

HRH Raja Nazrin Shah attributed the deep cultural chasm between the Islamic and western worlds to "misunderstanding and misconception about one another, informed by the strident voices of a few above the moderate voices of many […]. The result has been uncalled-for hostility between people, with many suffering the effects of prejudice and discrimination." Raja Nazrin added that Malaysia cherished "the values of religious, cultural and racial acceptance".[68] The same observer said on another occasion that Mankind had fared badly in creating a sense of community belonging in multicultural societies: "When we think of social fragmentation as good rather than bad, something is awfully wrong. If we continue on the present path, great dangers lie ahead."[69]

Islam's affirmative stance on cultural pluralism is poorly reflected in the conduct of Muslim societies and governments, the aftermath of 9/11, radicalism and violence added to the challenge of bringing moderation and balance into the picture. Muslim

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66. David Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 32; Muzaffar, "What Pluralism Means to Islam".

67. Report in *The New Sunday Times* [Kuala Lumpur] (16 November 2008), Focus 33.

68. "Prince: Let's Hear Moderate Majority", report by Azura Abbas, *New Straits Times* [Kuala Lumpur] (20 January 2009), F 9.

69. Raja Nazrin Shah, "Reject All Forms of Radicalism", 6.

leaders, policy makers and the media would do well to take Islam's teaching earnestly into their affirmative action guidelines on multiculturalism. Note also that it is not always the government that takes the lead on these matters, as policy makers often respond to the public sentiment at the expense sometimes of more comprehensive approaches to pluralism. I may perhaps illustrate this with a reference to the so-called 'Kongsi Raya' episode, a name coined for a combined celebration of the Muslim ʿīd al-fiṭr and the Chinese Lunar New Year in Malaysia.[70] Due to the concurrent arrival in 2006 of the two events, many Malaysians practised combined open houses for both occasions. The government also encouraged it, but the Muslim clerics of PAS (the *Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party* or the *Islamic Party of Malaysia* – in Malay: *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* – the Malaysian opposition party with an explicitly Islamist agenda) and some state *muftī*s called for a review of the permissive policy stand saying that "an Islamic celebration should not be put on par with a non-Islamic festival". Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi announced that the practice should continue as it had "never caused any problems among the people".[71] Ong Ka Ting, the then leader of the *Malaysian Chinese Association* (MCA, a component party of the ruling coalition), also concurred, saying that 'Kongsi Raya' was a social and cultural event and provided a chance for "Malaysians to integrate and celebrate the festivals of different races".[72]

Science shows that being together helps foster tolerance among people.[73] This can be realised through mixed-race classes in public schools, and by simply encouraging people of different races and cultures to be together in the workplace, office environment, housing and residential quarters. Malaysia's customary 'Open House' where friends and people of all races visit each other on festive occasions is conducive to multiculturalism. It is similarly suggested that the *Titan Emas* programme – introduced in the early 1990s to bring students from the Peninsular

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70. These are respectively derived from the Malay word for ʿīd al-fiṭr, *Hari Raya Puasa* and the Cantonese felicitations on the occasion of Chinese Lunar New Year, *Gong Xi Fa Cai* – hence the combined hybrid construct 'Kongsi Raya'.
71. Saʾodah Elias, "Kongsi Raya Practice to Go On", *The Star* [Kuala Lumpur] (17 June 2006), N 6.
72. Ibid.
73. A recent research study at Stony Brook University in the United States revealed that mutual trust spreads just as fast as mutual suspicion. Psychologist Arthur Aron and his team found that intolerance is automatically reduced in a mixed-race class room and that relations between different groups can improve by simply being, or working, together. See report in *New Sunday Times* [Kuala Lumpur] (16 November 2008), Focus 33. In another study, Linda Tropp, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, reported that psychologists have been able to establish close relationships between diverse pairs – Blacks and Whites, Latinos and Asians, Blacks and Latinos – in a matter of hours. That relationship immediately reduced conscious and unconscious bias in both people and also significantly reduced prejudice toward the other group in each individual's close friends. See report by Benedict Carey, "Racial Trust isn't Always Difficult", *International Herald Tribune* (7 November 2008), 4.

Malaysia and the East Malaysian States of Sarawak and Sabah in Borneo closer together – should be revived.[74]

Legal Pluralism

As opposed to legal centralism, legal pluralism refers to a situation in which the state law co-exists with other laws, such as customary law, religious law, and international treaties – officially recognised or otherwise. Legal pluralism can also refer to a situation where the state law recognises and validates the existence of other laws. Simply defined, legal pluralism refers to a situation in which two or more laws interact. More specifically, legal pluralism refers to the existence within a particular society of different legal mechanisms applying to identical situations.[75]

Thus the international merchant who sells goods is often subject to a different contractual mechanism from the ordinary citizen who conducts the same operation. Similarly, in colonial Africa, the personal status of Africans was governed by the so-called 'customary' law and of Europeans by the so-called 'written' law, whereas the diplomats enjoyed immunities under the so-called 'regime of capitulations'. Barry Hooker's book *Legal Pluralism* (1975)[76] noted the post-colonial exportation of common law to African and Asian countries wherein it co-exists to this day with religious jurisprudence and or customary laws. Indonesia inherited Dutch law but witnessed the development of its own national laws, added to a plurality of Islamic and customary laws, some of which had originated from earlier receptions. Malaysia also applied, as it does to this day, a regime of legal pluralism wherein common law co-exists with Islamic law and the Malay custom. For its Muslim population, the *sharīʿah* courts of Malaysia apply the Islamic personal law, and the Malay custom. Legal pluralism thus entails a condition in which a number of persons, or a population, observe more than one body of laws.

Yet the whole concept of legal pluralism is considered to be anomalous by those who regard legal centralism as a normative position of both the law and national state. Legal centralism implies that law should apply equally to all citizens and that the state should have monopoly to introduce and apply uniform law through a single set of state institutions. Closer scrutiny would suggest this, however, to be more of an ideological assertion than a factual statement.[77]

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74. A. Katthirasen, "Past Present", *New Sunday Times* [Kuala Lumpur] (16 November 2008), Focus 33.
75. Definition attributed to Jaques Vanderlinden (1972), as quoted in Gordon Woodman, "The Idea of Legal Pluralism", in: B. Dupree, M. Berger and L. al-Zwaini (eds), *Legal Pluralism in the Arab World* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1999), 2.
76. Barry Hooker, *Legal Pluralism: An Introduction to Colonial and Neo-Colonial Laws* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).
77. Cf., Woodman, "The Idea", 11.

The *sharīʿah* is internally pluralist as is evidenced by the plurality of *fiqh* schools and *madhhabs* therein. All the leading schools of *fiqh* contain rules that entitle non-Muslim minorities to observe their own customary and personal laws on matrimony, ownership, worship matters, religious occasions, birth and death ceremonies and so forth. Non-Muslims are also allowed to follow their own traditions concerning dress, food and beverage even if they be forbidden in Islam. If a Muslim destroys substances such as liquor and pork that belong to a non-Muslim, the former is liable to compensation even if these are not considered as valuable assets (*māl*) under the laws of Islam. Non-Muslims are also free in their choice of life-style, education, economics and trade, artistic expression, media and communication. In the sphere of public law such as constitutional law, criminal law, laws pertaining to security and justice, taxation and some aspects of property law, the state usually applies uniform laws to all citizens, hence a limited scope for legal pluralism.[78]

I will briefly mention here the *sharīʿah* law doctrine of *siyāsah sharʿiyyah*, or *sharīʿah*-oriented policy (henceforth shortened to *siyāsah*). *Siyāsah* authorises lawful governments to introduce administrative rules and procedures, policy measures and legislation that serve the ideals of justice and good governance. Such measures may even depart from some of the established *fiqh* rules, or when the *sharīʿah* itself may be silent with regard to them, provided they do not contravene the higher goals and objectives of Islam. In times of emergency, calamity and riots, for instance, the state may introduce policies that may be contrary to the normal rules but which may fall under the rules of necessity and *ḍarūrah*. *Siyāsah*, and *ḍarūrah*, in turn, point to the truism that law is not always sufficient or even the best means by which to secure public interest in some areas of governance. No society can be expected to conduct all its affairs by reference to the text. Legal text, as well as political and economic considerations, custom and even exceptional conditions all play a role. Throughout their history, Muslim governments have resorted to *siyāsah* in the issuance of large body of administrative and policy measures that existed side by side with the substantive *sharīʿah*. What it all means is that the *sharīʿah* itself recognises a certain measure of legal pluralism, not just in the internal plurality of its schools and *madhhab*s, but also with regard to the acceptance of extra-*sharīʿah* policies, laws and procedures that are deemed to facilitate efficient management of public affairs.[79]

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78. Uniform laws may also be deemed necessary to regulate certain aspects of personal law, such as matrimony, when it comes to registration procedures and matters of concern to the welfare of children. This may also extend to aspects of property laws and commerce in so far as they may have a bearing on public welfare.

79. See for details on *siyāsah* Mohammad Hashim Kamali, "Beyond the *Sharīʿah*: *Siyāsah Sharʿiyyah* and its Application in Malaysia", *Al-Shajarah* 10 (2005), 169–92. See also idem, "*Siyāsah Sharʿiyyah* or the Policies of Islamic Government", *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 6 (1989), 59–81.

Malaysia enjoys an elective government, bound by a constitution and the rule of law, hence a legitimate system of rule that qualifies to initiate measures under the rubric of *siyāsah*. A policy-relevant message to note here is that in its quest for better management of ethno-religious and cultural pluralism, Malaysia's leadership may at times need to introduce bold policy initiatives, administrative and procedural laws, that may well be seen with a degree of circumspection by the uniformed, which could be dispelled if made aware of the internal flexibility of Islamic doctrines. On aspects of economic development and science, for instance, the *sharīʿah* may have no ruling to guide a certain course of action, yet it makes it a duty, nevertheless, of the lawful leader and government to take initiative so as to secure the public interest by recourse to judicious policy, or *siyāsah*. Most of the applied laws of Malaysia, and probably also the OIC countries on justice and good governance can be subsumed under the explicit guidelines of *sharīʿah*, failing which they are likely to fall under the rubric of *siyāsah*.

Public media undoubtedly plays a key role in disseminating information when such may be needed to build consensus and dispel misapprehension. We need to stress this since race and religion are sensitive matters that present governments with uncertainties over the initiatives they take – due largely to the prevalence of conservative attitudes over them. In his book *Islam Hadhari: A Model Approach for Development and Progress*, the former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi underlined attitudinal issues among the Muslims of Malaysia of concern particularly to economic development: "A mental revolution is crucial in confronting an increasingly competitive world [...]. The fact that the Bumiputras[80] are lagging behind is not a new reality, nor a radical statement [...]. Many feel that the Bumiputra problem is due to their mindset and attitude."[81] The wider impulse of Abdullah's appeal is to mental openness to change and the resistance often exhibited to it among the conservative strata of Malaysians. Whereas Islam itself provides space for pluralism and reform, the conservative perceptions of Islam do not concur. It is then a matter to a large extent of enlightenment and correct information about Islam to address the mindset issues.

80. Malay term widely used in Malaysia, embracing ethnic Malays, Javanese, Bugis, Minang, and occasionally other indigenous ethnic groups such as the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and the tribal peoples in Sabah and Sarawak and. This term comes from the Sanskrit word *Bhumiputra*, which can be translated literally as 'son of earth' (*bhumi* = earth, *putra* = prince) or 'prince of the soil'. Economic policies designed to favour Bumiputras (including affirmative action in public education) were implemented in the 1970s purportedly to defuse inter-ethnic tensions following the '13 May Incident' in 1969. These policies have succeeded in creating a significant urban Malay middle class but have been less effective in eradicating poverty among rural communities and have caused a backlash of resentment from excluded groups (such as the ethnic Chinese and Indian Malaysians).

81. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, *Islam Hadhari: A Model Approach for Development and Progress* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk, 2006), 15.

Conclusion

In an attempt to acquire a more nuanced understanding of pluralism, this article drew a distinction between five separate yet inter-related applications of pluralism in the spheres respectively of ethnicity, religion, politics, culture, and law. Notwithstanding the latent constriction of the relatively more open space of cultural interaction in Malaysia, multiculturalism has remained, nevertheless, a tangible reality of life in this country. This can also be said perhaps with regard to political pluralism, though once again, not without reservations. Broadly speaking, Malaysia has applied a regime of political pluralism in its general elections, the government rank and file, political parties and so forth. Malaysia's record in this area compares favourably perhaps to most other Muslim countries. Notable also is the fact that the aftermath of the 2008 general elections has brought about an intense level of political activism, espoused with the emergence, for the first time, of a tri-partite coalition of opposition parties, the *Pakatan Rakyat*, the component of the opposition parties consisting of the People's Justice Party (*Parti Keadilan Rakyat*, PKR), the 'Islamic Party', PAS, and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) that now rule five of the 13 states of Malaysia. With its reduced majority in Parliament, the ruling *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) coalition led by UMNO (United Malay National Organisation) has found itself preoccupied in internal changes and adjustments to formulate suitable responses to the new and wider prospects of political pluralism in this country.

Legal pluralism has also been a recognised feature of the applied laws of Malaysia, where common law, legislation, *sharīʿah* law and Malay custom have existed side by side, though in somewhat uneven proportions. *Sharīʿah* law is only applied to the Muslims and that also in the sphere of personal status law, which is administered by the *sharīʿah* courts. The administration of *sharīʿah* law in Malaysia has also come under scrutiny, and there is a body of opinion now that Malaysia's legal pluralism has not been free of problems, especially with reference to the application of *sharīʿah* law to conversion cases, guardianship of children, problematic divorces, alleged conversion to Islam of deceased persons affecting the choice of their burial ceremonies, and so forth. The scope of legal pluralism in Malaysia may well be due for further delimitation in favour of greater uniformity of laws and inter-religious harmony.

It is not an overstatement then to say that the burden of pluralism in Malaysia falls on ethnicity and religion, with language often playing a supporting role to ethnicity. I have stated in the course of this article that the scope of ethno-religious pluralism has narrowed down in recent decades in Malaysia, yet the concern is equally evident in government circles and civil society for fresh policy initiatives

and practical measures that can bring people of all races and religions closer together in the various walks of life. There is much scope for confidence building measures toward genuine pluralism, which should hopefully strike harmony with the best values of all the religious and cultural traditions of this country.