

The Qur'an & the Other  
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Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression

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The Qur'an explicitly and unequivocally denounces the narrow religious exclusivism which appears to have characterized the Jewish and Christian communities encountered by Muhammad in Hijaz. The Qur'an is relentless in its denunciation of the arrogance of Jewish religious figures and scathing of the tribal exclusivism that enabled them to treat people outside their community, especially the weak and vulnerable, with contempt. This contempt for other people, the Qur'an suggests, was very much rooted in notions of being the chosen of God. According to the Qur'an, many among the Jews and the Christians believed that they were not like any other people whom God had created, that their covenant with God had elevated their status with Him and that they were now the 'friends of Allah to the exclusion of other people' (62:6). The Qur'an alleges that they claimed a privileged position with God merely by calling themselves Jewish or Christian. In other words, it was a claim based on history, birth and tribe rather than on praxis and morality. Thus, they claimed to be 'the children of Allah and His beloved' (5:18) and 'considered themselves pure' (4:48). In response to these notions of inherent 'purity', the Qur'an argues, 'Nay, but it is Allah who causes whomsoever He wills to grow in purity; and none shall be wronged by even a hair's breadth' (5:49). The same text links these notions of being God's favourites to their socio-economic implications and suggests that this sense of having an exclusive share in God's dominion leads to greater unwillingness to share wealth with others: 'Have they perchance, a share in Allah's dominion?' the Qur'an asks, and then asserts: 'But [if they had] lo, they would not give to other people as much as (would fill) the groove of a date stone!' (4:53). 'Do they perchance, envy other people for what Allah has granted them out of His bounty? And among them are such as believe in Him and among them are such as have turned away' [emphasis mine] (4:55).

The Qur'an denounces the claims of some of the People of the Book that the afterlife was only for them and 'not for any other people' (2:94, 111), that the fire (of hell) would only touch them 'for a limited number of days' (3:

24) and that 'clutching at the fleeting good of this world will be forgiven for us' (7:169). The Qur'an, furthermore, takes a rather dim view of the boasts of the Jews and Christians that their creeds were the only ones of consequence. While the Qur'an does not accuse the Christians of claiming to be free of any moral accountability in their behaviour towards the non-Christians, they too, according to the Qur'an, held that they were the beloved of God.

And they say: 'None shall enter paradise unless he [or she] be a Jew or a Christian'. Those are their vain desires. Say: 'Produce your proof if you are truthful.' Nay, whoever submits his [or her] whole self to Allah and is a doer of good, will get his [or her] reward with his [or her] Lord; On such shall be no fear nor shall they grieve. (5:18)

And the Jews say the Christians have nothing [credible] to stand on and the Christians say the Jews have nothing to stand on while both recite the Book. Even thus say those who have no knowledge. So Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection in that wherein they differ. (2:111-13)

Attempts to appropriate the heritage of Abraham and make it the property of a particular socio-religious group are also denounced: (3:69) 'It is not belonging to the community of Jews or Christians which leads to guidance, but the straight path of Abraham' (2:135). Abraham 'was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but an upright person who submitted to Allah' (3:67).

Thirdly, the Qur'an is explicit in its acceptance of religious pluralism. Having derided the petty attempts to appropriate God, it is inconceivable that the Qur'an should itself engage in this. The notion that Abraham was not a Jew or a Christian, but 'one of us' (i.e., a Muslim) is at variance with the rejection of all exclusivist claims in these texts. For the Qur'anic message to be an alternative one, it had to offer the vision of a God who responds to all humankind and who acknowledges the sincerity and righteousness of all believers. The Qur'an, thus, makes it a condition of faith to believe in the genuineness of all revealed religion (2:136; 2:285; 3:84).

The Qur'an acknowledges the de jure legitimacy of all revealed religion in two respects: it takes into account the religious life of separate communities coexisting with Muslims, respecting their laws, social norms and religious practices and it accepts that the faithful adherents of these religions will also

attain salvation and that 'no fear shall come upon them neither will they grieve' (2:62). These two aspects of the Qur'an's attitude towards the Other may be described as the cornerstones of its acceptance of religious pluralism. Given the widespread acceptance, among the most conservative Muslims, of respect for the laws of the religious Other, even if only in theory, and the equally widespread rejection of their salvation, I want to focus on the latter.

The Qur'an specifically recognizes the People of the Book as legitimate socio-religious communities. This recognition was later extended by Muslim scholars to various other religious communities living within the borders of the expanding Islamic domain. The explicit details, restrictions and application of this recognition throughout the various stages of the Prophetic era, and subsequently in Islamic history, point to a significant issue in dealing with the Other. The socio-religious requirements of the Muslim community, such as community building and security, rather than the faith convictions, or lack thereof in these other communities, shaped the Qur'an's attitude towards them.

There are a number of indications in the Qur'an of the essential legitimacy of the religious Other. Firstly, the People of the Book, as recipients of divine revelation, were recognized as part of the community. Addressing all the prophets, the Qur'an says, 'And surely this, your community (ummah), is a single community' (23:52)<sup>11</sup>. The establishment of a single community with diverse religious expressions was explicit in the Charter of Medina. Secondly, in two of the most significant social areas, food and marriage, the generosity of the Qur'anic spirit is evident: the food of 'those who were given the Book' was declared lawful for the Muslims and the food of the Muslims lawful for them (5:5). Likewise, Muslim men were permitted to marry 'the chaste women of the People of the Book' (5:5). If Muslims were to be allowed to coexist with others in a relationship as intimate as that of marriage, then this seems to indicate quite explicitly that enmity is not to be regarded as the norm in Muslim-Other relations. Interestingly, this text mentions believing women in the same manner as the women of the People of the Book: '[permissible in marriage] are the virtuous women of the believers and the virtuous women of those who received the Scripture before you' (5:5). The restriction of the permission to the women of the People of the Book indicates that this ruling related to the social dynamics of early Muslim society and the need for community cohesion. The fact that most jurists, while agreeing on marriage to women of the People of the Book, who are also the people of Dhimmah, differ as to whether it is

permissible if they are from states hostile to Islam, also reflects this point (al-Tabari 1954, 5, pp.212-14). Thirdly, in the area of religious law, the norms and regulations of the Jews and of the Christians were upheld (5:47) and even enforced by the Prophet when he was called upon to settle disputes among them (5:42-3). Fourthly, the sanctity of the religious life of the adherents of other revealed religions is underlined by the fact that the first time permission for the armed struggle was given, was to ensure the preservation of this sanctity; 'But for the fact that God continues to repel some people by means of others, cloisters, churches, synagogues and mosques, [all places] wherein the name of God is mentioned, would be razed to the ground' (22:40).

The Qur'anic recognition of religious pluralism is evident not only from the acceptance of the Other as legitimate socio-religious communities but also from an acceptance of the spirituality of the Other and salvation through that Othemess. The preservation of the sanctity of places of worship was thus not merely in order to preserve the integrity of a multi-religious society, as contemporary states may want to protect places of worship because of the role they play in the culture of a particular people. Rather, it was because God, who represented the ultimate for many of these religions, and who is acknowledged to be above the diverse outward expressions of that service, was being worshipped in them. That there were people in other faiths who sincerely recognized and served God is made even more explicit in Qur'an 4:113: 'Not all of them are alike; among them is a group who stand for the right and keep nights reciting the words of Allah and prostrate themselves in adoration before Him. They have faith in Allah and in the Last Day; they enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong, and vie one with another in good deeds. And those are among the righteous'. If the Qur'an is to be the word of a just God, as Muslims sincerely believe, then there is no alternative to the recognition of the sincerity and righteous deeds of others, and their recompense on the Day of Requital. Thus, the Qur'an says:

And of the People of the Book there are those who have faith in Allah and in that which has been revealed to you and in that which has been revealed to them, humbling themselves before Allah, they take not a small price for the messages of Allah. They have their reward with their Lord. Surely Allah is swift to take account. (3:198)

And whatever good they do, they will not be denied it. And Allah knows

those who keep their duty. (3:112-14)

>From Where Then the Image of Religious Arrogance?

Why did this inclusivism and, indeed, justice, not become the predominant trait of the Islamic theological appraisal of the Other and Otherness? The ideal answer to this question would require an examination of the historical development of Islamic theology and the history of Islam's encounter with the Other as a whole. I shall, however, confine myself to looking at the arguments that traditional exegesis employed to circumvent the obvious meaning of inclusiveness in qur'anic texts, and to reflecting on the alternative opinions provided by some more contemporary exegetes. The following is one of the two texts that are most explicit about the legitimacy of religious diversity:<sup>12</sup>

Surely those who have faith and those who are Jews and the Christians and the Sabeans, whoever has faith in Allah and the Last Day and does good, they have their reward with their Lord, there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve. (2:62)

Most of the exegetes exercise themselves to no avail to avoid the explicit meaning of these texts, i.e., that anyone who has faith in God and the Last Day and who acts in a righteous manner will attain salvation. This refusal to recognize the efficacy of all religious paths to salvation after the coming of Muhammad is argued on the basis of the doctrine of supercessionism. According to this doctrine 'any given religious dispensation remains valid until the coming of the one to succeed it; then the new dispensation abrogates the previous one' (Ayoub 1989, p.27). Those who heard of the message of Moses were thus obliged to believe in it and to follow the Torah until the coming of Jesus, whose message superseded that of Moses until the coming of Muhammad, when the final form of faith was irrevocably determined.<sup>13</sup>

There are two ways in which the majority of scholars have approached this text to circumvent the more apparent meaning. It was argued that 2:62 had subsequently been abrogated by 3:85, 'Whosoever desires a din other than islam shall not have it accepted from him [or her].' This is a very significant opinion attributed to Ibn Abbas and 'a group among the exegetes' by al-Tabari (1954, 1, p.323).<sup>14</sup> Some of the exegetes whose works are under consideration here either rejected this opinion or ignored it. Those

who rejected it argued that the idea of God abrogating a promise militates against His justice and that, being God, He will not fail to uphold a promise. The abrogation theory would have been the easiest avenue to obtain the much desired exclusivist interpretation. However, with the case against it rather apparent, the exegetes had little option but to resort to some creative and often contradictory exegetical devices to secure damnation for the Christians, Jews and Sabeans.

Given their assumption that salvation is confined to those who have faith in and followed Muhammad as a prophet, the text presented two significant problems to these exegetes. The first problem was the inclusion of 'those who have faith' alongside the Other and the second one was the qualifying phrase 'whosoever have faith among them,' which seemed to imply that 'faith' is used in a different sense from that employed in the first descriptive phrase, 'those who have faith'.

Al-Zamakhshari, along with several others,<sup>15</sup> dealt with the first problem by redefining 'those who have faith' in a manner that equalizes the four categories in 'falsehood'. 'They are the ones', Al-Zamakhshari wrote, 'who believe with their tongues without their hearts agreeing', i.e., the hypocrites (n.d., 1, p.146). 'Whosoever among these rejecters/deniers acquires a pure faith and genuinely enters into the community of Islam will have no fear come upon them, neither will they grieve' (ibid.). Al-Tabari defines 'those who have faith' in this text as 'the ones who accept what the Messenger of Allah brought them of Allah's truth' (1954, 1, p.317) and then proceeds to distinguish between the application of the phrase 'whoever among them who has faith' to this category, and the following three. According to him, when the phrase 'whoever among them has faith' is applied to 'those who have faith' then it means 'remaining committed to that faith and not changing'. In the case of the Christians, Jews and Sabeans, however, he argues that it means 'coming to belief, i.e. entering Islam' (ibid. pp.320-1). The view that the acceptable Other refers to converts from other religions, the most common view in Qur'anic exegesis, is regularly applied to virtually all of those texts that distinguish between the Others who remained rejected by God and those who were acceptable and to whom salvation was promised.<sup>16</sup>

### Exegetical Difficulties

Criticism of the abrogation theory, regarding God renegeing on a promise or

causing a past generation to suffer for the intransigence or disbelief of a present generation, is clear. Furthermore, the following text (Qur'an 3:85), the supposedly abrogating text, is no less inclusive than Qur'an 2:62, [] which is supposed to have been abrogated. 'If one goes in search of a religion other than self-surrender unto God [Asad's rendition of islam], it will never be accepted from him [or her] and in the life to come he [or she] shall be among the lost' (3:95). What is significant about this opinion is that Ibn Abbas and 'a group among the exegetes' actually held the opinion that this verse, at an earlier stage, did offer salvation to groups outside the community of Muslims. Ibn Abbas is one of the earliest commentators of the Qur'an. It was only much later when the exegetes had recourse to more sophisticated exegetical devices that alternatives to this theory became possible in order to secure exclusion from salvation for the Other.

The interpretation offered by al-Zamakhshari that 'those who say faith' is actually a reference to the hypocrites, arbitrarily imputes an antithetical meaning to the phrase, without any theological or linguistic support. This is hardly conducive to understanding any text. The chaos in interpretation that must inevitably come from this kind of device, no matter how illustrious the exegete, has serious implications for any attempt to understand the Speech of God. Whenever the Qur'an uses the word *imān* with reference to the hypocrites, it does so with the word *qaw-l* or variants thereof, meaning that they only say or claim that they believe (2:8,14,86; 3:119; 5:41,61). Finally, throughout the Qur'an the expression 'those who have attained to faith/conviction' is used 239 times explicitly in the sense of 'those who have faith'. The case for a single exception to all of these with the effect of rendering an opposite meaning, requires a more significant explanation than has been provided.

Then there is the theory that the Jews, Christians and Sabeans mentioned in this verse are those who actually converted to Islam. In a sense, the entire early Muslim community were 'converts' to Islam, although the term seems to be uncommon in early Islamic literature. It is, however, possible that, as the community acquired a settled character, new entrants were known or even referred to as 'new Muslims'. Such a term was indeed in use, *maslamah*, and is employed by al-Tabari (1954, 7, p.498) and al-Zamakhshari (n.d., 1, p.459) in this context (*maslamah ahl al-kitab*). There is, however, no indication that these converts existed as a socio-religious category apart from the earlier Muslims, which would have warranted their exclusion from the category of 'those who have faith,' or that the terms 'new

Muslims' or 'converts' were widely used. On the contrary, the serious attempts to cement the Exile-Helper link as well as various other tribal links, would indicate that Muhammad would not have brooked the formation of yet another intra-Muslim category. In the very unlikely event that these new Muslims were regarded, even if only occasionally, as a sub-category of the 'believers', then it would have been far more plausible to refer to them as such in a text promising salvation.

More significant though, is the fact that the converts are already included in the first category and there is no convincing need to single them out as Jews, Christians and Sabeans. Nor could there have been any doubt regarding the salvation of these new Muslims who, as Christians or Jews before embracing Islam, were certainly closer in faith to 'those who have faith' than a mushrik. If the erstwhile mushrikun were eligible for salvation upon embracing Islam, then there could have been no doubt about the salvation of the Jews or Christians who did so.

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