

# A Muslim's Perspective on Interfaith\*

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**W**hat does my faith has to tell me about interfaith engagement? Since faith is a deeply personal matter, I wish to approach this subject from my own faith perspective as a Muslim.

I am essentially a pluralist Muslim. By this, I mean that I accept the *inherent* and *necessary* diversity – not only across various faith systems or religions, but more importantly, within Islam itself. Thus, when we ask what does Islam has to say about interfaith engagement, there can be no single answer but a spectrum of views on this matter.<sup>1</sup>

Different Muslims probably have different things to say about Islam's position and attitude towards other religions. These views can range from a militantly exclusive attitude that seeks to plant the supreme flag of Islam over others through dominating and vanquishing other religions, including fellow Muslims who do not share their parochial views and specific interpretations on Islam<sup>2</sup>, to a radically liberal position on the other end of the spectrum that sees Islam as essentially no different from any other religions and that the different religions are really just different names and paths to describe the same ultimate reality.

My views probably lie somewhere in the middle, but veering more to the liberal end of the spectrum. That means, I accept that no two religions are the same – that there are irreconcilable differences between religions, and that is what makes each religion unique and thus important to exist in its own right. Yet, I do not deny that at a more profound and substantive level, there is a form of affinity, linkages and similarities, in which the various great religious traditions can lay its claim to a common spiritual genealogy or source of inspiration that links back to God Almighty Himself.

The Qur'an is specific and clear on this: "To every people (was sent) a messenger..." (Q.10:47). This is how the great Muslim scholar from India, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, in his famous exegesis of the Qur'an *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, explains: that because the great religious traditions originated from the same Ultimate Source – God the Creator – we ought to strive towards greater unity rather than conflict.<sup>3</sup>

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At the same time, the Qur'an also teaches that diversity is part and parcel of God's plan. Thus, anyone who says that we must turn the whole world into Islam is deluded; first, it will be going against God's own decree and plan, and secondly, it is simply an impossible task to achieve. The Qur'an clearly says "If it had been your Lord's Will, they would all have believed, – all who are on earth! Would you then compel mankind, against their will, to believe?" (Q.10:99).

Even Prophet Muhammad does not make the conversion of the world into Islam as his mission. "We have not sent you [Muhammad] as a guard over them. Your duty is but to convey (the Message)..." (Q.42:48; cf. 10:108). More importantly, the Qur'an says that he was sent as a "mercy to all the worlds (*rahmatan lil alamin*)", not to be a lord and dominate over this world.<sup>4</sup> There can be only One Lord, and that is God Himself, and this very same God has said that He created this world diverse and it ought to remain that way. As mentioned in the Qur'an: "To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an open way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He has given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute." (Q. 5:48).

Based on this verse, many scholars have argued that it is wrong to say that we must impose the Islamic system in all societies, including to establish what they termed as "an Islamic State" (*daulah Islamiyyah*) or to formalize "*Shari'a* laws" in all aspects of life. These calls expressed by many fundamentalist movements within Islam, has got nothing to do with Islam *per se*, but with supremacist attitude that can be traced to historical factors that has generated a sense of inferiority complex under years of domination by colonial and imperial powers.<sup>5</sup>

Having set the tone that diversity is part of God's wisdom and plan, how then should Muslims engage with the Other – i.e. people of different faiths, beliefs, or even those with no beliefs at all?

Foremost is freedom. The Qur'an states in no uncertain term: *la ikraha fi al-din* ("Let there be no compulsion in religion...") (Q.2:256). Additionally, if we do engage with the Other – and the Qur'an does promote mutual, respectful interactions – then, let there be wisdom (*bikmah*) (Q.16:125); and as best as possible, to find common terms or ground (*kalimatun sawa'*) (Q.3:64). If no common position can be found, Muslims shall agree to disagree: *lakum dinukum wa liya din* ("to you be your way, and to me mine") (Q.109:6). And in all dealings with people of other faiths, we must bear in mind that compassion (*rahmah*) and justice (*adala*) must rule above all. Islam prohibits sectarian thinking (*al-abzab*)<sup>6</sup> that privileges one's own group or community to the neglect of the universal principles of justice and compassion. (Q.4:135).

Thus, in interfaith engagements, the Qur'an provides enough guidance for Muslims to formulate a framework, of which I shall lay down two important ones.

**First**, the Qur'an offers the concept of Man as being bestowed with dignity (*karamah*). In Q.17:70, God mentions that "We have honoured the children of Adam..." The Qur'an also speaks of Man being created "in the best of mould..." (Q.95:4) that even the angels have to bow down before Adam and Eve. This alone is enough to tell us why we

ought to respect every single individual as a fellow human being, despite his/her different beliefs, ethnicity, skin colour, nationality, and other such differences. All men and women are equal before God – what separates them is their degree of God-consciousness (*taqwa*) in fulfilling their responsibility as stewards (*khalifah*) of this earth, i.e. to administer this world properly, to do good and not to be among those whom God condemns as *fasad fil 'ard* (corruptors of this world).

This dignity bestowed upon human beings ensures that we take care of the other's plight. If they are hungry, we ought to feel their hunger too. If they are suffering, we ought to feel their suffering too. And because all religions have a moral mission, different religions ought to come together to address common problems and suffering faced by fellow human beings, regardless of differences.<sup>7</sup> I believe that the concept of *karamah* bestowed upon every human being can open up avenues for interreligious solidarity.

This, coincidentally, corresponds to the highest level of fellowship known as *ukhuwah bayariyah* or “fellowship among human beings”, a term propounded by the late Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), a great Indonesian scholar and thinker who passed away recently. For Gus Dur, fellowship among human beings is the highest amidst two other forms of fellowship: *ukhuwah wathaniyyah* (fellowship among fellow countrymen), and below that, *ukhuwah Islamiyyah* (fellowship among Muslims). To him, Muslims have reversed the schema to put fellowship among Muslims first as compared to fellowship among human beings. Thus, many Muslims fell into the trap of sectarian thinking and are willing to violate the rights of other human beings in the name of upholding Islam and fellow Muslims.

**Secondly**, the Qur'an tells us in Q.49:13 that since God have created diversity, two principles ought to underlie our interactions. First is the concept of “to know each other” (*li ta'arafu*). Second, the concept of competing with each other in doing good deeds (*fastaq bi-khul khayr*).<sup>8</sup> There can be no clearer invitation for Muslims and non-Muslims to come together, do dialogues in order try to understand each other, live in peace and harmony, promote good and desist from doing evil to each other and destroy this earth, and to not let differences divide our common purpose to manage this world in its best possible ways, and to be accountable for our every deed on earth. The Qur'an explains: “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other)...” (Q.49:13); “If Allah so willed, He could make you all one people: But He leaves straying whom He pleases, and He guides whom He pleases: but you shall certainly be called to account for all your actions.” (Q.16:93).

As I had described above, I believe that the Qur'an gives clear guidance in terms of establishing a positive interfaith framework that can bring greater good to society and humanity at large. We can also cite numerous reports in the *hadith* (Prophetic tradition) that narrate how Prophet Muhammad himself lived up to the spirit of this Qur'anic framework in his dealings with people of other faiths, of which it will be too numerous to mention here. Nonetheless, one *hadith* sums up wonderfully on this spirit, as the Prophet himself seeks to impart:

“From Ibn Abbas it was once narrated that the Prophet of God (peace be upon him) was asked: “Which religion is most loved by God?” The Prophet replied, “The upright and tolerant religion [*al-hanifyat al-samhah*].”<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the challenge for us now is to make this orientation, this manner of understanding God’s Revelation – inclusive, tolerant, rational and peaceful – dominant amidst the increasing tendency to push Islam into an exclusivist mode that is hostile to other religions.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout Islamic history, we have seen both orientations being manifested. Muslims, at various junctures in history, have seen the ups and downs in terms of co-existing with people of other faiths. It ranges from peaceful acceptance, such as in Andalusia in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and in Ottoman era where the Jews and Christians lived peacefully and flourished under the Muslim rule, to persecution when Aurengzeb (d.1707) ruled Mughal India in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, destroyed temples and Hindu art, and seek to expand his empire while forcing Islam to the conquered people.

Which orientation will eventually become dominant is ultimately the result of social and political arrangements in each society. Religion itself is not the factor. An intolerant and parochial Muslim will interpret Islam in an intolerant and parochial manner and reject interfaith other than attempts to convert them to Islam. On the other hand, a peace-loving and rational Muslim will interpret Islam as a peace-loving and rational religion and wants to do dialogue with other religions in order to understand one another and to promote what is good to society and humanity. Thus, it is necessary to ensure that the right orientation prevails in society. That is the task of the leaders and politicians in particular, and every one of us who identifies ourselves as members of a society, nation or humanity at large. []

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The acceptance of diversity and plurality of views is a crucial component in any forms of dialogue. A person who assumes monopoly of truth and adopts an essentialist and reductionist view of his own and other faiths is more prone to either obstinate clinging on to one's own (potentially untenable/erroneous) views or gross misrepresentations of other people's faiths. That is why the Qur'an itself often makes qualifications when speaking of other faiths. As much as the Qur'an castigates certain aspects among some, such as deviating from true monotheistic belief, nevertheless, verses such as Q.3:113-114, Q.3:199, Q.5:82 and Q.2:62 showed that there can be those who are spiritually upright among the People of the Book. Thus, the Qur'an does not attempt to outrightly reject people of other faiths (in this case, the People of the Book – i.e. the Jews and Christians in particular) by portraying them in a non-homogenous and non-monolithic manner. See the discussions in Muhammad Galib M., *Ahl al-Kitab: Makna dan Cakupannya* [People of the Book: Meaning and Scope] (Jakarta: Penerbit Paramadina, 1998). For arguments supporting the pluralist position, see Gamal al-Banna, *At-Ta'addudiyah fi al-Mujtama' al-Islamiy* [tr. Doktrin Pluralisme dalam al-Qur'an] (Bekasi Timur: Penerbit Menara, 2006); Abd. Moqsith Ghazali, *Argumen Pluralisme Agama: Membangun Toleransi Berbasis al-Qur'an* [Arguments for Religious Pluralism: Developing Tolerance Based on the Qur'an] (Depok: KataKita, 2009); Hendar Riyadi, *Melampaui Pluralisme: Etika al-Qur'an tentang Keragaman Agama* [Beyond Pluralism: Qur'anic Ethics on Religious Diversity] (Jakarta: RMBooks and PSAP, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> We can see this tendency in some puritanical and extremist movements, such as the Khawarij movement in early Islam, circa 7th century CE. In contemporary times, the same tendency is seen in the Wahhabi movement. According to Syed Farid Alatas, common features of such movements include: (1) intolerance of others, particularly Muslims who disagree with their orientations; (2) overemphasis on rules and regulations at the expense of spirituality; (3) forbidding beliefs and practices allowed by the majority of Muslims; (4) non-contextual/non-historical interpretations of Qur'an and Hadith; and (5) Literalism in the interpretation of texts. See "The Study of Muslim Revival: A General Framework" in Syed Farid Alatas, ed., *Muslim Reform in Southeast Asia: Perspectives from Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore* (Singapore: Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> In particular, see Abul Kalam Azad, *The Opening Chapter of the Qur'an* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2001), pp. 155-156.

<sup>4</sup> This argument was put forth by Muhammad 'Abduh's student and Egyptian cleric from al-Azhar University, Ali 'Abd al-Raziq (d.1966) in his controversial work, *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm* [Islam and the Foundations of Rule]. In this work, al-Raziq argued that Prophet Muhammad's role is primarily religious in nature and not, as in the words of the Qur'an, to "(set) over you to arrange your affairs." (Q.10:108). Writing at a volatile period where anti-colonial sentiments among Muslims were high, al-Raziq was expelled from al-Azhar fraternity for his views, which according to the conservative clerics of his time, borders on secularising Islam. But as argued by Souad T. Ali, al-Raziq's views were considered "dangerous" because it seeks to "Islamise secularism" more than to "secularise Islam". See Souad T. Ali, *A Religion, Not a State: Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's Islamic Justification of Political Secularism* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2009). Al-Raziq is now considered to be one of the pioneers of Muslim liberal thought which seeks to separate religion and state. For a succinct discussion on the strand of thinking, read Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of supremacist attitude among Muslims, see Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> On the Qur'anic usage of the term *al-ahzab*, refer to Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1999), pp. 138-140. In this context, sectarianism refers to those who make exclusivist truth-claims, such as the Jews and Christians being referred to in Q.2:111 and 113, who deny truths and salvation outside their own exclusive groups. Muslims, as such, are told to avoid sectarianism and accept the unity of Revelation, in the sense of recognising the common spiritual foundation of other religions. See, for example, Q.42:13, 4:161-163 and 3:78. In Q.22:40, the Qur'an is even more explicit in implying that places of worship, including churches, synagogues and mosques are to be protected simply because these are places where the names of God [Allah] are being mentioned. It was in this sense that Cyril Glasse once remarked that:

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“...the fact that one revelation [i.e. the Qur'an] should name others as authentic is an extraordinary event in the history of all religions.” See, entry “Ahl al-Kitab” in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> On this, refer to Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> See Issa J. Boullata, “*Fa-stabiqu l-khayrat*: A Qur'an Principle on Interfaith Relations” in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Zaidan Haddad, eds., *Christian-Muslim Encounters* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), pp. 43-64.

<sup>9</sup> Narrated by Imam Ahmad; also, al-Bukhari in *al-Adab al-Mufrad*. According to Roy P. Mottahedeh, this narration is evidence of classical Islam's view that all human societies have a religious foundation that is inscribed through each individual's natural disposition (*fitrah*) that has been infused with moral and spiritual elements. Thus, we must assume the goodness in all human beings. This is the theological foundation for tolerance toward others. See “Toward an Islamic Theology of Toleration” in Tore Lindholm and Kari Vogt, eds., *Islamic Law Reform and Human Rights: Challenges and Rejoinders* (Oslo: Nordic Human Rights Publication, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Several scholars have argued that traditionally, orthodox Islam has always been inclusive and tolerant as it seeks to realise the middle path for the Muslim community (*ummahun wasatan*). A good representative position on this can be found in Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *Faysal al-Tafrīqa*, as translated and discussed by Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). In addition, traditional Sufi hermeneutics also supports a non-exclusivist acceptance of the validity of other religious traditions, particularly at the esoteric dimension. The works of Sufi savants such as Jalaluddin Rumi (d.1273) and Muhyiddun ibn 'Arabi (d.1240) were adopted to develop an inclusive framework by contemporary Sufi scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Reza Shah-Kazemi, as well as by liberal scholars such as Abdolkarim Soroush and Budhy Munawar-Rachman. For a useful exegetical and hermeneutical discussion on the inclusivist and pluralist viewpoints that can have implications for interfaith, see Reza Shah-Kazemi, *The Other in the Light of One: The Universality of the Qur'an and Interfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 2006), and Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).