Voices within Islam:
Four Perspectives on Tolerance and Diversity

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When Muslim intellectuals interact with non-Muslims, they frequently find themselves in debates about Islam and its compatibility with democracy, or under what circumstances Islam supports political violence. These issues, along with the themes of renewal, tolerance, and dissent in Islam, formed the basis for a series of meetings we have held recently with prominent Muslim thinkers. In the following pages, we present a selection of the views of these intellectuals and religious figures.

The thoughts of Gamal al-Banna that are excerpted only hint at the breadth of his incredibly prolific writings, which are available only in Arabic and span 60 years. Al-Banna is the brother of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Gamal, however, is usually considered a critic of the brotherhood for its conservative understanding of Islam. (In his 1946 book, *The New Democracy,* he enjoined the brotherhood "not to believe in faith, but to believe in human beings.") The book that may be most indicative of his work is *Islam Is Not Religion and State but Religion and Society* (2003), in which he argues that Islam does not offer a specific model for contemporary political systems and that the appropriate focus for activism should be at the level of society, not politics. Much of his work generates debate, including a recent volume, *The Veil,* which criticizes those activists who wish to repress women in order to symbolize their faith.

Gamal al-Banna has lent his powerful voice in support of both secular and Islamically oriented activists in his native Egypt, and he is revered for his open mind and his brave voice. If one were to sum up his work, it would be his insistence that "in Islam thinking is essential." He emphasizes consistently that the "Koran and the prophet accept entirely the concept of freedom of thought, welcome diversity of creed, respect the opinion of others and leave the matter of judging to God on Judgment Day."

While discussions about democracy are important among Islamic thinkers, many of the debates between leading Muslim intellectuals are concerned with how Muslims should understand and interpret their religion. This can be clearly seen in the extended essay by the Syrian engineer Muhammad Shahrour.

Shahrour is famous for his best-selling first book, *The Book and the Koran: A Contemporary Reading,* which is especially popular with the educated middle class in the Arab world. Published in 1990, it is a large and often difficult work, but the substance of the argument is captured by Shahrour's insistence that the Koran should be read as

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though it were just revealed by the prophet Mohammed, not through the filter of centuries of interpretive dust. Like many contemporary Muslims who are thinking seriously about their religion, Shahrour was not trained as a scholar of religion; he earned his doctoral degree in soil engineering at University College in Dublin. He continues to work and write in Damascus, and sometimes appears on satellite television and speaks often in the Arab world.

The Iranian reformist thinker Mohsen Kadivar is an important and courageous voice of reform in a country that is locked in an intense struggle between reformers who want to make the system more responsive to the will of the people and conservatives determined to hold on to power through their rigid interpretation of Islam.

Kadivar, who is a *mujtahid* (a cleric qualified to interpret religious law), comes to this ideological battlefield supplied with one of the key weapons in the Islamic Republic: the language of religion. He writes of democracy, but he does not demand the overthrow of the Islamic state and its replacement with a secular form of government. In 1999, however, he was indicted and sentenced to prison for "disseminating lies, defaming Islam, and disturbing public opinion." Released after 18 months, Kadivar has been even more determined to present his views, and his prison conviction has only increased his popularity.

Kadivar is sometimes compared to Martin Luther or John Calvin, the clerics who transformed Roman Catholicism. His opinions and writings receive significant attention both among lay intellectuals and young clerics in seminaries. He has a doctorate in Islamic philosophy and theology, and achieved the clerical certification to perform *ijtihad* (independent interpretation) in 1997. Kadivar is in a unique intellectual position to influence the future of Muslim thinking on important issues such as human rights, tolerance, democratic governance, and relations with nonbelievers.

In contrast to Kadivar, Ayatollah Mohammad Boujnourdi is a leading member of the conservative clerical establishment in Iran today. He lived in Najaf, Iraq, prior to the 1979 revolution, and was a close confidant of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, advising the Iranian leader on a range of issues. In 1984, Ayatollah Khomeini appointed Boujnourdi as the head of the Supreme Judicial Council, a body charged with drafting legislation.

Boujnourdi describes himself as a "pragmatic man," and has criticized Iranian hard-liners for adopting extremist positions. He is known among the Iranian reformists as an "enlightened" conservative because he agrees with the reformists that the Islamic Republic has at times resorted to unnecessary force, alienating the population. Hence, in contrast to other senior conservative personalities, Boujnourdi represents a part of the Iranian clerical establishment that has engaged the reformists in discussions on democratization and human rights.

None of these four contrasting thinkers writes customarily in English, so the work reproduced here offers a unique glimpse of their ideas rather than an interpretation of their views by Western scholars or journalists. Obviously, there are many important voices and many perspectives, so what is offered is a small yet indicative taste of some of the key debates about Islam and pluralism that are under way today in the Muslim world.

Radicalism Emerges from Tyranny

Gamal al-Banna

THE ADVENT OF tyrannical military rule precipitated the rise of fanatical groups that made violence and direct action a methodology. The mentor of some of the Islamic movements was Sayyid Qutb, who considered jihad a means of establishing and legitimizing "divine judgment" (*hakimiyya ilahiyya*) in place of all human law. The hard line adopted by the Islamic movements did not simply derive from a distorted interpretation of Islam. There are psychological and political factors as well, and the tyranny of the ruling military junta played an important role.

Torture in [President Gamal Abdul] Nasser's detention camps in the 1950s and 1960s led the mostly young detainees to believe that any government that follows such practices is not a Muslim government, but an apostate (*kafira*) government. It was thus in Nasser's prisons that the seeds of the accusation of apostasy were planted, and it was the charge of apostasy that served as a rationale for jihad by the young Islamists.

The members of the Muslim Brotherhood in detention, who were wiser and more resilient than their young confederates, attempted to refute these ideas but to no avail. A book bearing the title *Preachers Not Judges* was released, but the damage had been done. The savage torture they had been subjected to rendered them impervious to appeasement. The first to be released from prison among them, Shukry Mustafa, founded the Forum of Heresy and Migration, which proceeded to abduct one of Al Azhar's fine clerics and went on to execute him when the government refused to negotiate for his release.

A vicious circle resulted: terrorism by the state was met with violence from the organizations provoking more terrorism by the state, leading to more violence.

A Call for Reformation

Muhammad Shahrur

MANY WESTERN ANALYSTS, in their attempts to conceptualize Islamist groups that practice violence and terrorism, resort to the terminology of "fundamentalist movements." But Islam—in contrast to Christianity, where fundamentalism is a clearly stated doctrine—has no fundamentalist tradition. Accordingly, any rhetoric about violence and terrorism among Islamic fundamentalists refers only to armed political movements and not to ritualistic, legislative, or ethical Islam itself.

These political movements reflect important divergences between Islamic and Western experience. Historically speaking, in Muslim societies the rulers have made religion subservient to political authority. The legitimacy of political authority was based on identifying obedience to officeholders with obedience to God and the prophet. This was further augmented by the persistence of the doctrine of predestination from the first century of Islam. The idea that fate defines a person's life found many justifications in the Koran, such as "Nothing will afflict us except that which God ordered" and in popular proverbs, including "What is written in your destiny must be seen by your eyes." Obeying God and the prophet was, of course, separable from obeying rulers. But this distinction was completely overlooked by most of the *ulema* (religious scholars), who were already caught up in service to despotic authorities.

In 1924 the new Turkish ruler, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, disestablished the caliphate, the nominal head of the community of all Muslims. With the caliphate gone, the legitimacy of despotism disappeared. Paradoxically, an alternative legitimacy has not since emerged in the minds of most people. And this lies at the heart of the bizarre combination of ruling regimes that we find in the Arab and Muslim world today. Rulers have found themselves with few choices except to complement their weak or even missing legitimacy by returning to religious sources and creating state offices such as grand mufti and sheikh al-Islam to gain an aura of legitimacy. We can see this in the Iranian revolution, where a despotic authority claiming revolutionary legitimacy exists today under the slogan of the "Guardianship of the Jurisconsult." This supreme group can block any legislation passed by the parliament.

Besides the failure to develop secular sources of state legitimacy, another difference between the West and the Islamic world has been the existence in the latter of Sharia. Sharia refers to the verses that inform rulings and judgments on a range of issues, including social and familial relations, personal affairs, punishments for crime, and financial and commercial transactions. In practice, these issues are inseparable from the work of the state. Unlike required religious practices (such as prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage), religious rules for marriage, divorce, inheritance, wills, education, adoption, selling and buying, and lending and credit cannot be separated from the scope of political power. This situation is unique to the Muslim world.

A third difference is the persistence in Muslim countries of an archaic worldview. While Europe managed to rid itself of its biblical worldview, time-worn interpretations of the Koran, sayings of the prophet, and causes of revelation still predominate in the Arab world despite the availability of enlightened critiques. Occasionally, we even hear *fatwas* (religious opinions) from here and there excommunicating those who suggest that the earth is round. The Muslim world's endemic crisis derives from stultifying, unenlightened interpretation and legal decisions that are inspired by the dead hand of anachronistic thinking.

This crisis is exacerbated by the division of the Islamic world into isolated schools of law, each with its own texts, jurisprudence, and scholars building up a gigantic yet unharmonious and contradictory heritage that can neither be accepted as is nor reformed. Meanwhile, fundamentalist Islamic movements of various orientations seek to impose their own interpretations, and try to supplant existing schools of law with their own, often narrow views.

THE MODERNIST FAILURE

Liberal movements in the Muslim world adopted the European model and hence rejected Islamic jurisprudence and its legislation. These movements did not discard Islam as monotheism, or as a divinely ordained message. They did not reject its value system or ultimate ideals. The liberals called for separation of religion and state, never targeting rites (such as prayer, fasting, good treatment of parents, and avoidance of cheating in markets) but only the Sharia and jurisprudence. However, the liberals were never able to find a context for success within Islamic Arabic culture because they lacked adequate philosophical and theoretical tools. They failed to make even minimal adaptations to the Islamic and Arab ethos. As a result, the liberals remained Westernized and outside the people's culture.

The story of the Marxist movements was even worse. They started from an absolute and assumed history—a kind of determinism akin to that of predestination nurtured by despotic Muslim dynasties. Believing in the deterministic development of societies from one historical stage to another and progressing ultimately to the communist stage, Marxists in the Muslim world became prisoners of dogmatism. Moreover, their inclination toward atheism led them to deconstruct religion itself, rather than the structures of religious despotic authority that did repress people's minds and chain their wills. Their attempt to justify their anti-religious stance by arguments critical of the feudal despotic institution was akin to drying up a water source because the water wheel is dirty.

The Arab world has also seen nationalistic movements that dogmatized science, progressivism, and modernity. These subordinated freedom to the slogans of Arab unity, socialism, and progressivism. Nationalists developed their own rhetoric to delegitimize nonconformists. They used the vocabulary of "reactionary/agent/traitor" as opposed to the "infidel/ atheist/polytheist" and the "capitalist/imperialist/enemy of the people" terminology used by Islamists and communists, respectively. But they shared an antagonism to pluralism.

The 1967 Arab-Israeli war exposed the failure of all of these movements. In the ruins of defeat, it became clear that projects for modernity in the Arab world had betrayed their original promises. Nationalistic ideologies especially appeared as romantic and idealistic formulations that lacked any concrete theory of state and society and failed to fulfill the need for justice or to reconcile competing interests. As a result, oppressive police regimes emerged.

THE ISLAMIST RESPONSE

It is with this history in mind that we can better understand the Islamist movements—that is, the groups of Muslims who want to reestablish an Islamic state. These movements became noticeable in the wake of the 1967 war, spawned by what is usually referred to as an Islamic revival or resurgence. Yet, with their reliance on traditional Islamic literature, the Islamists were unable to provide any creative ideas on how the state and society should deal with the new variables introduced by the twentieth century.

The Islamist movements had no insights appropriate for an age of dramatic scientific and infor-

mation progress—not to mention new political concepts and innovations that have spread worldwide, such as civil society, freedom of speech, elections, constitutionalism, plebiscites, women's economic rights, and elected political offices. Historical Islamic literature was silent on constitutional jurisprudence that clearly defines the rights and prerogatives of the ruler, how he is selected, and the duration of his rule.

Similarly, Islamic historical thought had developed no notion of individual freedom as it is understood today. Freedom of speech itself enjoys only minimal importance in Islam. Traditionally, individuals did not enjoy any genuine rights to speech in Islam; they were to follow the way of their monarchs and jurists. Religious judgments and not plebiscites are the foundation of classical Islamic jurisprudence.

Furthermore, when it comes to principles and methods of political action, it is clear that members of Islamist movements are deeply committed to their religion but suffer from extreme naïveté. This naïveté is part of a more general political fragility and awkwardness among Islamists that help to explain their turn to terrorism and violence.

Fatally, Islamist movements overlap politics with excommunication, Islam with belief, piety with rites, and jihad with armed violence. Rather than propagating religion by good examples, as advised in the Koran, they do so by the sword. Moreover, they distort Koranic texts with serious consequences—such as when they identify killing *(qatl)* with fighting *(qital)*—and consider these harsh distortions as basic to Islam. These errors stem from the lack of a contemporary genuine Islamic theory on state and society that puts jihad, piety, and debate in their proper place. Misunderstanding and ambiguity compounded with a vigorous religious zeal can easily lead to incidents of bigoted armed violence—including the kind of killing out of ignorance that was seen in the 9-11 attacks on the United States.

Another reason why Islamic political movements have resorted to violence is itself political. Their violence is a fundamental element of the spiral of violence and counterviolence caused by the Muslim world's deeply entrenched incumbent authoritarian regimes. These regimes' weak legitimacy entices them to engage violently with the opposition. Their uncompromising response helps create a mood for violence that aggravates the already violent tendencies inherent within Islamist movements. Poverty, unemployment, the unequal distribution of wealth, class privileges, and ignorance further fuel popular backing for radical Islamists.

Finally, Islamists have been pushed toward violence by the failure of contemporary modernization movements. Islamists appeared to fill the intellectual and cultural vacuum from which Arab Muslims have suffered. But the Islamist movements resorted to experiences and wisdom drawn from the distant past. Official religious institutions, handicapped by conservatism, exacerbated the problem by also fixating on the past and grounding this view inside the "Arab mind." As a result, the response to political violence was based on a model of jihad drawn from the past.

REINTERPRETING ISLAM

The prospects for Islamist movements are gloomy unless they can articulate a contemporary Islamic theory on state and society that provides for freedom of thought, political opposition, the transition of power, plebiscites, parliamentarianism, freedom of faith, and individual and collective human rights—especially those of women. For this to happen there needs to be a complete transformation of the concept of legal reasoning in Islamic terms. Unless this transformation occurs, the threat of the rise of fundamentalist powers inimical to the structure of civil society and its institutions will remain.

Let me emphasize this point: the basic texts of Islamic law are the same texts that a movement like the Afghan Taliban used. We need to adopt modern methods of interpretation. But the obstacles are large: when the great Egyptian thinker Sheikh Muhammad Abdu proposed a reinterpretation late in the nineteenth century he was subjected to public defamation by the traditionalists, who condemned him as a Mason and a Western agent.

The process of Islamizing reality is ultimately a sociological process. A civilized society produces a civilized Islam and a Bedouin society produces a Bedouin Islam. Perhaps the most debilitating event in the Muslim world has been the rise of political movements whose agenda is to pull Muslim societies backward in history under the tempting slogan of applying Sharia. The latter serves as a hollow label; underneath it lurk all sorts of ruling private interests that lie at the real core of policy making in Muslim countries. Remember that Afghanistan under the Taliban became the world's largest producer of narcotics. Muslims are no different from other people in their susceptibility to corruption once they achieve unchecked power.

The Islamists have emerged because the modernity projects in the Arab world betrayed their promise, creating a pressing need for an alternative.

The inherited traditional culture was more than ready to offer that alternative. But this alleged revival did not go beyond rites and worships as understood by people of tradition—for example, prayer, fasting and pilgrimage, spending considerable time in mosques, men growing beards, and the adoption of the female veil. (The veil in particular served as a political symbol and slogan. Warring factions mobilized around it, and ruling powers accepted and encouraged it as long as it diverted people from their real grievances and problems.)

What really would have had an important effect on the rulers were doctrines on constitutional jurisprudence, checking power, and ensuring governmental accountability to the people. But these concepts were not found in the inherited traditional culture. Thus, by emphasizing tradition, the rulers benefited from the poverty of the Islamic tradition regarding these issues. They were aided by official religious institutions that supported the spread of the Islamic heritage by funding religious education and the publication of millions and millions of tracts.

WHOSE SHARIA?

Islamic traditions that govern social transactions and personal matters do offer a semblance of diversity in legal and jurisprudent schools of thought. But this provides a superficial kind of legitimacy, reflecting an artificial richness of ideas and disagreement among religious scholars. Examples would include debates over when the month of fasting, Ramadan, begins. Or under what circumstances interest on bank loans is permitted. Or how Sharia is to be applied in cases of theft. (Is the amputation of a thief's hand literally or only metaphorically required? For that matter, if amputation is permitted, what is the "hand"?)

Some would argue that the mere call for applying Sharia is antithetical to religious, political, and cultural pluralism. To consider this argument, we must first be clear about what we mean by Sharia. If we mean the divine revelation of the Koran and the prophetic tradition, then this argument would imply that God and his prophet are opposed to pluralism within the confines of the Muslim state. But this is impossible, of course. God declared it clearly and uncompromisingly: "No compulsion in religion, righteousness is already differentiated from falsehood" and also, "If God wills it, he could have made all of those on earth believers: Would you force the people to be believers?"

So it is a question of defining the conceptual boundaries of the term "Sharia." By what criteria should "law" beyond the Koran be accepted? What about the books of the *Hadith* (narrations of the life of the prophet Mohammed), assembled and written by jurists? In fact, many of the texts now considered part of Sharia are historical words, the products of human labor. These texts, moreover, were formulated according to legal proofs and reasoning—also a historical human product. If the objective is to project all that is mentioned in these texts onto our current world, then we will have a Taliban in every Arab and Muslim country, albeit with various local versions. This prospect poses a threat to pluralism and civil society. It also would represent for society at large a return to a past life—not of the prophet's companions, but of the medieval ages.

It would be completely different if we comprehended Sharia as a general guiding umbrella of the rulings, injunctions, and principles mentioned in the Koran and Sunna (the body of customs and practices based on the prophet's words and deeds) that should be projected forward over time and space. Only in this sense can we posit a Sharia that is not in conflict with civil society and pluralism. We only need to do what our predecessors did when they first read the Koran and Sunna in the light of their reality and time. We too should have our own reading of the Koran and Sunna so that they can provide us with new fundamentals of jurisprudence and legislation. These fundamentals should stem from the following bases:

• Supreme ideals (ethics and value systems). These were subject to accumulation from the days of Noah until the prophet Mohammed. They include upholding the ultimate universal human values, such as respecting parents, not committing suicide, keeping promises, and engaging in honest trade.

• Rites and rituals. These are the centerpiece of belief. But prayers, fasting, and pilgrimage were subject to change and diversity. Prayer is found in all religions, and fasting among Muslims, Christians and Jews. Accordingly, the state should accept diversity in rituals and rites, and the existence of many houses of worship (mosques, churches, and synagogues) should be acceptable to civil society. (Indeed, this is already the case in most Muslim countries.)

• A Sharia subject to development in understanding and application (except for monotheism and rituals).

THE PATH TO SALVATION

We have looked at the development and ideologies of the Islamist movements, but a last point

needs to be addressed: what is their goal? The answer is not as simple as one might assume. Is the goal the pursuit of power by example? I will assume the truthfulness of the raised slogans about justice, equality, *shura* (consultation), fighting corruption, and ensuring security. But these slogans require a mechanism to achieve them and gradualist programs at the core of that mechanism. Obviously, Islam's original heritage and traditions are deficient when it comes to these mechanisms and programs.

Fundamentalism essentially starts from sacralizing tradition and subscribing to it literally, regardless of its contradictions or inconsistencies. Accordingly, it will find itself obliged to force people to go back to the past with all its details and leave aside the present with all its novelties in order to apply unchangeable traditional texts under the pretext of respecting constants.

If the Islamists' goal is to participate in power and not to monopolize it, then with whom would they cooperate in ruling? With the nationalists or the liberals? Or would they transform themselves into a new official religious institution whose function is to legitimize a new system within which it would be an active partner? The Islamist movements' choice—to monopolize power or to share it and leave the door open to all coming movements, whether religious or not—will determine whether the cycle of destructive violence will resume yet again, with merely a changing of places and roles.

An experiment taking place in Lebanon features an Islamist movement, Hezbollah, that is undoubtedly fundamentalist in terms of its foundations and ideology. Yet it is trying to prove that terrorism is not an option, and that violence was employed only against occupation, colonialism, and subjugation. Hezbollah is unabashedly attempting to entrench its position more and more inside the politics and culture of its society. However, it cannot be foretold to what extent this movement can cooperate with nationalist powers and other political movements. Nor is it clear how it will engage with external powers that cannot tolerate collective action led by a religious fundamentalist movement. (There is also the compelling question of whether Hezbollah will deviate from Iran, its major patron and supporter.)

The central concern for the Arab Muslim world is the need to appreciate the urgent necessity of a second contemporary reading of the Koran and Sunna, guided by the imperatives of the world today. This process should be freed from the perspectives of early thinkers, with due and deep respect for all of them, because we need a current reading. The exercise of self-conscious and critical reason is the only safeguard against terrorism and violence. This process is of course arduous and still remote, and the hopes built around it are imbued with idealism. Nevertheless, for good or bad, I see no other way to salvation.

Translated from the Arabic by
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Freedom of Thought and Religion

Mohsen Kadivar

To UNDERSTAND THE PLACE of tolerance in Islam, we need to examine what we mean by freedom of thought in Islam. I argue that freedom of thought and faith is not only beneficial to Islam and to Muslims, but that it is also mandated by fundamental religious rules.

Islam is one of the three great religions but it is frequently thought to be a religion that does not accept diversity of viewpoints. In historic Islam the text of the Koran, the traditions of the holy prophet Mohammed, the behavior of the authorities of religion, and consensus among Muslim scholars are considered to be permanent precepts, beyond time and space. Thus they are regarded as divine and not

subject to criticism. While proponents of this approach believe in religious rationality, referred to as "wisdom," this rationality is thought to exist beyond the human mind.

According to Islam, Muslims are free to openly practice their religion, express their religious beliefs, practice their rituals alone or in groups, and teach religion to their children. They have the right to criticize all other religions and to ensure the supremacy of Islam. Nobody has the right to force a Muslim to leave his religion under duress or to prevent him from practicing the religious ceremonies. There is a consensus in this and there are no differences in this area.

Yet a Muslim is not allowed to change his religion to become, for example, a Christian or a Buddhist or become an atheist. A Muslim who for any reason leaves his religion, or in other words becomes an apostate, would be severely punished. The child of a Muslim who has chosen to become a Muslim after maturity and then renounces Islam is subject to execution, even if he repents. His wife would be separated from him without divorce, and his property expropriated and divided among Muslim heirs. Also, a youth with one Muslim parent is not free to choose another religion other than Islam after maturity. If she or he does not become a Muslim the charge of apostasy would apply, although she or he would first be asked to repent. If the apostasy continues the person would be sentenced to death or to life imprisonment with forced labor.

There are several "traditions" that are frequently cited as justification for these punishments. Sunni Muslims refer to the tradition of the prophet that states: "Kill any one who changes his religion." Shiite Muslims refer to a tradition from their sixth imam, Jaafar Sadeq, that also reportedly makes death a penalty for anyone who leaves Islam. In the history of Islamic thought, few Muslim thinkers have dared to question these traditions. Why have Muslim thinkers shied away from analyzing them? How can a religion that wants its followers to research and accept a religious faith with the help of reasoning and analysis argue for killing a Muslim should he or she decide to follow another faith that is as rational and accepting of its followers?

"DURESS IS NOT PERMISSIBLE"

The Koran has a verse that states: "Duress is not permissible in religion, as the path has become clear from falsehood to light, therefore anyone that takes the idols as tyranny and starts to have faith in God, has truly found a support that is never separated from him. . . ."

This verse means that we as Muslims cannot deny that God has prohibited us from imposing faith on anyone, since forced faith and tyranny are not valid. The disapproval of force in this verse equals accepting freedom in religion and its requirements are freedom in both matters: freedom in bringing religion and freedom in leaving it.

How can a religion that denies the freedom of religion and thought expect to be freely chosen and when those who choose may have their freedom taken from them? If people are free to think seriously about religion, it is irrational to argue that they must choose Islam. If they are free, then the result cannot be determined beforehand. If they have no choice but to accept it then they are not free. What is the difference if an individual has been born in a Muslim family and has matured in an Islamic society and therefore is a Muslim and if someone has been born in a Christian family, has matured in a Christian society, and as a result is a Christian? Good and operative ideas are the choices for conscious individuals.

As stated in the Koran, "We send the book [the Koran] righteously to you for the people, therefore anyone who finds the right path has done so to his own benefit and anyone who deviates has done so to his own loss and you are not their guard." The Koran has revealed the right of people to choose their faith, and people in this world are free to go by it or to ignore it. It is not in this world but in the other world [that is, at Judgment Day] that one is to be evaluated and awarded.

Unfortunately, the subjects of freedom of religion and thought in Islam have not been studied in the context of how individual Muslims perceive their faith. Like any idea, people choose their religion, or choose to abandon it for another idea or faith. We live in an age of rational thinking. People do not see a conflict between reason and faith. Faith is strengthened by reason and principle, not by coercion and pressure. That which is created with force and pressure is only a superficial idea and no more than that.

I believe that all ideas and religions found in human societies do not all enjoy the same validity and justification, and there is no doubt that some proponents of Islam find their religious faith superior to others. If non-Muslims or skeptical Muslims do not accept our reasoning, we do not have an obligation to impose our version of truth on them. Force and terror in the name of religion would undermine religion itself. When a person sees a benefit in a religion, such as well-being and spiritual peace, he or she will not let go of it. Change comes when people are convinced, not when they are forced.

Restricting thought and ideas is not the solution to our problems, and as Muslims we cannot ignore the fact that in today's world our ideas have to exist with other ideas, even if we disagree with them.

Translated from the Persian by Bahman Baktiari

Islam and Tolerance

Mohammad Boujnourdi

INTOLERANCE IS ON the increase in the world today, causing violence, religious persecution, and even genocide. Sometimes it is racial and ethnic, sometimes it is religious and ideological, sometimes it is political and social. In every situation it is evil and painful. How can we solve the problem of intolerance? How can we assert our own beliefs and positions without being intolerant of others? How can we bring tolerance to the world today? I would like to discuss some of these issues from an Islamic point of view.

Given the Muslim view of God as rule-giver, tolerance in Islam is understood to be the undeserved and capricious generosity of a ruler toward the ruled. Epistemologically, tolerance is defined according to the regulations of the Sharia and the normatively interpretative example of the prophet Mohammed and the first Muslim community. Theologically, Muslims view everything in light of the destiny of Islam to rule the world and, therefore, they are committed to what they believe is God's will.

What is tolerance? Literally the word "tolerance" means "to bear." As a concept it means respect, acceptance, and appreciation of the rich diversity of world's cultures, forms of expression and ways of being human. In Arabic it is called *tasamuh.* There are also other words that give similar meanings, such as *hilm* (forbearance) or *afw* (pardon, forgiveness) or *safh* (overlooking, disregarding). In the Persian and Urdu languages, we use the word *rawadari,* which comes from *rawa,* meaning "acceptable or bearable" and *dashtan,* meaning "to hold." Thus it means to hold something acceptable or bearable.

A RELIGIOUS DUTY

Tolerance is a basic principle of Islam. It is a religious moral duty. It does not mean "concession, condescension, or indulgence." It does not mean lack of principles, or lack of seriousness about one's principles. Sometimes it is said, "People are tolerant of things that they do not care about." But this is not the case in Islam. Tolerance according to Islam does not mean that we believe that all religions are the same. It does not mean that we do not believe in the superiority of Islam over other faiths and ideologies. It does not mean that we do not present the message of Islam and do not wish others to become Muslims.

But is it not true that Islam grants Jews and Christians living within Muslim-ruled nations a special status as *dhimmis* [Arabic for "protected people"]? This concept of *dhimmi* began in 628 AD, when the prophet Mohammed defeated a Jewish tribe that lived at the oasis of Khaybar and made with members of the tribe a treaty known as the *dhimma.* This treaty allowed the Jews to continue cultivating the oasis as long as they gave half of their produce. This agreement has served as a model for Muslims ever since.

Some Western scholars point to the taxing of non-Muslims (*jizya*) as an example of discrimination. But it is important to note that the prophet was not attempting to make the taxes a form of indirect pressure on non-Muslims. He commanded that the total amount of taxes be proportionate with the economic capability of non-Muslims. *Jizya* was not enforced on them as a kind of "punishment" because they refused to convert to Islam, nor to humiliate them. Quite the contrary, it was meant to enhance their feelings of citizenship, since it was clear that *jizya* was paid to cover the expenses of protecting non-Muslims against outside attacks. As citizens they had the right to share in their societies' protection. Moreover, the poor among them did not have to pay the *jizya* and had the right, like Muslims, to be supported by the money collected through *zakat* (alms giving). In short, they did have citizenship.

We can thus say that throughout history Muslims have been very tolerant people. We must emphasize this virtue among Muslims and in the world today. Tolerance is needed among our communities. Muslims must foster tolerance through deliberate policies and efforts. Our centers should be multiethnic. We should teach our children respect for one another. We should not generalize about other races and cultures. We should have more exchange visits and meetings with others. Even marriages should be encouraged among Muslims of different ethnic groups.

With non-Muslims we should have dialogue and good relations, but we cannot accept things that are contrary to our religion. We should inform non-Muslims what is acceptable to us and what is not. With more information, I am sure respect and more cooperation will develop. ∎

Translated from the Persian by Bahman Baktiari