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## **Inclusivism and Religious Plurality: A Quranic Perspective**

*By Mohamed Bin Ali*

### **Synopsis**

*Inclusivism and living within a religiously plural context are not alien to Islam. Rather, many parts of the Quran speak about them and extoll their virtues.*

### **Commentary**

MUSLIM INDIVIDUALS who have extremist orientation claim that their interpretation of Islam is the only correct one that can lead to salvation. Furthermore, they claim that adherents of other faiths must be disavowed. The most extreme of them will even justify killing them. These hostile positions and perceptions of non-Muslims are formulated through perverted interpretation of Quranic verses.

In reality, one will discover that the Quran speaks volumes about embracing religious plurality and exhort Muslims towards inclusivism. The Quran speaks positively about diversity of religions and ethnicities by regarding them as signs of God's mercy and glory exhibited through His creations. It also appreciates plurality as a natural phenomenon. Essentially, the Quran has laid down the principles that govern positive interreligious relations. All this is evidence that Islam values diversity and human dignity.

### **Inclusivism and Religious Plurality**

In the discourse on religion and inter-religious relations, inclusivism can be understood as the appreciation of religious plurality and avoiding truth claims. It can help to comprehend the relationship between religions. While believing that his religious belief is true, a religious inclusivist accepts the existence of other beliefs.

Inclusivism is a Quranic principle that is upheld in Islam. Likewise, religious plurality is

also a concept that exists in Islam and other religious traditions. Fundamentally, there exists the belief that the teachings of all world religions contain truths and goodness.

From an Islamic perspective, both inclusivism and religious plurality signify an important principle which is the appreciation of God's creation of diversity. As God has created diversity in the natural world, Islam views such diversity through Quranic principles that explain the objectives of such diversity.

### **Quran, Religious Diversity and Plurality**

While acknowledging that Islam is the true religion, the Quran also calls for respect and protection of other religions and their places of worship. For example, the Quran mentions that "Had God not repelled some people by means of others, synagogues and churches, mosques and monasteries in which God's name is mentioned, would have been demolished" (Chapter 22:Verse 40).

The Quran also mention that Jews and Christians and all those who perform righteous deeds in the name of God will attain reward from God. This is explicitly mentioned in the Quran (Chapter 2: Verse 62). The appreciation of religious plurality was showcased by the Prophet himself when he allowed the delegation of the Christians of Najran to pray in his mosque. He went even further by calling them and the Muslims to "a word of commonality (*kalimah sawa*) between the two communities.

The Quran uses three different terms to mean religion i.e. *deen*, *millah* and *shariah*. Although these terms are used interchangeability to mean religion, there exists differences between them especially if they are analysed from the lexical and linguistic standpoint.

### **No Compulsion in Religion**

Apart from peace, Islam also means submission. In the Arabic language, the term Islam originates from the root word "*aslama*" which means 'to submit'. A Muslim is a person who submits himself to God.

Semantically, the term Islam could also refer to the system of belief where believers attain peace through submission to God. It is not an exclusive name given to a particular faith or religion but rather it is a term that shows act of submission to the will of God.

There is also an important Quranic principle that coercion and compulsion in religion do not exist. In this regard, the Quran affirms "Let there be no compulsion in religion, truth stands out clear from error. Whoever rejects evil and believes in God had grasped the most trustworthy hand hold that never breaks" (Quran: Chapter 2: Verse 256).

This verse has always functioned as an important principle that safeguards the freedom of religious belief. It is among the many Quranic injunctions that have provided a rationale for religious diversity and tolerance. They have characterised the Islamic community and tradition. As such, it is a principle that denounces the forced conversion to Islam.

## **Ummah, Universality and Humanity**

Another Quranic principle that highlights the virtue of inclusivism is the notion of *ummah* or community. The term *ummah* has always been understood as the global Muslim community. The Quran highlights that *ummah* is universal which includes all creations of God.

In the Medina Charter which was constituted after the Prophet's migration to Medina, the Prophet defined the Jews and Christians as *ummah*. The charter recognises all different communities as one nation (*ummah*) regardless of religions and tribes. The first clause in the Charter started with the statement "They are a single community".

The Quran also emphasised the value of human dignity and call on human beings to know each other. This concept of getting to know each other is known as *ta'arruf*. Quran (Chapter 17: Verse 70) mentions that God has honoured the children of Adam and provided them the good things in life, while in Chapter 49, Verse 13, it says that God created human beings from different tribes and communities so that they can get to know each other.

Through this verse, it can be concluded that plurality is accepted as a natural phenomenon while diversity in God's creations signifies God's mercy and glory.

## **Islam and Human Dignity**

The claim that Islam rejects living amidst religious plurality and calls for the elimination of other faiths is baseless and must be countered. Essentially, these claims go against the spirit of human dignity and inclusivism which are emphasised in Islam.

The misuse of Quranic verses by extremists today is a serious matter as it violates the Islamic intellectual tradition. It has sparked a serious problem within the Muslim world that continues till today.

To move forward, it is necessary to guide Muslims and inform non-Muslims of how the Quran has been misinterpreted. Rather, it is imperative to stress its important teachings that inclusivism and embracing religious plurality are virtues that are much needed in today's world where conflicts amongst religions are on the rise.

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