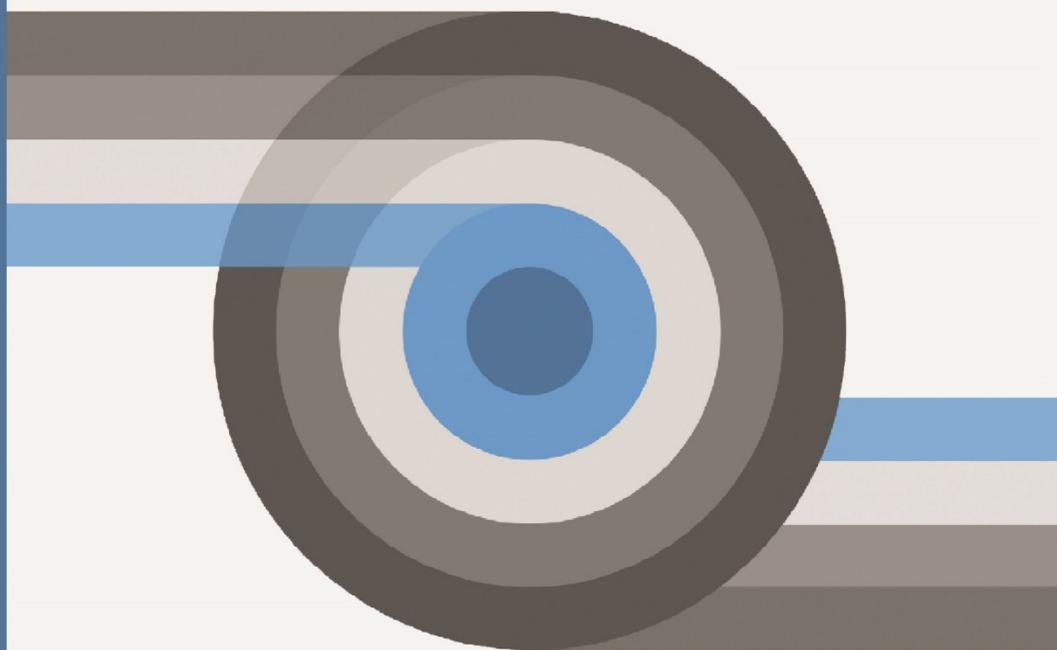


PLURALISM

AND ITS VARIOUS SPHERES



Āyatullāh Muḥammad Taqī Miṣbāḥ Yazdī

Translated by Saleem Bhimji

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BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Pluralism and Its Various Spheres
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First Edition
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PUBLISHED BY:
The World Federation of Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities
Registered Charity in the UK No. 282303
*The World Federation is an NGO in Special Consultative Status with the
Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations*
Islamic Centre, Wood Lane, Stanmore, Middlesex, United Kingdom, HA7 4LQ
www.world-federation.org

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THE WORLD
FEDERATION
OF KHOJA SHIA ITHNA-ASHERI MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST GRACIOUS, THE MOST MERCIFUL

Pluralism and Its Various Spheres

Meaning of Pluralism

Question: What does the term pluralism mean and in what arenas of [human existence] can it be discussed?

Answer: The word plural means “more than one” and “manifold.” Therefore, pluralism means “multiplicity” or a “tendency towards multiplicity.”

A pluralistic tendency is one which is related to monistic¹ predispositions and an affinity to unity.

In diverse areas of social life, we face questions such as whether production should be monopolized by one person or one group, or if it should be shared among many individuals or numerous groups. If we accept that multiple individuals or groups should carry out a certain task, then this is called pluralism; and if we accept that one individual or one group [should carry out a particular task], then this is called monism.

The birthplace of the word ‘pluralism’ is The West. In the past, if an individual who worked in the church held a number of positions, or if a person believed that one could in theory, hold multiple positions within the church, then that person was called a pluralist.²

However, today in the cultural arena, a pluralist is said to be a person who in any particular intellectual sphere - whether it be political, religious, artistic or otherwise - accepts all of the available methods [of action] which are within that specific domain.

This tendency is the opposite of the belief in a monopoly - that is, the belief that there is only one method or one school of thought which is valid and that all of the other methods are invalid.

Pluralism comes up in a variety of areas, and in each of them, sometimes it means accepting plurality and different opinions in practice

¹ Monism attributes oneness or singleness to a concept, e.g. existence. (Tr.)

² The website - www.dictionary.com notes that one of the meanings of pluralist/pluralism is: Ecclesiastical: the holding by one person of two or more offices at the same time. (Tr.) Last checked on April 10, 2020

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- meaning to coexist peacefully with one another, and to respect and allow one another to comment and share their opinion - this is what is meant by 'practical pluralism.'

It is sometimes used in the sense of theoretical and scientific pluralism - meaning that we hold true all of the different views in politics, culture, economics, or religion; or that we hold that all of the opinions represent some part of the truth (*ḥaqq*), and that one [path or thought pattern] is not the exclusive pure truth and all of the others are false (*bāṭil*) and erroneous.

In the past, when societies were not as expansive as they are today, and their interactions with one another was limited, something which today is known as 'pluralism' was not even discussed.

But today, with the development of societies and widespread communication between them, the issue of pluralism has been raised, especially after the intensification of sectarian and religious conflicts and their devastating consequences, as this has led to the decision that the beliefs of others have to be acknowledged, and that people need to enter into reconciliation with one another. This has been done as civilization has realized that the betterment of human society lies in bringing together the different religions and schools of thought.

The basis of pluralism lies in the practical dimension of peaceful coexistence. Therefore, they recommend that the multitudes in society need to devote their energies to reforming the self and living together peacefully, instead of living a life of strife and friction.

This is not to say that all groups need to consider each other as being right or on the truth (*ḥaqq*), rather it means that everyone must accept the existence of plurality as a fact [of life]. However, this does not conflict with the fact that each group considers itself to be on the right path (*ḥaqq*) and the others to be on the wrong path (*bāṭil*).

In regards to the theoretical and scientific aspect of pluralism, it requires that a human being must not be strict, absolutist and fanatical about one particular thought pattern, and consider it one hundred percent correct and the [only] truth (*ḥaqq*). In fact, what is required is a return to some type of skepticism in the epistemological dimension.

The Concept of Religious Pluralism

What is Religious Pluralism

Question: What does the term “religious pluralism” mean?

Answer: The term religious pluralism is sometimes raised in the theoretical and intellectual dimension, and sometimes in the practical dimension.

Religious pluralism in practical terms means respecting the beliefs of other people and any religion which they believe in, and living together peacefully. A pluralist therefore, is one who believes that two or more types of thinking - regardless of theoretical acceptance or dismissal of it - must live together peacefully and not cause social disturbance to others.

However, in contrast to this, if a person believes in the need to do away with one of the groups or ideologies from the social scene, and only allow one group to practice their beliefs, then this is considered to be anti-pluralism.

For example, in the case of the Catholics and the Protestants, some people say that only one of these two beliefs must rule, and therefore one must fight the other to eliminate it.

However, on the basis of religious pluralism, these two beliefs [Catholicism and Protestantism] at the theoretical level, must consider each other as being false (*bāṭil*) teachings; but on a practical level, they must live in brotherhood with one another.

Religious pluralism in the theoretical sense means accepting the truthfulness of all religions and sects [thus, in the example given above, it would mean to accept the truthfulness of both Catholicism and Protestantism].

This will be explained further in upcoming questions [and their respective answers].

Assessing Religious Pluralism in its Theoretical Dimension

Question: From the purely theoretical perspective, what does religious pluralism mean? Is this something which is acceptable [within the framework of the teachings of Islam]?

Answer: In short, religious pluralism means to accept the truthfulness of many religions – however, there are three different types of expressions and interpretations of this belief:

First: No religion is considered as being **purely** false (*bāṭil*) or **absolute** truth (*ḥaqq*); but rather, every religion has correct doctrines and false principles contained within it.

Second: The truth (*ḥaqq*) and the reality (*ḥaqīqah*) are only one, and every religion has a path towards that One Truth.

Third: Religious theorems are intangible propositions, and these hypotheses of religion are either entirely meaningless, or if they have any meaning, they cannot be substantiated, and thus all beliefs are considered equal, and as such, an individual can adopt any religion which is to one's own liking.

Explication of the First Meaning of Pluralism

First: No religion is considered as **purely** false (*bāṭil*) or **absolute** truth (*ḥaqq*); but rather, every religion has correct doctrines and false principles contained within it.

The proponents of this view regard the reality (*ḥaqīqah*) as a set of components and elements, and each of these can be found within any given religion.

They believe that it is not possible that any single religion can be considered as completely false and invalid (*bāṭil*), and that it would have no correct or good teachings or judgements within it; just as they believe that it is not possible for there to be a religion which has absolutely no false teachings and no instructions which go against reality.

They say that [in order to prove this point] many of the precepts of Christianity have come to be found in the religion of Islam, and thus it cannot be said that in its entirety, Christianity is invalid (*bāṭil*).

In addition, they claim that there are many instances in which Islam also agrees with the teachings of Judaism, and thus it cannot be said that Judaism or Islam are completely redundant.

When it is seen that goodness and truths are spread among all of the religions, then one cannot say that one specific religion is correct and another religion is false, but rather one must state that all religions and denominations must be treated with equal respect, and that one can choose between any of the religions. That means one can take various teachings of the different religions and integrate them - take a part of the teachings of Judaism, one part of Islam, and part of another religion [and mix them all together].

Assessment of the First Meaning of Pluralism

The opinion is that many religions, or rather all religions more or less have elements of truth (*ḥaqq*) contained within them, and this is a view that is accepted [by us as well].

There is no [set of religious teachings which is] one hundred percent false (*bāṭil*) in the world – and as such, no one can ever accept such a statement. But on the other hand, if we mean that all of the religions in the world have at least some false beliefs or precepts, and that we have no perfect (*kāmil*) and comprehensive (*jāmi'*) religion, then this is something which we cannot accept.

Islam says that the religion of Allah and the *sharī'ah* of [Prophet] Muḥammad ﷺ is entirely correct, and with the revelation of the faith of Islam, religion reached its full potential; and that which is found in other religions, if it is in harmony with Islam, then it is correct, otherwise it is false (*bāṭil*).

In no way can idolatry, animalism, etc. be the same as the unaltered monotheistic Islam. The conscience of every fair-minded human being would clearly see the dissimilarities which exist between these religions and sects and their teachings.

In addition to this, Islam is a religion that openly rejects that a person should believe in some of the verses (*āyāt*) [of the Quran], and

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disbelieve in other verses (*āyāt*) [of the Quran]; and it states that showing bias between the teachings of the religion is tantamount to the total rejection (*kufr*) of the entire religion.

In short, [we believe that] Islam is completely on the right (*ḥaqq*) and there is no falsehood (*bāṭil*) contained within it [contrary to the other religions which exist in the world today].

Explication of the Second Meaning of Pluralism

Second: The truth (*ḥaqq*) and the reality (*ḥaqīqah*) are only one and every religion has a path to that One Truth.

This opinion takes the view that the religion of truth (*ḥaqq*) is like a unified vertex or mountain peak, and all of the religions in the world are approaches to that unified point.

Every religion wants to guide us to that solitary truth (*ḥaqq*) and reach the destination - whether it takes a long path or a short traverse way, or even if the paths are similar.

Thus, those who go to the mosque, the church, the temple or those who go to their temple to worship idols - are all in essence seeking the same, solitary object of worship [which is God].

Assessment of the Second Meaning of Pluralism

This expression is conceivable strictly as an example, and the relationship between different religions cannot be seen like this.

The first and foremost statement of Islam is that “God is One” and the path to salvation is the acceptance of monotheism (*tawḥīd*), so how can it be considered to be the same as the Christian way of the concept of the Trinity³? How can both of these ways deliver us to the same final destination!?

In dealing with this issue of the Trinity, the Quran says:

³ The Christian doctrine of the Trinity holds that God is one God, but three coeternal consubstantial persons or hypostases – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—as “one God in three Divine entities.” These three are distinct, yet are one “substance, essence or nature.” (Tr.)

تَكَادُ السَّمَاوَاتُ يَتَفَطَّرْنَ مِنْهُ وَتَنْشَقُّ الْأَرْضُ وَتَخِرُّ الْجِبَالُ
هَدًّا أَنْ دَعَوْا لِلرَّحْمَنِ وَلَدًا ﴿٩١﴾

The heavens are about to be rent apart at it, the earth to split open, and the mountains to collapse into bits, that they should ascribe a son [Jesus], to the All-Beneficent [One God]!⁴

Can it [Islam and its teachings of monotheism (*tawhīd*)] be the same path and goal which is shared with those who believe in the Trinity?

Can a religion [Islam] that strictly abstains from pork and liquor end up at the same point [with God] as a religion that permits these things!?

Explication of the Third Meaning of Pluralism

Third: Religious theorems are as intangible propositions; and these hypotheses of religion are either entirely meaningless or if they have any meaning, they cannot be substantiated, and thus all of the beliefs are considered equal, and as such an individual can adopt any religion which is to one's own liking.

Some positivists⁵ overreact to all of these [religious] theorems and consider all of them as being meaningless; while others say that it is possible that [such opinions] have some meaning, however they cannot be proven; others say that it is possible that for some people, it may be good [to follow a specific religion], but for others it may not be the right thing; or that at one particular time frame, they [religions] are good to follow, while at other times, they [religions] are bad.

Such people state that we cannot find a definite, one hundred percent understanding of the reality [Allah], and that actually having one hundred percent certainty about a theorem is a sign of a lack of attention and investigation of the issue at hand and other such matters.

⁴ Quran, Sūrah Maryam (19), verses 90-91.

⁵ Positivism is a philosophical theory stating that certain ("positive") knowledge is based on natural phenomena and their properties and relations. Thus, information derived from sensory experience, interpreted through reason and logic, forms the exclusive source of certain knowledge. (Tr.)

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These people state that in summary, these are all a type of linguistic acrobatics and are subject to societal and individual tendencies. In fact, one of the foundations and sources of inviting towards tolerance in today's world comes from this same discussion.

On a philosophical basis, some have argued in favour of religious pluralism, and say that basically we have no correct religion or false religion, or one that is completely true (*ḥaqq*) and another which is entirely false (*bāṭil*). They go on to state that it is a mistake to apply labels such as correct and false in these matters, and mention that such statements are either meaningless or invalid and cannot be substantiated or refuted.

They say that in other words it can be stated with some degree of acceptance that all of these religions and beliefs are right (*ḥaqq*) and lead to the straight path.

Some people draw a line between these theorems and say: That which points to the reality and exists is meaningful, and is something which can either be accepted or rejected (logically) such as the statement: 'God is One'; while statements of dos and don'ts which cannot be accepted or rejected (logically) such as the statement: 'One must be just' and 'One must not be unjust' do not point to any reality.

Assessment of the Third Meaning of Pluralism

The discussion of the philosophy of positivism and the meaning of non-sensory propositions and sensationalism or rationalism in knowledge is a discussion that will have to be elsewhere, but it has been covered in detailed in philosophical and epistemological discussions.⁶

At this juncture, we must point out that by keeping in mind the field of education and humanities, a one hundred percent reliance on the sensory (*ḥiss*), and lack of confidence on the intellect (*ʿaql*) is rejected in our point of view. We must note that the only way to verify the accuracy or inaccuracy of a statement is not only via the sensory powers and experience, rather we can also prove or reject a theorem by reason (*ʿaql*),

⁶ Refer to *Philosophical Instructions*, Volume 1, Lessons 13 to 19 by Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi. This book can be read in its entirety at: www.alhassanain.org/english/?com=book&id=691 (Tr.)

such as mathematical and philosophical arguments; thus we completely reject this theory.

In addition, we intrinsically see a difference between the statements: “God exists,” “one should not oppress” and “one must pray” - when compared to the statement: “the light of a lamp tastes sour.”

If the first three statements do not make sense, they should not be any different from the fourth in terms of meaning.

When religious propositions are reasonable, can be analyzed, and are possible to be proven or disproven, then it is at this point that the previously stated propositions can be reviewed: “God does not exist,” “God is one” and “God is three” – how can these three views be combined or considered for them all to be accurate? Is it really possible to believe all three propositions to be true on the basis of pluralism? Or is it possible to accept that all three beliefs are equally valid and valuable?

Religious Pluralism in the Practical Dimension

Question: Has religious pluralism existed in a practical dimension throughout the history of Islam?

Answer: The discussion on religious pluralism can take place between (two) groups of the same sect (*madhab*), or between two [or more] sects of the same religion, or even between two [or more] religions.

For example, religious pluralism can be discussed between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism - living in close-knit communities with one another, or in a single geographical area or in a city, such that the followers of these faiths can live peacefully with one another without any physical altercations with each group considering themselves [and their religion] to be right (*ḥaqq*) and the other groups [and their religion] to be false (*bāṭil*); and they may even engage in debate and discussions with one another. There is such a thing in Islam.

The Noble Quran and the life example of Prophet Muḥammad, prayers of God be upon him and his family, and the [twelve] immaculate Imams, peace be upon all of them, have advised the Muslims to have such relationships.

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The unity that we have in our slogans today in which we invite the Shi'as and the Sunnis to, has been in place since the time of Imam [Ja'far] al-Şādiq, peace be upon him.

This individual [the sixth Imam] had recommended [his Shi'a - followers] to attend the daily congregational prayers (*şalāt al-jamā'at*) and the funerals of their Sunnī brethren. The sixth Imam, peace be upon him, also advised that they [the Shi'as] must visit the sick people [among the Sunnī Muslims], and not hesitate to do whatever they can for their Muslim counterparts.

Even more than this, since the beginning of Islam, the Muslim community has always been friendly and welcoming with the non-Muslims living under Islamic rule (*ahl al-dhimmah*), trading or partnering in business with one another, lending money to each other, visiting the sick of the other, etc. However, at the same time, each one of them - both theoretically and religiously - believed his religion and set of teachings to be [the only] true religion.

In any case, this is one of the definite issues seen in the teachings of Islam for which there is no doubt, and which the Muslim scholars - both the Shi'as and the Sunnis accept, and have no hesitation that peaceful living with the *People of the Book* (*ahl al-kitāb*) is something which Islam has accepted.

Of course, this does not mean that their religion is endorsed.

It can even be said that Islam, in the event of signing a peace treaty with the polytheists (*mushrikīn*), based on a secondary ruling [in Islamic jurisprudence], co-existed peacefully with them. This was seen in the commencement period of Islam in which a peace treaty between the Prophet, prayers of God be upon him and his family, and the polytheists was negotiated in an agreement of non-encroachment on the life and wealth of both sides.

The Legitimacy of Multiple Religions and Sects

Question: Can we believe in the validity of multiple religions and sects [in one time period]?

Answer: As has been said, religious pluralism has a practical dimension, which is where Islam teaches [its followers] to be gentle, tolerant, and co-exist peacefully with followers of different religions, and even within the various sects [of Islam].

If we cannot say that Islam was a pioneer in this field, at least we can state that Islam is in favour of respecting the rights of various minorities – whether they be religious minorities other than Islam, or minorities of the various sects within Islam.

In this respect, it suffices to reflect upon the well-known speech of the master, ‘Alī [ibn Abī Ṭālib], peace be upon him, that when he heard about the news of the companions of Mu‘āwiyah [ibn Abī Sufyān] ripping off the anklet from a Jewish girl, he is quoted as having said: “If a Muslim dies of grief over hearing this news, then he is warranted in doing so.”⁷

⁷ The text of this portion of sermon 27, found in *Nahj al-Balāgha*, reads as follows:

وَلَقَدْ بَلَغَنِي أَنَّ الرَّجُلَ مِنْهُمْ كَانَ يَدْخُلُ عَلَى الْمَرْأَةِ الْمُسْلِمَةِ وَالْأُخْرَى الْمُعَاهِدَةَ فَيَنْزِعُ
حِجْلَهَا وَفُلْبَهَا وَفَلَانِدَهَا وَرُعْتَهَا مَا تَمْتَنِعُ مِنْهُ إِلَّا بِالِاسْتِرْحَامِ وَالْإِسْتِرْحَامَ ثُمَّ انْصَرَفُوا
وَإِفْرِينَ مَا نَالَ رَجُلًا مِنْهُمْ كَلِمًا وَلَا أُرِيقَ لَهُمْ دَمٌ قَلَوُ أَنَّ امْرَأً مُسْلِمًا مَاتَ مِنْ بَعْدِ هَذَا
أَسَفًا مَا كَانَ بِهِ مَلُومًا بَلْ كَانَ بِهِ عِنْدِي جَدِيرًا.

I have been informed that their men (soldiers from the army of Mu‘āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān) forcefully entered the houses of the Muslim women, and also women under the protection of Islam (the Jews and Christians) – snatching their anklets, bracelets, necklaces and earrings. The women could not put up any resistance to them and the only thing which they could do was recite the verse of the Quran: ‘Indeed we belong to Allah, and to Him indeed we will return’ (2:156), and to ask them for mercy. Then they [the soldiers] would leave, loaded with wealth, with not a man from among them having suffered a cut or their blood being shed. If a Muslim would die in grief after [hearing] this [news about either Muslim or non-Muslim women being attacked in such a way], then he would not be blameworthy; in fact, in my opinion, it would be worthy of him [to die upon hearing such news about the rights of Muslim and non-Muslim women being treated like this].

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However, the point is that in dealing with the phenomenon of plurality between religions and sects of a religion, we need to ask some questions: Can we all be on the right? Is it possible to say that Islam is true (*ḥaqq*) and Christianity is also true (*ḥaqq*)?

To answer this question, we must look at the content of Islam and Christianity and see whether one can admit to both of them being the truth (*ḥaqq*), or if we must accept that agreeing to the truthfulness of one necessarily requires us to repudiate the other?

The first issue which we have in Islam is the principle of monotheism (*tawḥīd*) – meaning that God is One and cannot be divided nor multiplied – neither is He born, nor does He have any offspring.

The first principle in Christianity is the Trinity (*tathlīth*). Aside from the atypical denominations [within the world of Christianity], the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox – which are the three most eminent sects of Christianity – all say that they have three gods – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (*rūḥ al-quḍus*). They go on to say that the path to salvation, and in order not to suffer from the punishment is to accept the Trinity.

Much has been said and written in the interpretation of these three principles and doctrines, and with the exception of a few [within the world of Christianity] who regard the Trinity as something outside of the fold of Christianity, all of the other Christians accept this belief and acknowledge the divinity of Christ (*al-Masīḥ*) – or at least him being the actual [begotten] son of God.

In regards to such statements, the Quran says:

﴿تَكَادُ السَّمَاوَاتُ يَتَفَطَّرْنَ مِنْهُ وَتَنْشَقُّ الْأَرْضُ وَتَخِرُّ الْجِبَالُ
هَدًّا ﴿٩٠﴾ أَنْ دَعَوْا لِلرَّحْمَنِ وَلَدًا ﴿٩١﴾﴾

The heavens are about to be rent apart at it, the earth to split open, and the mountains to collapse into bits, that they should ascribe a son [Jesus] to the All-Beneficent [God]!⁸

In another place, the Quran states:

⁸ Quran, Sūrah Maryam (19), verses 90-91.

﴿يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لَا تَغْلُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ وَلَا تَقُولُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْحَقَّ إِنَّمَا الْمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَكَلِمَتُهُ أَلْقَاهَا إِلَى مَرْيَمَ وَرُوحٌ مِنْهُ فَآمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَلَا تَقُولُوا ثَلَاثَةً انْتَهُوا خَيْرًا لَكُمْ إِنَّمَا اللَّهُ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ سُبْحَانَهُ أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُ وَلَدٌ لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَكَفَى بِاللَّهِ وَكِيلًا ﴿٧١﴾﴾

O People of the Scripture! Do not exceed the bounds in your religion, and do not attribute anything to God except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary [‘Isā ibn Maryam], was only an apostle of God, and His Word that He cast towards Mary [Maryam] and a spirit from Him. So have faith in God and in His apostles, and do not say: ‘[God is] a Trinity.’ Relinquish [such a creed]! That is better for you. Indeed, Allah is but the One God. He is far too immaculate to have any son. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens, and whatever is on the earth, and Allah suffices as trustee.⁹

In another place in the Quran, Allah says:

﴿لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ ثَالِثُ ثَلَاثَةٍ وَمَا مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِلَّا إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ وَإِنْ لَمْ يَنْتَهُوا عَمَّا يَقُولُونَ لَيَمَسَّنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٧٣﴾﴾

They are certainly faithless who say: ‘Allah is the third [person] of the Trinity,’ while there is no god except the One God. And if they do not relinquish what they say, then there shall befall the faithless among them a painful punishment.¹⁰

⁹ Quran, Sūrah al-Nisā’ (4), verse 171.

¹⁰ Quran, Sūrah al-Mā’idah (5), verse 73.

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[With all of this evidence] Does the intellect of any human being - let alone a Muslim - accept that monotheism (*tawḥīd*) and the Trinity (*tathlīth*) are both correct and valid beliefs?

One belief system says that if you do not accept the Oneness (*tawḥīd*) of Allah, then you will not enter into ranks of the Muslims, and that the first condition for entry into Islam and the true teachings of this religion is the belief in monotheism (*tawḥīd*). On the contrary, the other system teaches that until you do not accept the belief in the Trinity, you can never become a Christian, therefore you will not find salvation, and consequently you will not attain felicity.

There is a huge difference between these two ideologies!

If we compare these two religions with Buddhism which believes that there is no God and there will never be a God, then we see that these beliefs [that of Islam and Buddhism, or even Christianity and Buddhism] can never amalgamate.

The belief that: “There is a God” is inconsistent with the notion that: “There is no God”; just as believing that “God is three” is inconsistent with believing that “There is no God.”

Analyzing them all together, they are closer to humour and fable - rather than serious, real beliefs.

Also, if we look at the *sharī‘a* and the practical teachings (*aḥkām*) of Islam and Christianity, we find it impossible to accept both of them simultaneously [as being the truth (*haqq*)].

The religion of Islam states that eating pork is forbidden (*ḥarām*); whereas Christianity says that pork is permissible (*ḥalāl*).

When it comes to alcohol - in Islam, we have a teaching from Imam ‘Alī [ibn Abī Ṭālib], peace be upon him, in which he states that if a sole drop of alcohol was poured into a well of water, and then from that water, crops were to be irrigated, then a flock of sheep were to graze from that land, and any one of the sheep from that flock was to be slaughtered for consumption, he (‘Alī, peace be upon him) would not eat that meat!

Contrast that position which is taken in regards to alcohol in Islam with what is seen in Christianity in which it is said that when a priest dips bread into wine and puts it into the mouth of a devotee, this bread

which one is given becomes the body of Christ, while the wine becomes the blood of Jesus!¹¹

Given these and many other such things, can a wise person accept that Islam is merely one direct path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) to the truth (*ḥaqq*) and the peak of perfection and prosperity [out of many], and that Christianity is also the straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) and that Buddhism is also another path, and so on!?

Multiple Straight Paths

Question: Within the teachings of Islam, is it correct to believe that multiple straight paths exist?

Answer: The belief in multiple straight paths, in the interpretation of pluralism in that there are many different truths (*ḥaqāʾiq*) on one issue, as we mentioned in the answer to the previous question, is by no means acceptable.

According to the interpretation of pluralism and the existence of a single truth and the inaccessibility of human beings to it, the assumption of multiple straight paths to Allah is also wholly false – however, it can be accepted only in very limited areas, as the Muslim commentators have referred to it in their books that this is in the meaning of more than one “way” (*subul*) and not “path” (*ṣirāṭ*).

The word path (*ṣirāṭ*) means the principle highway and there is no more than one such path and this is proven by certainty. It is possible

¹¹ This is in reference to the Eucharistic (thanksgiving) offering in which bread and wine are transformed (transubstantiation) into the body and blood of Christ, and this is spoken about in the New Testament of the Bible, Matthew 26 which reads as follows:

²⁶ And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said: Take, eat; this is my body.

²⁷ And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying: Drink ye all of it; ²⁸ for this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. ²⁹ But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.

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that in certain areas, there are sub-paths in which there may be deviations which do not harm the actual principle of religion, but accepting these sub-paths does not mean that there is more than one straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*).

Therefore, in the Quran, Allah considers The Path (*al-Sirāt*) as [being limited to] only one, however, He does mention multiple ways (*al-subul*). For example, Allah says:

﴿وَأَنَّ هَذَا صِرَاطِي مُسْتَقِيمًا فَاتَّبِعُوهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا السُّبُلَ فَتَفَرَّقَ بِكُمْ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ ذَلِكُمْ وَصَّاكُمْ بِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٥٣﴾﴾

This indeed is My straight path (*ṣirāt*), so follow it, and do not follow [other] ways (*subul*), for they will separate you from His way. This is what He enjoins upon you so that you may be conscious (of God).¹²

Of course, in the context of the straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) there are various ways (*subul*) which run alongside it which is something that can be accepted, and we see this in the Quran where Allah says:

﴿وَالَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَمَعَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٦٩﴾﴾

And as for those who strive in Us, We shall surely guide them to Our ways (*subul*), and indeed Allah is with the virtuous.¹³

In this verse, the ways (*subul*) which are accepted are the ones which will make their path back to the main highway which is considered as the only, straight passageway (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*).

¹² Quran, Sūrah al-An‘ām (6), verse 153.

¹³ Quran, Sūrah al-‘Ankabūt (29), verse 69.

The Motivation for Religious Pluralism in our [Iranian] Society

Question: What is the motivation behind the [spread of the] notion of religious pluralism in our [Iranian] society?

Answer: For some time, in the press, in publications, and lectures by some dubious individuals, religious pluralism has been promoted and emphasized, and it has been stated that the religion of Islam has good things [contained within its teachings], and that Christianity and other religions also have good things [contained within their teachings] and they should all be respected.

These [dubious] individuals go on to mention that we should look with tolerance towards the religious beliefs of others, just as we would like others to respect our religious beliefs.

They further mention that similar to the fact that we like to invite others to our religion, we must also ensure that we give others the right to consider their own beliefs as being valid, and that they too are given the opportunity to invite others to their belief system and their teachings should also be respected and made acceptable [within the Iranian society].

The motivation behind such discussions and thoughts in our [Iranian] society can be understood as follows:

1. Preventing the Export of the Islamic Culture and Culture of the Revolution

When people believe that all opinions, religions and beliefs are valid, then there is no need to invite others to Islam. When the words which a Christian speaks [about his religion] are considered as being valid, then what need is there for such a person to become a Muslim?

When the materialists are also considered as being on the truth (*haqq*) and their taste demands it, then what necessity is there for those who believe in God to invite them to believe in Him?

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Why should a believer in One God (*muwahhid*) invite a polytheist (*mushrik*) to monotheism (*tawhid*) – [realistically speaking] why would a person invite anyone else to their religion?

As a result, the revolutionary and Islamic thought stays within a certain span, and eventually loses its appeal and impulse and becomes useless.

2. Paving the Way for Influence of Western Thoughts and Materialistic Values in Our [Iranian] Society

When our religion, culture, and values are considered to be non-absolute and we do not consider Islam as the only acceptable religion, then it stands to reason that the path to other religions and schools would be opened up for people to follow – and thus, they would eventually leave Islam. If we consider that other religions and sects are also right (*haqq*), then why should we not follow the ways and values of others?!

The outcome of the above two points is the elimination of dedication and religious enthusiasm. When religious honour and reverence – which are things which prevent the perverted and misguided thoughts and wrongs – are attacked and destroyed, then the spirit of apathy and indifference to the beliefs and sacred values, both among the youth and the individuals of the society will begin to be lost.

This is what the enemies of Islam and the enemies of the [Islamic] Revolution themselves are aiming for as their goal, and they are attempting to open the way for the infiltration and imposition of both the material and Western values, and the ground for the reign of the world of disbelief and arrogance is trying to be laid.

The Reasons for the Notion of Pluralism

Question: What proofs do the proponents of pluralism provide to support their opinion?

Answer: At the outset, it should be known that the proponents of pluralism provide numerous evidences such as rational, historical, Quranic, literary, and others. Although it is not possible to address all of them here, we will respond to some of them.

The proponents of pluralism point to three issues to support their views:

1. Pluralism in political, social, economic matters;
2. The concept of relativity in values;
3. The concept of relativity in knowledge.

We will present a brief explanation of each of these instances.

1. Socio-Political Pluralism

In the world today, the various countries have distinct types of governance. Some have monarchical, various are republics, others are presidential, and there are yet other governments which are parliamentary - each of them have a different way of governing their country.

In the philosophy of politics, when asked which type of system of governance is better, they do not give a definitive answer, and say that each one has its own advantages and disadvantages, and its own benefits and shortcomings.

Today, democracy is something which is [universally] accepted, and it is said that people should, through having various political parties [which have different values and goals], play a role in governing. If one party always has a majority and constantly takes over the government [through elections, with other parties never having a chance to govern], then this is something which is not desirable. Rather, there must always be differences of opinion, and each party needs to take the reins of the government for a period of time.

In this way, party pluralism [in politics] is accepted today.

Economic Pluralism

In the economic dimension, the existence of different economic poles causes the elimination of domination and subjection by particular individuals as economic growth, and development depends on the existence of different economic powers in society.

By mentioning these types of arenas, the proponents of pluralism likewise draw an analogy on the issue of religion to politics, economics,

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and political parties, and come to the conclusion that pluralism is desirable in various social arenas and should be pursued and developed.

Of course, the explanation that has been given in response to previous questions about religious pluralism makes it clear that drawing such an analogy [as these individuals do] is a mistake.

2. Relativity in Values

There are many matters and fields of study that cannot accept multiple views - that is to say, two or more theories cannot be rightly trusted - matters within physics, chemistry, mathematics and geometry fall into such a category.

With this in mind, the [religious] pluralists should be asked: Why do you liken religion to economics and politics? Why are religion and religious propositions not looked at in the same way that physics and mathematics are reviewed and studied in which there is no more than one answer to any particular question?

Just as the analysis of the angles of reflection and refraction is one in which the response is either that they are equal or not equal; or when it comes to the mathematical equation of whether two times two is either equal to four or not equal to four – when faced with religious question such as: “Does God exist or does He not exist?” - Why do we not employ the mathematical analysis of having only one right answer in this case?

For such a religious question, there is only **one** correct answer, and an individual cannot say that there are multiple correct answers to such a religious query – this simply **cannot** be accepted!

The pluralists attempt to answer this by bringing up another point, saying that issues of humanity, human values, and cultural issues - which also include religious ones - are intangible and have no external reality, and thus they are subject to human sensitivity.

We quote some examples as follows: among the different colours, which is better – green or yellow? Is the aroma of such and such a thing better than something else? Is a specific type of food better than other types of food? Is a certain person more beautiful than someone else; or is a certain water or climate better than the rest; or are the customs of the peoples of China and Japan better than the habits of the people of the African countries, etc?

Individuals who subscribe to the theory of religious pluralism state that religious affairs are the same, and one cannot say for sure whether prayers facing Mecca is better or praying facing Jerusalem; is Islam better or Christianity; is monotheism (*tawhīd*) and the Divine teachings better or is the concept of the Trinity (*tathlīth*); or is materialism the better path to choose?

These and thousands of other such things depend on the habits and tastes of the people, and have no reality other than their acceptability in the eyes of the populace and what is pleasing to humanity.

These things can even change over time, and a person can say that for a period of time, one liked the colour green, but then later on liked yellow for a while, and later on, the colour red was their favourite for a certain duration.

In one society, “sitting” is a sign of respect; whereas in another society, “standing” is a sign of respect; while in a third country “bending down and then straightening up” is a show of reverence.

Therefore, differences and variations are prevalent in all societies and aspects of life.

3. Relativity in Knowledge

The third pillar and another principle that is used to reinforce [religious] pluralism is the relativity in knowledge, which in fact is also the root of two of the most important principles of this issue.

It should be noted that not only is knowledge relative with respect to the discussion of values, but principally, knowledge in all fields is also relative, in a way. To put it more clearly, knowledge cannot be unqualified; albeit, in some matters it is clear, while in others it is hidden and obscured.

Relativity exists in the real sciences and the entirety of human knowledge. All of our sciences are related to and affect one another with the geometry of human knowledge - due to continuous change in the different roots of sciences - being in a constant state of change.

Finally, we would like to add that in our [Iranian] society, along with the above-mentioned matters, there are some people who have taken up Islamic and religious appearances, who have also tried to

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provide evidence and examples for this belief from religious concepts and sacred texts.

Furthermore, in some cases, they even cling on to literary texts and poems, the likes of Mawlavi¹⁴ and Aṭṭār¹⁵, which have been mentioned in each and every single proof and evidence. However, various points have been mentioned in response to the inattentiveness or deliberate negligence in this regards, which in their own respect have been criticized and evaluated in their suitable place. In this book also, we have mentioned some of them.

Motivations for the Emergence of Pluralism

Question: In general, what motivational factor or factors are involved in the emergence of pluralism?

Answer: There are two rational motives for pluralism:

1. The emotional and psychological motivation;
2. The social motivation.

1. There are some who say that it is impossible to limit the true (*ḥaqq*) religion or sect to strictly one which will be granted salvation, because everyone who is born in a particular country and has grown up in that system will automatically consider one's own belief system [and the religion which they were born in], and that path as correct, and they will believe that all of the other paths are misleading and invalid.

This opinion is not limited to Muslims alone, or Shī'as, or Imāmī Shī'as - that they consider all others as being on the wrong path - in the same way, others [non-Muslims and non-Shī'as] also consider others [Muslims and Shī'as] to be on the wrong path.

¹⁴ This is a reference to Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Balkhī (d. 1273 CE) better known as Rūmī, the famous poet - his most famous work of Persian poetry being the *Masnavī*. (Tr.)

¹⁵ This is a reference to Abū Ḥamīd ibn Abū Bakr Ibrāhīm (d. 1221 CE) better known by his pen-names of Farīd al-Dīn and 'Aṭṭār, the Persian poet, theoretician of Sufism, and hagiographer from Nīshābūr, Iran - his most famous works of Persian poetry being the *Mantiq al-Ṭayr*, or The Conference of the Birds, and *Ilāhī Nām-e* or The Book of the Divine. (Tr.)

If we were born into another nation and religion and came from other parents [who were not Muslims and Shī'as], then perhaps we would have had another thought and way of life - just as if a Christian or Jewish European or American today would have been born in Tehran or Qum, they too may have had a different religion [other than what they are currently following – and would likely have been a Shī'a Muslim].

Just like we would expect them [those who are not born in a Muslim family or a Muslim country] to entertain the possibility of the truthfulness of the religion of Islam and the Noble Prophet, prayers of God be upon him and his family, and pursue its research and not fall short in this regards, we too must reciprocate and also presume that there is another path out there which is the right path and must search for it.

Why is it that we presume that just because we were compulsorily born on some point of this Earth [in our case Iran], having certain parents [who are Muslims] that we automatically take for granted that we [and the religion which we follow] are correct, and we feel that the path which others are following is not true?

From another angle, can it be accepted that out of the 6 billion people who live on the Earth today, only about 100 to 200 million people – and that too if they observe the obligations (*wājibāt*) and [refrain from the] prohibitions (*muḥarramāt*) of the *sharī'a* and have not shut the door of salvation and paradise for themselves – are the only ones who are on the truth (*ḥaqq*) and destined for paradise, and that anyone else who is a non-Muslim – meaning the Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Hindus, etc. and all of the non-Shī'as, such as the various denominations within the Sunnī community, and even those who are Shī'a but do not believe in the twelve Imams, peace be upon all of them, such as the other groups within the realm of the Shī'a – that all of these are misguided, deviants and prone for punishment and hell!?

This analysis provides the psychological impetus for some people to believe that other religions and sects can also be the truth.

Such people say: We are on the right (*ḥaqq*), but those other people are also saved and destined for paradise. They too, in their own opinion, are on the right (*ḥaqq*) and it is possible that they may actually be more honourable and purer than us, and practice their religion much better than we follow ours.

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2. Another point that has prompted this theory is the confrontation with the struggles, turbulences, and domestic wars that have always existed throughout human history until today. What a great deal of devastation, destruction and bloodshed has occurred over the claims of legitimacy about this or that religion, and the intolerance and persistence of people over their particular beliefs which has gone on for so long. The war of the crusades between the Muslims and Christians, and the sectarian wars between the Shi'as and Sunnis, or the wars which have gone on between Catholics and Protestants are all examples of this.

The root of all of these conflicts and tensions is intolerance and insistence of peoples' own view over that of others. To put an end to these conflicts, we need to be a little tolerant and easy. If we all come together and say: We [meaning our religion] is the right (*haqq*) and you [and your religion] are also right (*haqq*); Islam is right and so is Christianity; the Shi'a way is right and so is the Sunnī; the Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants are all right, etc. as they are all rooted in humanity - then all of humankind will be at peace and harmony, and we will all reach to a level of affability.

So far, the discussion has been about these two motivating factors. Should these two motivations now be endorsed? And if so, is there a solution other than pluralism? If there is another way, then what is the logical and correct way to proceed?

To answer this question which has been proposed by the intellectual motivational factor, the following two points must first be made:

1. The term disadvantaged (*mustad'af*), which we will use in our discourse, has at least two meanings:

a. The socially and economically disadvantaged (*mustad'af*) - those who are the underprivileged in a society;

b. The intellectually disadvantaged (*mustad'af*) - which in the Science of Theology (*al-ʿIlm al-Kalām*) is a reference to those who have failed to recognize the truth (*haqq*) due to shortcomings and their own culpability in their power of contemplation. For example, they have not been able to understand the reason for the need of the existence of God or the veracity of Islam, or they have not come across these issues in their

lives, and even if they had come across them and heard about God or Islam, they did not give any probability about the validity of them, and consequently they did not pursue them any further. Whether this attitude comes from the environment of the family or society, or due to a lack of information or negative propaganda, whatever the case may be, it has led the person to take on a different path in life.

2. In its technical meaning, one who is uninformed (*jāhil*) is divided into two types:

a. The culpable (*al-jāhil al-muqaṣṣir*): This refers to a person who has access to knowledge, or considers that one's belief system may not be correct, however falls short in following up, and does not seek the right path and the truth (*ḥaqq*) in his life. This group has been remonstrated in the society and within the religious teachings of Islam.

b. The inculpable (*al-jāhil al-qāṣir*): This refers to a person who is either unknowing (*ghāfil*) and does not think that what one is doing or saying is incorrect [in terms of religious beliefs and ideologies]; and if there is a possibility that one knows that what they are doing or saying [in terms of the religious outlook] is not permissible, but if that person was to see or hear things [guiding one to the truth], then they still have no means to reach to that truth (*ḥaqq*). This group is not, from the rational (*ʿaql*) or religious (*sharʿ*) point of view, rebuked.

Now, by keeping in mind these two points, we say: The intellectually weak and ignorant (*al-jāhil al-qāṣir*), that is a person who really has not been able to come to terms with the truthfulness of Islam and Shiʿism is excused and discharged of this responsibility.

Although one is mistaken and the belief system is not correct - because the truth (*ḥaqq*) cannot be two, so either God exists or He does not exist; either Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ is the seal of the Prophets (*Khātam al-Anbiyāʾ*) or he is not - and a combination of these is the amalgamation of two contradictions which is impossible - however, we would not consider such individuals to be worthy of the punishment and hell - and indeed a majority of the people of the world fall into this category.

If one fails to recognize the truth (*ḥaqq*) due to one's own laxity, or one recognizes the truth (*ḥaqq*) and still decides to go against it - then

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both the intellect (*‘aql*) and the law (of Islam) would consider such a person as deserving of punishment - and every person deserves to be punished as much as one is guilty.

A clear evidence of this opinion is contained in a portion of the Supplication of Kumayl¹⁶:

لِكِنَّكَ تَقَدَّسَتْ أَسْمَاؤُكَ أَقْسَمْتُ أَنْ تَمْلَأَهَا مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ مِنَ الْجِنَّةِ
وَالنَّاسِ أَجْمَعِينَ وَأَنْ تُخَلَّدَ فِيهَا الْمُعَانِدِينَ...

...but You (Allah) – holy are Your Names – have taken an oath that You will fill it (hell) with the unbelievers – both with the *jinn* and humanity together, and that You will place those who stubbornly resist therein forever...

Therefore, a person who rejects faith and is a disbeliever (*kāfir*) and is not traversing the path of truth (*ḥaqq*) is considered as one who was culpable in his actions and will enter into hell; however, as for those who will reside in the punishment for perpetuity, it is those individuals who were the people of obstinacy and stubbornness in regards to the truth (*ḥaqq*).

Another point to keep in mind is that within the discussion on religious pluralism, it is not about which city and country you and I were born into, or which parents we were given to, or where we grew up. Rather, the discussion is centered upon the fact that amongst the various

¹⁶ Kumayl ibn Ziyād ibn Nuḥayk al-Nakha’ī was from the tribe of Nakha’ and was among the followers and special companions of Imam ‘Alī, peace be upon him, and Imam al-Ḥasan, peace be upon him. He spent 18 years of his life at the time of Prophet Muḥammad, prayers of God be upon him and his family. He was among the Shī‘a who gave allegiance to Imam ‘Alī, peace be upon him in the first days of his caliphate and participated in the battles alongside Imam ‘Alī, peace be upon him, including the battle of Ṣiffīn. He was also considered as “*ṣāḥib al-sirr*” which literally means “the owner of the secret”) of Imam ‘Alī, peace be upon him. Since he narrated this supplication from Imam ‘Alī, peace be upon him, it became known as the Supplication of Kumayl. (Tr.)

and even contradictory views, from an epistemological and real point of view, no more than one opinion can be correct.

So what will happen to the dissenters of the truth (*ḥaqq*)? This is another matter which we have already discussed.

As for the social motive of avoiding war and bloodshed, it should be said that these matters were not, and do not legitimize different and contradictory claims. Categorizing the thoughts of others to be either true or false, or right or wrong is a human action and is among our mistakes. It is not possible to bridge one to the other, but there is a right way to avoid unnecessary wars and bloodshed that Islam has followed in the best way possible.

As an explanation to this point, we can state that: Those who are not the followers of the twelve Shi'a Imams are divided into several different groups that have separate rulings related to them:

a. The various Shi'a and Sunnī sects that are classified as being Muslims - and other than a limited number of them (such as the *nāwāṣib* - those who vilify and show malice to the [fourteen] infallibles, peace be upon them all) - who share in the same beliefs as the *Imāmiyyah* in the principles of God, religion, the Book (Quran) and the necessities of religion - they all fall under the Islamic verdict as being regarded as Muslims and are entitled to all of the rights as such - and among all of these sects, the faith of Islam has never permitted for there to be any war or conflict (between them).

b. Non-Muslims or those who are Jews, Christians, or Zoroastrians - those who are commonly known as the *People of the Scripture* or *People of the Book* (*ahl al-kitāb*), these are groups who are contractually protected under the Islamic system, and their lives, property and honour are sacrosanct, and just like Muslims are obligated to pay [taxes such as] *khums*, *zakāt* and other religious dues, they (the *People of the Scripture*) are also required to pay some kind of tax on [government and military] services (known as the *jizīya*). Islam has never advocated that a pre-emptive war be enacted on these individuals.

c. Those who are not the followers of one of the Heavenly revealed teachings, however they have entered into a treaty with the Islamic government. This group is permitted to live in the Muslim regions - rather, they live in the Muslim inhabited lands following their own ways

and customs through a bi-lateral agreement. In such an understanding, both parties must act according to that which has been ratified – which would be unique to each group living in such a system. In the case of this group as well, there must be no conflict initiated by either side.

d. Those who have either never held a covenant or agreement with the Muslim government, or they made agreements but violated them. These rebellious people are not tolerable in any government and system, and they must be subdued by force and power, and fought into submission to the state and the laws, or they must be removed from that region. This principle is seen in all systems of the world and no healthy government will allow for the pilfering and violation of the rights of others, and thus will have to deal swiftly with such acts of criminality.

Alongside the aforementioned points, the logical and rational religion of Islam always invites the opposition to discuss and debate, and it states that: “We the Muslims, are people who engage in discussion and conversation and have a clear position that: If you can persuade us and prove to us the truth of your path, then we will stop talking [about Islam] and join you; however if we can prove to you that we are right, then you must come and join us.”

Even more than this, the religion of Islam says: “If you do not submit to logic and the truth (*haqq*), then at least let us live by a shared agreement and not shed the blood of one another. If you do not want to, then you do not have to accept our religion.”

Ultimately, if one does not accept logic and the truth (*haqq*), and refuses to live in peace under an accepted agreement, then every unbiased observer will have to admit that there is no choice but a physical confrontation. It is not enough for one party to not quarrel in the conflict, rather one group must do all that they can to prevent aggression and war with the other party.

Therefore, the correct way is not to say that everyone is on the right path. Rather, one can only consider oneself as being on the right (*haqq*), and in reality it is only one group within a group which is on the truth (*haqq*) - however with that said, we never engage in hostility or war with others [due to our difference of opinion].

Religious Pluralism is a relatively recent concept which states that there are multiple concurrent paths which reach to God and that a person can follow any of God's prophets and messages at any given time in human history to attain salvation.

According to this belief, one could have followed the teachings of Prophet Moses during the era of Prophet Jesus, thus rejecting Jesus and his teachings and still be granted salvation by God; and in a similar fashion, in the current era, one could reject Prophet Muhammad and his teachings and stay on the teachings of Prophets Moses or Jesus or any prophet sent by God - after studying and clearly acknowledging his status - and would still be worthy of salvation by God.

From the Quranic perspective, the notion that there can be multiple straight paths leading to God is accepted in an extremely limited definition; this book seeks to tackle this phenomenon and better understand the philosophy behind Religious Pluralism and to provide the Quranic response to this notion.



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