

Islamic Ethics in Personal and Social Life Tolerance and Interreligious Dialogue in Islamic History

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ABSTRACT

This article examines historically the practice of tolerance and interreligious dialogue in Islamic civilization, starting from the period of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in Medina, the era of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphate, to the plurality of al-Andalus (Islamic Spain). Using a historical-critical approach and analysis of primary and secondary sources, this study argues that tolerance in Islam is not just a pragmatic concession, but has strong theological roots in the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah. The findings show that Muslim societies have historically succeeded in building a social ecosystem that allows for productive coexistence between Muslims, Christians, Jews, and adherents of other religions, which is manifested through legal mechanisms (dhimmi systems, interreligious agreements), intellectual (translation movements, philosophical debates), and culture (mutual influence in art, architecture, and science). This article also discusses the relevance of this historical heritage to contemporary interreligious dialogue discourse in the midst of the challenges of global radicalism and Islamophobia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The question of how Islam treats adherents of other religions has become one of the most controversial and most debated issues in global religious discourse, both by academic scholars and by the general public. On the one hand, some people describe the relationship between Islam and other religions as inherently antagonistic and intolerant. On the other hand, many Muslim and non-Muslim scholars point out that Islamic civilization historically offered a more advanced model of interreligious coexistence than many of its contemporaries. The Qur'an itself provides an explicit theological basis for tolerance. The verse *la ikraha fi al-din* ("there is no coercion in religion") in Surah Al-Baqarah is one of the most fundamental principles in Islamic ethics regarding freedom of religion. 1 Similarly, Surah Al-Kafirun which closes with *lakum dinukum wa liya din* ("To you is your religion, and to me is my religion") affirms the principle of mutual respect for differences of belief. 2 Meanwhile, Surah Al-Hujurat states that the diversity of tribes and nations was created so that humans could know each other (*li ta'arafu*), not to hate each other. 3 This article aims to examine

historically how these theological principles were embodied and, in some cases, ignored in the historical practice of Islamic civilization.

By tracing the three main periods and regions of Medina during the Prophet era, the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, and al-Andalus (Islamic Spain), this article seeks to draw a more nuanced map of the traditions of tolerance and interreligious dialogue in Islam. This research uses a historical-critical approach by analyzing primary sources (historical texts, treaty documents, records of Muslim and non-Muslim historians) and contemporary secondary literature from various Western and Eastern academic perspectives. A comparative approach is used to place the Islamic experience in the context of broader world history.

2. METHODS

This research uses a library research method with a qualitative approach. This method was chosen because the research focuses on the study of various literature that discusses the concept of tolerance and interreligious dialogue in Islamic history. Research data was obtained from secondary sources, such as the Qur'an, hadith, classical books, scientific books, journal articles, previous research results, and other documents relevant to the research theme.

Data collection techniques are carried out through the systematic identification, selection, and study of literature that is related to the practice of tolerance and interreligious dialogue during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Khulafaur Rasyidin, to the development of Islamic civilization in various historical periods. Furthermore, the data is analyzed using content analysis by identifying the concepts, values, and practices of tolerance and interreligious dialogue contained in various sources, then interpreting them critically based on the perspective of Islamic history.

Through the literature study method, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the principles of tolerance and interreligious dialogue in Islamic history and its relevance in building a harmonious, peaceful, and mutually respectful society in the midst of diversity in the contemporary era. This research is also expected to be an academic contribution to the development of the study of history and Islamic thought regarding inter-religious relations.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Theological Foundation of Tolerance in Islam

A deep understanding of tolerance in Islam must begin with the text of the Qur'an itself. Unlike religious texts from other traditions that are often exclusive in defining salvation, the Qur'an shows a remarkable concern for religious plurality. The concept of *ahl al-kitab* (People Given the Book) which includes Jews, Christians, and Sabi'in places them in a different category from polytheists, with the guarantee of protection and recognition of the validity of some of their teachings. The Qur'an consistently acknowledges the continuity between Islam and the earlier Abrahamic traditions. The prophets of the Jewish and Christian traditions of Abraham, Moses, Isa, and others are recognized as prophets of God who carry essentially the same treatise. This attitude creates a theological basis for constructive relations with communities of other faiths, since Islam claims itself not to be a completely new religion, but rather as a continuation and refinement of the existing monotheistic tradition.

The Sunnah of the Prophet and the Ethics of Interreligious Relations

The practice of the Prophet Muhammad (saw) in interacting with the non-Muslim community became a concrete example (*uswah hasanah*) for Muslims. The Prophet was known to have good relations with his non-Muslim neighbors and business partners in Mecca before the hijrah. After emigrating to Medina, he established formal relations with the Jewish community through the Charter of Medina, a document of socio-political agreement that modern scholars see as one of the oldest instruments of interreligious tolerance in history.

The Prophet's hadiths also show an explicit concern for the protection of non-Muslims. His famous words, "Whoever oppresses a *dhimmi* or degrades his dignity or burdens him beyond his ability, then I am his opponent on the Day of Judgment," became a strong ethical foundation for the protection of minorities in Muslim society.

The Charter of Medina: A Model of Early Islamic Political Pluralism

The Charter of Medina (*Sahifat al-Madinah*), which was drafted at the beginning of the Hijri period (c. 622 AD), was the first constitutional document in Islamic history that regulated relations between various religious groups. Montgomery Watt, in his pioneering analysis, concluded that this document laid the foundation for a pluralistic society (*ummah*) that included the Jewish community of Medina as an integral part of a common political body, albeit by retaining their respective laws and customs (Watt & Medina, 1968). R. B. Serjeant, in a comprehensive philological study, argues that the Charter of Medina was actually a compilation of several treaties made at different times, rather than a single document (Serjeant, 1978). Despite this academic debate, the consensus among scholars is that the document contains provisions that were remarkably progressive for their time: guarantees of religious freedom for the Jewish community, the obligation to defend one another when attacked by a common enemy, and the settlement of internal disputes through the laws of each community.

Fred Donner emphasizes that the Charter of Medina reflects the early inclusive approach of Muslim communities that viewed the monotheistic faith rather than Arab or Muslim identity narrowly as a condition for membership in those early communities (Donner et al., 2010). This interpretation, while controversial, shows how complex and layered the historical legacy of tolerance is in the origins of Islam. The Charter of Medina then became a precedent that influenced the policies of the caliphs thereafter. When Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab conquered Jerusalem in 638 AD, he issued *Al-Uhdah al-Umariyya* (Umar's Security Guarantee) which guaranteed the safety of the souls, property, and places of worship of the Christian inhabitants of the holy city (Al-Baladhuri et al., 18866). The text of this document, preserved by the historian al-Baladhuri, is one of the earliest evidences of the Muslim rulers' formal commitment to the protection of religious minorities.

The *Dhimmi* System: Between Protection and Discrimination

One of the main mechanisms governing relations between Muslim states and non-Muslim communities is the *dhimmi* system—a protection contract that provides non-Muslims with guarantees of security, freedom of religion, and legal autonomy in exchange for the payment of special taxes (*jizya*) and acceptance of Islamic political superiority. Assessments of this system vary widely among modern scholars. Bat Ye'or, in his controversial work, described the *dhimmi* system as a systematic form of subordination that ultimately led to the decline of the Christian and Jewish communities under Islamic rule (Ye'or, 1994).

However, criticism of this view comes from many quarters. Thomas Arnold points out that in many cases, Christian communities in Muslim-conquered territories welcomed Muslims because they were free from Byzantine or Sassanid oppression, and that the spread of Islam occurred more through peaceful persuasion than coercion (Thomas, 1913). S. D. Goitein, through an in-depth study of the documents from the Cairo Genizah, archives of medieval Jewish synagogues found in Egypt, provides a much more nuanced picture.

These documents show that Jewish communities under Fatimid and Abbasid Islamic rule lived with a fairly high degree of economic freedom and social mobility, were able to occupy important positions in the state bureaucracy, and established extensive cross-regional trade networks (Goitein & Mediterranean, 1967). Mark R. Cohen offers a convincing comparative analysis: when comparing the conditions of Jews under Islam with their conditions in medieval Christian Europe, Cohen concludes that although the *dhimmi* system contained elements of discrimination, Jewish life in the Islamic world was generally much safer and more productive than in Europe, where they faced expulsion,

massacre, and the Inquisition (Mark et al., 1994). This comparison is not to romanticize the *dhimmi* system, but to place it in a historically fair way.

Bayt al-Hikmah and Interfaith Intellectual Dialogue

One of the most brilliant manifestations of interreligious dialogue in Islamic history was the translation movement (*harakat al-tarjama*) which reached its peak in the Abbasid era, particularly under the reigns of Caliphs Harun al-Rashid and al-Ma'mun (8th–9th centuries AD). At the center of the movement is Baghdad's Bayt al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom) a scholarly institution that involves scholars from various religious backgrounds: Muslims, Nestorian Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Sabians. Dimitri Gutas, in his classical study of the Graeco-Arabic movement, points out that the main translators of Greek works into Arabic were Nestorian Christians, such as Hunayn ibn Ishaq and his family (Gutas et al., 1998).

This intense interfaith collaboration resulted in the transmission and transformation of Greek knowledge of philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine that later became the foundation of the European renaissance centuries later. Jonathan Lyons describes this process as one of the largest intellectual exchanges in human history (Lyons et al., 2009) and it is interesting that this exchange is not one-way. While Muslim scholars absorbed Greek philosophy, they also developed a unique new scientific tradition and then transmitted it back to Europe. Figures such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna), al-Farabi, and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) developed a system of thought that influenced not only the Islamic world but also Jewish thought (Maimonides) and Christian scholasticism (Thomas Aquinas).

Franz Rosenthal emphasized that the openness of Islamic civilization to the classical intellectual heritage was not a passive attitude, but an active and planned choice (Rosenthal, 1975). The Abbasid caliphs sponsored the translation and development of science because they viewed the search for wisdom as a religious obligation, in accordance with the Qur'anic command to contemplate the universe and the hadith that advocated the search for knowledge "even as far as China."

More than just an exchange of texts, Bayt al-Hikmah and similar institutions became spaces where scholars of different religions sat together, debated, and built knowledge collectively. This intellectual dialogue is not always free from the tension of the often fierce debate between Greek philosophy and religious orthodoxy, but its very existence is clear evidence that interreligious intellectual coexistence is a historical reality, not merely a normative ideal.

Al-Andalus: Laboratory of Interreligious Coexistence

La Convivencia and its Myths Al-Andalus (711–1492 AD), a Muslim region in the Iberian Peninsula, is often cited as the most iconic example of interreligious tolerance in Islamic history. The concept of *la convivencia* (coexistence) popularized by historian Américo Castro refers to a period when Muslims, Christians, and Jews coexisted and influenced each other culturally and intellectually. Maria Rosa Menocal in her influential work *The Ornament of the World* described Cordoba under Abd al-Rahman III (912–961 AD) as a cosmopolitan city that became a center of European learning, a place where science, literature, and art developed beyond what existed in any part of Europe at the time, and where scholars of various religions could collaborate relatively freely (Menocal, 2002).

Richard Fletcher gives a concrete picture of the cultural hybridity of al-Andalus: the architecture of the Mosque of Cordoba using columns from Roman basilicas; an Arabic-language agricultural calendar written by Christian bishops; and Arabic poems composed by Jewish poets using Arabic metre but with biblical themes.¹⁶ This kind of hybridity is only possible in social ecosystems that allow for cross-religious and cultural encounters and exchanges. However, Brian Catlos warns against excessive idealization of *la convivencia* (Catlos, 2018). He points out that coexistence in al-Andalus does not mean that full equality of social hierarchies based on religion remains, communal tensions sometimes explode into violence, and the condition of minority communities is highly dependent on the policies of the ruling authorities. *La convivencia* is a complex, tension-filled, and non-linear condition rather than a perfect paradise of pluralism.

The Role of Jews in Spanish Islamic Civilization

The Spanish Jewish community (Sephardim) experienced an unparalleled golden age (Hatekufah haze'adit) during the Islamic period in Spain. Figures such as Hasdai ibn Shaprut (foreign minister Abd al-Rahman III), Samuel ibn Naghrela (the regal vizier of the Berber kingdom in Granada), and Shlomo ibn Gabirol (the great poet-philosopher) showed a remarkable degree of social and political integration. Norman Stillman documents how the socio-intellectual conditions of al-Andalus allowed for an unparalleled Jewish literary and philosophical renaissance: Jewish poets adapted Arabic prosody, Jewish philosophers dialogued their traditions with Aristotelian philosophy mediated by Muslim scholars, and Jewish physicians served Muslim courts (Constable, 2003). Olivia Remie Constable points out that one of the factors that makes this productive coexistence possible is the system of trade accommodation (funduq) that facilitates regular contact between traders of different religions. (Stillman, 1979). Everyday economic interactions create a network of personal relationships that transcend the boundaries of formal religion, becoming a social infrastructure for tolerance in practice.

Dialogue Philosophy Muslim-Yahudi-Christian

Al-Andalus was also the stage for one of the richest philosophical dialogues in history. Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126–1198 AD), the greatest Muslim thinker in Islamic Spain, wrote commentaries on Aristotle's works which were later translated into Latin and Hebrew, becoming a bridge between Greek, Islamic, Jewish, and scholastic Christian thought (Rushd, 2001). Seyyed Hossein Nasr emphasized that this philosophical exchange is not just a passive transmission, but an active dialogue in which each tradition critiques, develops, and transforms the shared heritage (Nasr, 2003).

Moses Maimonides (1135–1204 AD), the greatest figure of medieval Jewish thought, was born in Cordoba and was so deeply influenced by Islamic philosophy in particular Ibn Rushd that his magnum opus, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, can be understood as a Jewish response to the project of Aristotelian-Islamic synthesis. Thomas Glick describes how the Christian Mozarabs who lived under Muslim rule and adopted the Arabic language as well as many aspects of Islamic culture became crucial cultural intermediaries in the transmission of Islamic knowledge to Christian Europe (Glick, 1979). This process of cross-border transmission of religion, which took place in Toledo, Seville, and Palermo after the Reconquista, laid the foundations for the European Renaissance.

The Tradition of Interreligious Dialogue in Classical Islamic Thought

Beyond the historical context already discussed, the tradition of interreligious dialogue in Islam also has roots in classical theological thought. Early Islamic scholars, while of course maintaining a belief in Islamic truth, often engaged in serious intellectual debates with thinkers of other traditions, a practice that in some ways exceeded the tolerant standards of many religious traditions of his time. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111 AD), one of the greatest Muslim theologians, in *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* discusses the ethics of debating with non-Muslims and stipulates that intellectual discussions should be conducted with courtesy and honesty, not with the aim of demeaning the opponent. (Lapidus, 2014). Ibn Hazm of Cordoba (994–1064 AD) wrote a remarkable comparative work of religion, *Al-Fisal fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa' wa al-Nihal*, which analyzed Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and other traditions with a very high standard of textual criticism for his time (Hazm, 1996). Ira Lapidus concludes that although the concept of interreligious dialogue as understood in the modern context as an equal exchange aimed at understanding each other rather than winning debate does not yet exist in classical Islam, the Islamic intellectual tradition provides a rich resource for the development of a more inclusive dialogue ethic. (Lapidus, 2014).

The Relevance of Historical Heritage to Contemporary Interreligious Dialogue

The study of the history of tolerance and interreligious dialogue in Islam has urgent relevance for the contemporary context. In an era where Islamophobia in the West and radicalism in some Muslim societies both threaten peaceful religious patterns, a revisit of Islam's inclusive historical

heritage is becoming increasingly important. Hans Kung, a prominent Christian theologian who dedicates much of his work to Islamic-Christian dialogue, argues that world peace is impossible without interreligious peace, and interreligious peace is impossible without dialogue (Hasn Kung, 2007).

In this framework, the historical heritage of Islam that once demonstrated the ability to facilitate productive coexistence becomes an important asset—not as nostalgia, but as empirical proof that the values of dialogue are not alien to the Islamic tradition. Abdulaziz Sachedina argues that Islamic theological sources actually provide a solid foundation for modern democratic pluralism (Sachedina, 2001). He points out that concepts such as *maslaha* (the common good), *'adl* (justice), and *shura* (deliberation) can be the meeting points between Islamic values and the principles of pluralistic democracy, including in relation to religious freedom. Farid Esack, a South African Muslim theologian who developed Islamic liberation theology, offers a reading of the Qur'an that explicitly supports interfaith solidarity in the face of injustice (Esack, 1997).

Esack's approach shows that commitment to interfaith dialogue does not mean giving up Islamic beliefs, but rather is an authentic expression of Islamic values. In Indonesia, Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005) developed an inclusive theology rooted in the archipelago's Islamic tradition but open to dialogue with modernity and other religious traditions (Madjid, 1992).

His concepts of Islam Yes, the No Islamic Party and the religious freedom discourse he pioneered show how the historical legacy of Islamic tolerance can be translated into the context of a pluralistic modern Muslim society. Tariq Ramadan, from the perspective of Muslims in the West, asserts that Muslims in minority countries must develop a theology that allows them to become fully participatory citizens in a pluralistic society without losing their Islamic identity (Ramadan, 2004). This project requires a creative reinterpretation of historical heritage, sorting out which are the substance of universal Islamic values and which are cultural and political expressions of a particular era

4. CONCLUSION

This research has shown that the tradition of tolerance and interreligious dialogue in Islam is not just apologetic rhetoric, but is supported by concrete historical evidence rooted in a strong theological foundation. From the Charter of Medina that guarantees communal diversity, through the *dzimmi* system that, although imperfect, provides a legal framework for the protection of minorities, to the intellectual glory of Bayt al-Hikmah and *la convivencia al-Andalus*, Islamic civilization has contributed models of interreligious coexistence that are worthy of study and actualization. However, this historical study also requires us to be honest: the history of Islam, like the history of any civilization, is not spared episodes of injustice, discrimination, and even violence against religious minorities.

The *dzimmi* system contains an element of subordination that cannot be justified by modern human rights standards. *La convivencia* is a fragile and non-linear condition, not a paradise of eternal harmony. The challenge for contemporary Muslims is to inherit the best of this historical tradition while honestly acknowledging its limitations and building a theology and ethics of interfaith dialogue that is more inclusive, equitable, and relevant to the challenges of the times. The rich historical heritage of Islam is not to be idealized, but to be used as inspiration and foundation for the construction of a better future. Seyyed Hossein Nasr rightly concluded that Islam, at its core, is a religion that recognizes the plurality of creation as signs (verses) of the greatness of Allah. In this perspective, interreligious dialogue is not just an ethical obligation or a pragmatic need, but rather a spiritual response to the Divine call to know one another in the diversity that He created

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