ISLAM AND THE ABRAHAMIC FAITHS *TA'ARUF* ("GETTING TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER") IN THE QUR'AN AND IN PRACTICE

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Western studies frequently question the underlying causes behind the rapid spread of Islam during its early years, though as they fail to offer a clear answer, this would suggest that existing analyses of the reasons are unconvincing. Even so, we still find a large number of Western historians and academics drawn towards the familiar Christian church position that the history of Islam is a history of conquest by the sword – a view that is closer to speculation than it is to hard fact.

While this view is popular with the Christian clerical establishment and Western Orientalists, in reality it is not easy to accept as a serious explanation for Islam's sweeping success, and once we recognize its limits, we will find that the "social-historical narrative" offers a more persuasive explanation – even if it is still a relative newcomer to the academic scene despite the abundance of original historical material that is available to support it.

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One: The dialectic of inclusiveness and exclusivity

The rapid spread of Islam was helped by a new and hitherto unfamiliar social phenomenon which ran contrary to the traditional relationship between conqueror and conquered. When it was first introduced in the Madinah State, it allowed rights of residence to be granted to the People of the Book (the Jews and Christians), and later – as Islam established itself in regions with a wider range of religious affiliations – to the "semi-People of the Book" (the Sabians and Magians). Bernard Lewis, who analysed the Muslims' success at the beginning of the Islamic era in his book *The Jews of Islam*, maintains that the Muslim Arab governors who administered the new state managed to avoid the mistakes of their predecessors by opting for the principle of pluralism[1].

Pluralism – endorsed by Islam under the name of "*ta'aruf*" (or "getting to know one another") – offered non-Muslims an unprecedented guarantee of freedom and dignity. That was why many followers of the Eastern churches welcomed the change in their situation, which they saw as an escape from the repressive, high-handed arrogance of Christian rule to the benign custodianship of Islam – a custodianship that allowed them a greater degree of religious freedom than they had ever enjoyed before[2]. In the early days of the Islamic conquests, 'Amr bin al 'As granted protection to the Coptic patriarch Benjamin, neutralised the Byzantines' threat to him and made him governor of the churches in Egypt. This heralded the start of a period of cordial Christian-Muslim coexistence[3].

The principle of inclusiveness (which included and encouraged diversity) was a significant element in the relationship between the early Arab Christians and Islam. There was never a major confrontation between Muslims and Arab Christians on the scale of their confrontations with Quraysh or the Jews. Nor do historical sources record any instances of Arab Christians attacking Muslims, with the single exception of a report

1 Bernard Lewis: *Gli Ebrei nel Mondo Islamico* (*The Jews of Islam*), Sansoni Editore, Firenze 1991, p. 25.

2 Ibid. p. 24.

3 Alain Ducellier: *Cristiani d'Oriente e Islam nel Medioevo Secoli VII-XV* (*Musulmans et Chrétiens d'Orient au Moyen Age - VIIe-XIe siècles*), Giulio Einaudi 1996, Torino, pp. 48-49.

that Arab Christians in the southern Levant helped the Byzantines prepare for a campaign against the Muslims shortly before Tabuk – a campaign which never actually took place[1].

The fact that there are a large number of different faiths and sects in the Arab world – even today – demonstrates the practical consequence of this pluralistic social phenomenon. The striking thing about the Qur'an's attitude is that, although it asserts that non-Muslims are guilty of error, deviating from the truth, uttering lies, indulging in corruption, concealing and abandoning Divine Laws, clothing truth with falsehood, etc., they are allowed to exist within the Islamic social space, even though they may not enjoy the same status as Muslims. That is why those non-Muslim groups never died out and it explains why Islam enabled them to experience positive change in both their spiritual and worldly conditions. If there had been no cultural exchanges between it and Islam, Jewry would not have produced so many scholars, scientists, doctors, leading men of affairs and guardians of the treasuries. In fact, when the world of Islam went into decline in the 12th century, the fading power of the Caliphate was echoed by a similar decline in the stature and prestige of the Jews.[2]

Islamic civilization – the civilization that gave birth to "*ta'aruf*" – left its impact in many spheres and disciplines; in al Andalus it created the conditions for a new Christian theological initiative which led to Pope Adrian I attacking Elipandus, the Catholic Archbishop of Toledo, and Bishop Felix of Urgel for "deviating" from the standard tenets of the Christian faith and claiming that the "Son of God" was God's "adoptive son". (This meant that they classed the Messiah as being in almost the same category as an ordinary mortal.)[3]

Unlike Islam with its goal of inclusiveness, the Christian authorities were intolerant of other views and beliefs. In the Middle Ages, when the

1 Salwa Belhaj Saleh al 'Aiyib: *Al Masihiyyah al 'Arabiyyah wa Tatawwuratuha*, Dar al Tali 'ah, Beirut 1997, p. 139.

2 Americo Castro: *La Spagna nella Sua Realta Storica*, Firenze 1955, pp. 448-454.

3 Hans Kung: *Islam: Passato, Presente e Futuro* (*Islam, Past, Present and Future*), Rizzoli, Milano 2005, pp. 448-449.

Church was at its most repressive, Christianity's narrow-minded theology received strong support from Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who went so far as to claim in his discourse on the Jews that the crucifixion of Christ meant the end of Judaism as a legitimate religion and that the Jews should be the servants of the Christians. In his view the Church was committing no crime in seizing their property and wealth.[1] He also regarded Muslims as "carnal people" with a materialistic attitude to religious belief[2] and saw Islam as crude and hedonistic. "None of those who believed in Muhammad at the beginning of his Mission were wise men or versed in religious matters," he claimed. "Rather, they were brutish desert wanderers and ignorant of Divine teaching."[3]

In sharp contrast to his narrow-minded Christian theologian predecessors, the theologian Hans Kung notes that under Islamic rule "the rights of individuals and social groups were protected. That had not been the case in the Byzantine state which – ever since the decline of the Roman legal system – had had laws which were clearly discriminatory against the Jews".[4]

Modern-day views on the rules for the People of the Book introduced by 'Umar bin 'Abdul 'Aziz (681-720 CE) have tended to regard them as unjust and humiliating (such as forbidding them to ride horses, dictating what clothes they should wear, not allowing them to possess Muslim slaves, decreeing that their dwelling houses and places of worship must not be higher than Muslim houses or mosques, restricting their performance of their religious rites in public, etc.). However, a comparison with the restrictions in force in other societies of the time – as well as in earlier or later times – will show the vast difference between Islamic and other practices in this regard. In his comments on Islamic regulations Bernard Lewis says: "All these restrictions were purely social and symbolic and had no practical significance. The only thing that really irked the *dhimmi*

1 Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 10.

2 Thomas Aquinas: *Contra Saracenos*, Editrice Clinamen, Firenze, 2008, p. 20.

3 Thomas Aquinas: *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, cap. 6, n, 6.

4 Hans Kung: *Islam: Passato, Presente e Futuro* (*Islam, Past, Present and Future*), Rizzoli, Milano 2005, p. 449.

(non-Muslim living under Muslim rule) was the financial obligation, since he was obliged to pay a higher tax, though the Islamic state had inherited this discriminatory system from earlier empires such as Persia and Byzantium."[1]

Two: "*Ta'aruf*" within the context of "knowledge" and "recognition"

The notion of *ta'aruf* – endorsed in the Holy Qur'an in the verse: "O mankind! We created you from a single [pair of] a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know one another ["ta'arafu"]. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is the one of you who is the most righteous. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted [with all things]" *(Al Hujurat, v. 13)* – encompasses a range of meanings; the main one is probably the concept of recognition and knowledge. *Ta'aruf* would be impossible without recognition, while true recognition would be equally impossible without knowledge. Moreover, in order to be genuine, recognition of "the other" needs to be based upon either sound philosophical principles or a thorough historical and practical knowledge of what that "other" is really like. Consequently, the principle of *ta'aruf* which exists in Islam – a principle which was unknown in the earlier Abrahamic religions – is based upon rational foundations and directives which recognize the "other's" legal right to retain and express his identity. Muslims are not the "sole and unrestricted proprietors" of the social space they inhabit, but partners and guarantors in a system of diversity and coexistence.

However, although this new principle was introduced by the Holy Qur'an and endorsed in the authentic Sunnah, there were differences in the way it was implemented from era to era and region to region over the course of Islamic history. It would in fact be an exaggeration to say that there were never any shortcomings in the way it was put into practice in Islamic communities. Nor would it be fair to say that it was bad from start to finish, as Bat Ye'or claims in her book *The Decline of Eastern Christianity:*

1 Bernard Lewis: *Gli Ebrei nel Mondo Islamico* (*The Jews of Islam*), p. 31.

From Jihad to Dhimmitude, in which she sees the *dhimmi* (non-Muslim subject) system as being nothing more than a heavy-handed tool for subjection and oppression.[1]

The most striking examples of mutual hostility between Muslims and Christians were the Crusades against Islam and the persecution of the Christians in Egypt, Syria and the Holy Land under the Fatimid Caliph Al Hakim bi Amri'llah (996-1021). According to the Jesuit Samir Khalil Samir, the Caliph banned the Palm Sunday celebrations and ordered the destruction of the Catholic Miriamite Cathedral in Damascus, the Church of the Virgin Mary in al Qantara in Old Cairo and (and this was the last straw) the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem – an event which shook the Christian world.[2]

Despite historical evidence to the contrary, it is a commonly held belief in the West that the Islamic Conquests were achieved solely by the sword and that the peoples of the Maghreb and the Levant were forced to embrace Islam,[3] though if we look at Islamic history from a pragmatic angle, we will find that the new religion actually benefited more from the *jizya* (tax on non-Muslim subjects) than it did from non-Muslims embracing the Faith.[4] Indeed, the West often criticizes Islam for this very reason when the question of its relations with other faiths is discussed – particularly its relations with Christianity. The fact is that when we look at the matter from a historical point of view and consider it within the context of its time, we will find these kinds of criticism lacking in objectivity. Islam has a long record of "assimilating the other" – sometimes successfully, at other times unsuccessfully. Moreover, some *fiqhi* (jurisprudential) rulings on the "religious other" are not based on the fundamentals of the Faith so much

1 Bat Ye'or: *Il Declino della Cristianita sotto l'Islam: Dal Jihad alla Dhimmitudine* (*The Decline of Eastern Christianity: From Jihad to Dhimmitude*), Lindau, Torino, 2009.

2 Giorgio Paolucci e Camille Eid (a cura di): *Cento Domande sull'Islam, Intervista a Samir Khalil Samir*, Casa Editrice Marietti, Genova, 2002, pp. 44-45.

3 With regard to Judaism and Christianity, in the Maghreb countries the Jews were able to protect their culture from extinction by "Arabising" it, while this was not the case with the Christians.

4 See Hans Kung: *Islam: Passato, Presente e Futuro* (*Islam, Past, Present and Future*), Rizzoli, Milano 2005, pp. 266-268.

as dictated by social factors. In the more restrictive cases the *faqih* (scholar of jurisprudence) does not deny the "religious other's" right to exist, but rather seeks to "reduce the boundaries" of his freedom. Hence historically it is rare to find a school of Islamic jurisprudence denying the "other's" right to exist, though he may have been subjected to varying degrees of pressure, the degree being determined by whether the *faqih* was a man of liberal or hard-line views.

Generally speaking, attitudes to "the other" have varied from one society or culture to another and at this point we shall endeavour to examine Muslim approaches to the question.

As representatives of the faiths that preceded Islam, the Jewish and Christian "other" enjoyed special recognition in the Muslim religious consciousness and contributed significantly to the development of learning and scholarship in the early days of Islam, including serious dialectical criticism on the substance of the Holy Scriptures.

The Islamic context scholarly disciplines – specifically theology and literature on comparative religion – were shaped by the fundamental principles – or "roots" – of the Islamic religion and *fiqh*, which were regarded as objective, universal intellectual criteria. Accordingly, the analyses and lines of approach they adopted were valid in Islamic terms to the extent that they were seen as binding upon "the others" – i.e. non-Muslims – while "the others" rejected them from the start, using the same intellectual tools to demonstrate the superiority of their own religions.[1] Subsequently, a reaction against this intellectual freedom (which had originally been state-sanctioned) resulted in restrictions being placed upon the "other's" freedom and the imposition of a more monolithic collective social identity.

So while *ta'aruf* was a fundamental element of Islamic society, its interpretation and implementation have always been subject to the prevailing cultural norms. Learning and knowledge have not always

1 Abdul Majid al Sharafi: *Al Fikr al Islami fi'l Radd 'ala'l Nasara ila Nihayat al Qarni'l Rabi'/al 'Ashir*, al Dar al Tunisiyyah li'l Nashr, 1990, p. 520.

observed the principle of objectivity; indeed – rather than demonstrating a commitment to intellectual neutrality – the analyses of early scholars were inspired by their own personal religious beliefs and a desire to champion their Faith at the expense of the others, while appearing to ignore the basic connection between Judaism, Chrisitianity and Islam. This unreasonable bias in favour of their own beliefs, which made light of the others' arguments – even though they were drawn from the same Abrahamic principles – is exemplified *par excellence* by Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328 CE), who asserted that the "truth of Muhammad's mission" was supported by greater evidence than the "truth of the missions of Moses and Jesus", that Muhammad's miracles were greater than the miracles of the other Messengers, that the Book revealed to mankind by Muhammad was more noble than any of the other Revealed Books, and that Muhammad's Shariah (Divine Law) was more complete than the Divine Laws of Moses and Jesus.[1]

Sometimes the scholar's approach was so biased that it deteriorated into vituperation. One example of this is Ibn Taymiyyah's pupil Ibn Qayyim al Jawziyya (1292-1349 CE), who claimed that the Jews were "people of lies, slander, treachery, plotting and tricks, the killers of the prophets, the eaters of things forbidden, the most maliciously scheming, the least merciful and the most vengeful of peoples with the worst of dispositions." [In addition] "their usual attitude is one of hatred, their wont is enmity and rancor, sorcery, lies and trickery. They do not respect the sanctity of those who oppose them for their unbelief and rejection of the prophets, and they respect neither bond nor agreement with a Believer, neither right nor compassion towards those who agree with them, neither justice nor equity towards those who associate with them, neither safety nor security towards those who mix with them, nor good counsel towards those with whom they have dealings. In fact, the most malicious is the most judicious of them, the most skilful and proficient is the most dishonest. [If you come across one who is] sound and reliable – [qualities which] are not to be found among them – he will not be a true Jew…"[2]

1 *Al Jawab al Sahih liman Baddala Din al Masih*, Part 2, Dar al 'Asimah, Riyadh, 1414 AH, p. 5.

2 Ibn al Qayyim al Jawziyyah: *Hidayat al Hiyara fi Ujubati'l Yahud wa'l Nasara,* Mu'assasat Makkah, al Madinah al Munawwarah, 1396 AH, p. 8.

Although useful and insightful points have been raised during the exchanges between the followers of the Abrahamic faiths, this has often not been the case and debates have frequently been marred by verbal abuse and invalid, unrealistic arguments. This is why the focus during the present era has been on strategies aimed at encouraging social dialogue rather than debates on creedal topics.

In some of our examinations of modern Arab writings on Judaism we have shown elsewhere how historical circumstances play a part in the way the "religious other" has been judged and evaluated over the ages. Writing about the Jewish character, Mohammed Sayyid Tantawi says: "In its descriptions of them the Holy Qur'an applies terms such as unbelief, rejection of the truth, selfishness, arrogance, cowardice, lying, obstinacy, deceit, rebelliousness, transgression, hardness of heart, perversity, a tendency to rush into sin, hostility, embezzlement of people's lawful property, and other vices. They therefore deserved to be excluded from Allah's Mercy and subjected to humiliation and wretchedness. These ugly qualities recorded in the Qur'an are plain for all to see, because throughout the ages – and wherever they may be – the [Jews] have only become more uncompromisingly set in their ways."[1]

The unrealistic notion that the Jews have an unchanging natural disposition is frequently asserted in Arab writings about them. However, in seeking scriptural support for their position, they ignore the subtleties and nuances of the Holy Qur'an's text.[2] This may be attributable to certain Qur'anic verses being taken out of context – inadvertently or deliberately – since in fact the Qur'an denounces some Jewish practices and praises others, while even during the conflict with a section of the Jews at the time of the Islamic Mission it recognized their positive qualities. For example: "We gave Moses the Scripture – so [, Muhammad,] do not doubt that you are receiving it – just as We made it a guide for

1 Mohammed Sayyid Tantawi: *Banu Isra'il fi'l Qur'an wa'l Sunnah*, part 2, 2ns impression, Maktabat al Andalus, Libya Beirut, 1973, pp. 3-4.

2 For the nuances of the Qur'an's discourse with regard to the Jews, both before and after the conflict, see Muhammad 'Izzat Darwaza: *Al Yahud fi'l Qur'ani'l Karim*, al Maktab al Islami, Beirut, 1980, p. 28 and 59 onwards.

the Children of Israel. We appointed them as leaders, guiding by Our command when they were steadfast and when they had firm faith in Our signs" *(Al Sajdah, 23-24)*, "We gave Scriptures, wisdom and prophethood to the Children of Israel, and provided them with good things and favoured them over all other people" *(Al Jathiyah, 16)*, and "We knowingly chose them over all other people" *(Al Dukhan, 32)*. Similarly, the Qur'an shows no hesitation in censuring their enemies, as in "Pharaoh behaved arrogantly in the land, and divided the people into groups, seeking to weaken one section, slaying their sons and sparing their daughters; he was one of those who spread corruption" *(Al Qasas, 4)*, or its rejection of Goliath the Arab in his war with David and his Hebrew people: "And so by the command of Allah they defeated them. David slew Goliath and Allah gave him kingship and wisdom, and imparted to him the knowledge of whatever He willed" *(Al Baqarah, 249)*.

Numerous Arab writings adopt a piecemeal approach, focusing on the evil side of the Jewish character on the basis of fragmentary quotes from the Holy Qur'an, while ignoring those other instances in which the Qur'an praises the Jews.

Three: The Abrahamic heritage and theological exclusiveness

In contrast to the inclusive view of the Abrahamic faiths, which we find in numerous places in the Holy Qur'an, there is the Jewish and Christian approach which sees anyone failing to follow their particular line as a heretic and beyond the pale. This is why – despite their common origin – even today the followers of the three religions are unable to see themselves as members of a single faith. Judaism suffers from the exclusivist view which refuses to recognize the Abrahamic birthright of the descendants of Ishmael. However, there are some Jewish studies which favour an inclusive approach to Christianity and Islam. According to David Flusser: "In their relationship to the Jewish religion, Christianity and Islam may be seen as a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to increase his progeny and make him a father or many nations."[1]

1 D. Flusser: *Christianity*, in A.A. Cohen – P. Mendes-Floher: *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought; Original Essays of Critical Concepts, Movements and Beliefs*, Jerusalem 1972, New York, 1988.

Although it could be said that Christianity is closer to Judaism (insofar as the Old Testament is a Holy Scripture in both these religions), Judaism is closer to Islam in its pure monotheism, its dietary laws and its practice of circumcision.

The exclusiveness which has afflicted the Jewish religion has a parallel in Christianity, which classed Islam as a form of heresy. Imprisoned behind its theological fence, the Christian religion did not see the new faith as an evolution or revival within the framework of the Abrahamic faiths, and John of Damascus (676-748) attributed a series of heresies to Islam while denying that it was inspired by the Abrahamic spirit. And this was at a time when Islam itself was already spreading dramatically across the region.

When we consider the question from a historical point of view we find that Islam's openness to the "other" enjoyed strong support on a religiously sanctioned basis that did not exist in the other two faiths. However, Christianity today – under pressure from major historical developments that have driven it in the general direction of pluralism – is trying to abandon its centuries-old tradition of exclusiveness. Despite this, however, it is still finding it hard to accept "otherness" – even within its own ranks – and its new attitude is basically the result of changes in its social circumstances and cultural needs.

These days Christian theologians are trying to develop a new line of approach known as "comparative theology". However, they are somewhat hampered by their historical baggage, with the result that they find themselves seesawing between their old rejectionist exclusivity and more open minded attitudes.[1]

According to Professor Mouchir Basile Aoun, there are five possible types of theological dialogue between Arab Christians and Islam and its peoples: either dialogue in the form of a critical debate about Islam, demonstrating its shortcomings and showing those tenets of its faith that it has acquired from Judaism and Chrisitianity; or dialogue based on the

1 Bruno Forte: (Arabic translation by 'Ezzeddin 'Anayah) *Ru'iyat al Lahutiyyah fi'l Iman wa'l Aidiyulujiyyah*, *Madarat Gharbiyyah* magazine, No. 3, September/October 2004, pp. 27-28.

notion that Islam is a spiritual movement containing a spark of Divine Truth and some of the spiritual values propagated by the Gospels; or dialogue aimed at justifying Islam in theological terms which recognizes Qur'anic revelation as an agent of Divine Salvation in the same cast as the messages conveyed by Abraham and Ishmael; or dialogue at a human rather than spiritual level which sees both Christianity and Islam as cultural expressions of the search for absolute truth; or dialogue in an Arab nationalist context that regards Islam as the product of the selfsame cultural soil that produced all other religious and philosophical schools and beliefs, including the religions of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad and – somewhat later and in different social circumstances – secularism.[1]

Al Andalus was an excellent example of successful coexistence. Here Islam, as the dominant faith, gave Jews and Christians the freedom to practice their religions and a sort of religious and social balance existed between the three communities. We are unable to offer any historical examples of a similar situation under another Abrahamic faith.

Islam by its very nature recognizes the "other" (originally the "Abrahamic other") and this is probably its most distinctive feature when compared with the other two faiths. One striking thing about Islam in al Andalus is the fact that the Christians who lived under its rule were non-Arabs and had no close links or affiliation with the East or its heritage.

Ta'aruf and the merits of open-mindedness within a broad human context

Islam's attitude to the "religious other" – characterized by *ta'aruf* and inclusivity (which we might describe as "religious pluralism" as opposed to the quasi-mandatory cultural pluralism of the present time) – continues to be desirable and commendable today. There is actually a striking similarity between the concepts of Islamic *ta'aruf* (or "religious pluralism") and cultural pluralism, since both seek to promote social harmony and open-mindedness at a broad human level, while eschewing triumphalism and hegemony and respecting the rights of the individual.

1 Mouchir Basile Aoun: *Al Fikr al 'Arabi al Dini al Masihi*, Dar al Tali'ah, Beirut, 2007, p. 49.

Here we should note that in Islam it is not only a moral concept; it also has legal force based on scriptural injunctions which guarantee the benefits of security and dignity within the social space and ring-fence them against the dictates of events and changing circumstances. *Ta'aruf* has become ingrained in the mind and soul of the Believer; it dictates how he should deal with the "other" and shapes society so that it safeguards the "other's" rights, including his right to be different.

Despite this, however, doubts and criticisms have often been raised about Islam's competence to establish genuine *ta'aruf* that extends to the followers of the three faiths (i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam) – or for that matter, to people from other faiths and cultures. These doubts and criticisms are not merely due to Islam's failures in this regard during the present era; they are also a result of the massive changes that have taken place in Islamic societies – changes which are beyond their control – generating urgent pressure for the development of a non-religious form of *ta'aruf*/coexistence that is totally unrelated to any kind of religious context.

Here we should perhaps ask where these doubts and criticisms about Islam's competence in this regard originated.

It could be correct to say that West-centred cultural attitudes (which see the West as the epitome of civilization and are basically a consequence of its overwhelming material and cultural supremacy) have now led to a reaction in the West and Europe in the form of a movement towards cultural, religious and ethnic pluralism. This process, which is still at the experimental stage, is not a by-product of the Christian religion – on the contrary, it aims to curtail the Christian monopoly of the social space (a monopoly of a kind that has never been a feature of Islamic society).

When we consider the criticisms that have been levelled against Islam by non-Muslims because of the failings of their own societies, we should see them as an incentive to look back to our Islamic roots, while at the same time re-evaluating the lessons to be drawn from Islam's history.