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SPECIAL FOCUS

PLURALISM IN EMERGENC(I)ES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Theology and Philosophy of Pluralism

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Abstract

This essay is a reflection on the very notion of "pluralism" examined in a philosophical and theological approach. It evokes Quranic verses on pluralism and then examines the thoughts of different Muslim thinkers on the question, such as al-Farabi (d. 950), al-Ghazali (1058–1111) in the tenth and twelfth centuries, and Tierno Bokar Salif Tall (1875–1939), from Mali, in the twentieth.

Keywords: Pluralism, Islam, Qur'an, Islamic theology, Philosophy

Reading the Qur'anic Verse of Pluralism

One passage from the Qur'an that can be considered central to the Islamic theology of pluralism is verse 48, in chapter 5. In Yusuf Ali's translation it reads (I have replaced thee or ye by you, etc.):

> To you We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety: so judge between them by what Allah hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the Truth that hath come to you. To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute.

This verse is clearly an affirmation of the value of pluralism that is much needed in times like ours. It provides the foundation for what Moroccan philosopher Abdou Filali Ansari calls a "charter for pluralism."[1] Its implication is that, since ultimate truth is by definition inaccessible, and diversity is an uncontestable principle, the only choice open to human societies is to accept each other and to keep any competition between them within the domain of deeds.

It should be emphasized that the Qurʾan here affirms both the reality of truth and the diversity of ways and laws. If "their vain desires" (*ahwāʾahum*) do lead humans away from the truth, divergence *from the way* is not the same as the diversity *of the ways* prescribed to each community, as an exclusivist reading would have it. The verse invites an inclusive reading, which contemplates the idea that plurality is indeed God's will, the full truth of which can only be explained by God. Meanwhile, we demonstrate the truth of our way by the excellence of our deeds, "as in a race in all virtues." That inclusive reading of the passage defines pluralism and establishes verse 48 of chapter 5 as "the charter of pluralism."

Such a reading is not a form of apologetics or a projection of modern ideas and aspirations onto Qurʾanic text. We cannot read the verses but from the space-time in which we live and in light of our generation's problems. That is, from our world, which is a unified *one* more than ever and, at the same time, racked by ethno-nationalist forces of fragmentation that seek to deepen differences into conflicts of civilizations. It is not so much that we must read the verse within this context: we simply cannot do otherwise. Contrary to the claims of reactive fundamentalists, who pretend to bracket out time and change – that is, life itself – we simply cannot read the Qurʾan the way it was read by an Iraqi in the eighth century. And the Islamic tradition teaches that the Word of God should be read by the believer as if it had been just revealed to her. To then state that the Word is living to express that its meaning is continuously unfolding in time and that it speaks to us as we are and where we are, is not apologetics.

Other passages reinforce the pluralistic understanding of the verse of pluralism. They constitute a commentary of it from within the Qurʾan itself. As an example, even when the Book calls Muslims the "best community," seemingly evoking an election, which is exclusivist by

[1] He shared with me his views, using that phrase, in private conversations.

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definition, the notion itself ends up being inclusive and pluralistic when read in connection with other verses.

> You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah. If only the People of the Scripture had believed, it would have been better for them. Among them are believers, but most of them are defiantly disobedient. (3:110)
>
> They are not [all] the same; among the People of the Scripture is a community standing [in obedience], reciting the verses of Allah during periods of the night and prostrating [in prayer]. They believe in Allah and the Last Day, and they enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and hasten to good deeds. And those are among the righteous. (3: 113–115)

The "best nation" is such only because of its hastening to good deeds defined as "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong." We find here an echo of what was said earlier about the only right response to the test of difference. The "best nation" is not a closed community: it is open to individuals who do not "belong" to it, strictly speaking, but still partake in it as it is not defined by appurtenance but by action. The very phrase defining (or, to use the etymological term, delimitating) the best community opens it also to those from "the people of the Scripture" who "enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong."

Philosophy of Pluralism: Imam al-Ghazali and the Seventy-Three Sects

The question of pluralism is also raised in a famous hadith speaking of seventy-three sects (seventy-four in a different version) into which the Islamic community would eventually be divided. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), in two different works, presents two apparently contradictory versions of the hadith. In his well-known *Deliverance from Error*, he cites it as follows: "My community will be divided into seventy-three sects. Only one will be saved." In his book translated into English under the title *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity*, Ghazali quotes this version: "My community will divide into over seventy sects; all of them will enter Paradise except the Crypto-Infidels." Shall we say that from *Deliverance* to *The Decisive Criterion* Imam Ghazali (as he is called) has changed his mind from an exclusivist understanding of the hadith to a

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pluralistic and inclusive one? In the last chapter of my book *Open to Reason*[2] I have offered a reading that insists on the fundamental identity of the two versions, contradictory as they may seem at first glance. I contend that the sect promised salvation or Paradise is, in all versions, the sect of those who can rise above fragmentation and recognize the one truth reflected in all sects.

Those who are exclusivists are then, precisely, those who reject the truth by failing to recognize it in sects other than their own. That sect which exists only virtually is what I have called the seventy-fourth sect. The belief in the existence of a seventy-fourth sect is grounded in Qurʾanic anthropology, and it reflects the Qurʾanic notion of what it means to be, or rather to become, human. It is expressed in the passage often quoted in Sufi literature as the verse of *alastu?* ("Am I not?"). In that verse (7: 172), the human being is defined by his or her loving consent and positive answer to God's call, asking: "am I not your lord?"

Traditional commentaries explain that when human beings were afterwards sent down to live their earthly lives, they became forgetful of that primordial "yes" to God that constitutes them as human beings. But because they bear its mark all the same, they are still driven, even when they are not aware of it, by the force of love that was imprinted in them on the day God asked "am I not your lord?" That explains the diversity of ways of being driven, which still points towards the fundamental unity of the driving force. Imam Ghazali is essentially a Sufi theologian, and his inclusive and pluralistic view, developed in theological language in *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity*, is at its core the view of Sufism, which can go as far as including "infidelity" itself.

But Muslim philosophers too, the *falāsifa* as they are called, have developed a conception of religious pluralism that needs to be underlined in the times we are living. We can evoke here al-Farābī's notion of pluralism expressed in his work *On the Perfect State*, in which he states that the intelligible realities and verities that are grasped as identical by the highest cognitive faculty, which he calls the prophetic spirit (a spirit particularly developed in all prophets), are *translated* into the different languages, symbols, and rituals that constitute different religions: therefore disputes over religions are but disputes over translations of the same verities.

[2] Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Open to Reason. Muslim Philosophers in Conversation with the Western Tradition* (New York: Columbia University, 2018).

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Conclusion: the Pluralism of Love

I will conclude by coming back to the Sufi insistence on pluralism and inclusion. One figure par excellence of that spirit of tolerance is Tierno Bokar Salif Tall (1875–1939), the sage of the Mali region of Bandiagara, known mainly through his biography written by his disciple Amadou Hampâté Bâ. *A spirit of Tolerance: the Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar* is the English title of the biography.[3] Following the teachings of the Tijaniyya Sufi path in which he was a Master, he gave as a foundation for pluralism one of the names of God: *Rahmān* usually translated as "the Merciful." He explained that while the name *Rahīm*, built on the same root *r-h-m,* selects those who are worthy of God's compassion, *Rahmān* is limitless, all encompassing. So to the question: "does God love the infidel?" he taught that the answer is "yes," coming from *Rahmān* whose love embraces all.

[3] Amadou Hampate Ba, *A spirit of Tolerance: The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar*, trans. Fatima Jane Casewit (Wisdom, 2007).

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