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Title: Pluralism and the Qur'an

Author: Reza Shah-Kazemi

Source: Speech at *Milad al-Nabi* Celebrations, Atlanta and San Francisco, USA, 2007

Abstract: Dr. Shah-Kazemi opens this article with the narration of Prophet Muhammad's invitation to a group of Christians in 631 CE to perform their rites in his own mosque. This remarkable event was reported by Ibn Ishaq and others. As Dr Shah-Kazemi says "one observes here a perfect example of how disagreement on the plane of dogma can co-exist with deep respect on the superior plane of religious devotion". This is one of a series of acts of the Prophet which indicate the sanctity of religions which preceded Islam. Based on a reading of certain Qur'anic verses on the subjects of salvation, the Umma and religion, the author argues that "the essence of religion is immutable, only its forms vary". He goes on to state that "the universal message of the Qur'an invites the Muslim to manifest respect, tolerance and reverence for that same essence which resides at the core of all the revealed religions of mankind".

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Pluralism and the Qur'an

Reza Shah-Kazemi

This is an edited version of extracts from speeches delivered by Dr Reza Shah-Kazemi at *Milad al-Nabi* Celebrations held in Atlanta and San Francisco, USA, in 2007. It first appeared in *The Ismaili, USA*, 2008.

In the 9th year after the Hijra (631 CE), a prominent Christian delegation from Najran, an important centre of Christianity in the Yemen, came to engage Prophet Muhammad in theological debate in Medina. The main point of contention was the nature of Christ: was he one of the messengers of God or the unique Son of God? What is of importance for our purposes is not the disagreements voiced, nor the fact that the debate was cut short by a revelation instructing the Prophet to challenge the Christians to a mutual imprecation, the *mubahala*; rather, its significance lies for us in the fact that when these Christians requested to leave the city to perform their liturgy, the Prophet invited them to accomplish their rites in his own mosque.

According to Ibn Ishaq, who gives the standard account of this remarkable event – so little commented upon, alas – the Christians in question were Malaki, that is, they performed the Byzantine Christian rites. This means that they were enacting the Eucharistic rites which incorporated the fully developed trinitarianism theology of the orthodox councils, emphasising the definitive creed of the divine sonship of Christ - in other words, doctrines explicitly criticised in the Qur'an.

Nonetheless, Prophet Muhammad allowed the Christians to accomplish their mass and their rites in his own mosque. The most sacred spot for the Muslims in Medina was given over to the Christians for the enactment of rites embodying full-fledged trinitarianism, rites centred upon Jesus, 'Son of God '. Such a phenomenon evokes much more a kind of 21st century interfaith prayer gathering meeting than pre-medieval religious formalism. One observes here a perfect example of how disagreement on the plane of dogma can co-exist with a deep respect on the superior plane of religious devotion, that is, on the plane of sacred space, which is the exclusive property of no one religion, being rather the common goal of all true religions.

Now the Prophet was fully aware of what the Mass entailed, in its essentials, and that the formulae used would, of course, centre on Christ as the Son of God. The Bishop would thus be reciting the very words that are so severely censured in the Qur'an; and yet the Prophet allowed him to do so in his own sacred place of worship .Was this just a question of good *adab* on Prophet Muhammad's part? Or can we see this act of spiritual etiquette arising, rather, out of the Prophet's recognition of the principle we are stressing here: just as the divine reality transcends all dogma, likewise, sincere devotion to that reality transcends the dogmatic framework within which it is accomplished.

This act of the Prophet helps us to understand at least one aspect of what the Qur'an means when it tells the Muslims:

Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fine exhortation; and hold discourse with them [the People of the Book] in that which is finest (16: 125).

- It does not mean a refusal to differ, but to differ with dignity and respect;

- It means a refusal to allow any differences to eclipse or undermine what is most noble in the neighbour, what is most essential in his or her belief;
- It means a refusal to allow one's attitude to the Other, whether within or outside one's religion, to be determined by extrinsic and relative factors;
- It means, on the contrary, an affirmation of all that is best in the Other, and to make this the basis of one's fundamental disposition towards the Other. It is this that most clearly relates to 'that which is finest' *ahsan*: most fine, most beautiful, most excellent.

In this way, one induces the Other to likewise see what is best in one's own position: a reciprocal recognition, a mutual respect can thus be envisaged and cultivated between two or more partners in dialogue.

This act of the Prophet should not be seen in isolation but as one of a series of such symbolic acts which, more powerfully than words, indicate the sanctity of the religions that preceded Islam, and which therefore reveal the transcendence and universality of the essence of the sacred, at once surpassing and embracing all religions. Another such act was the protection by the Prophet of the icon of the Virgin and Child in the Ka'ba; he instructed all the idols within the holy house to be destroyed, but, according to Ibn Ishaq, and at least two other early historians, Waqidi and Azraqi, he himself protected this icon, not allowing it to be destroyed.

Such acts stem from the universality of the Qur'anic perspective. This universality can be clearly discerned on at least three different levels:

1. Salvation. There are several verses that make it dazzlingly evident that salvation is not restricted to one confessionally defined denomination, but is the common property of a universally defined piety. Salvation is the consummation, through grace, of a fundamental spiritual orientation; it is not the automatic reward bestowed upon one simply for belonging to one community rather than another, or for acting in certain ways as opposed to others:

Truly those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians – whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds – surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve (2:62).

2. The Umma. In one very important verse, the *umma* is clearly defined in terms of all the prophets ever sent to mankind by God; and thus it includes all of the followers of these prophets. In the Sura entitled 'The Prophets,' a long list of prophets is mentioned, at the end of which there is a reference to the Virgin Mary. The verse ends as follows:

Truly, this, your umma, is one umma, and I am your Lord, so worship Me (21:92).

3. Religion. The essence of religion is one and the same, but its forms vary. There is but one light of sacred revelation refracted through a variety of prisms. On the one hand:

'He hath ordained for you of religion (min ad-din) that which He commended unto Noah, and that which We reveal to thee (Muhammad), and that which We commended unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying: Establish the religion, and be not divided therein ... (42:13).

And on the other, in respect of the reason for diversity:

For each We have appointed from you a Law and a Way. Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But that He might try you by that which He hath given you [He hath made you as you are]. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will inform you of that wherein ye differed. (5:48).

On the one hand there are different rites revealed for different religions; but on the other, there is no difference between them. Muslims are told in the Qur'an in various places not to 'distinguish between' any of God's messengers. For example:

Say: We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us, and that which is revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted. (3:84).

Other key verses that uphold this perspective of a single essence residing at the core of all formal religions are as follows:

For every community (umma) there is a Messenger. (10:47)

Verily We sent Messengers before thee; among them are those about whom We have told thee, and those about whom We have not told thee. (40:78)

And We sent no Messenger before thee but We inspired him [saying]: There is no God save Me, so worship Me. (21:25)

Naught is said unto thee [Muhammad] but what was said unto the Messengers before thee. (41:43)

One can read this final verse as saying: nothing essential is said unto the last prophet, Muhammad, that was not said unto all the prophets sent before him. In other words the essence of religion is immutable, only its forms vary. "The universal message of the Qur'an therefore invites the Muslim not only to strive to realise that essence through fidelity to Islam, but also to manifest respect, tolerance and reverence for that same essence which resides at the core of all the revealed religions of mankind."¹

¹ See Reza Shah-Kazemi, *The Other in the Light of the One – The Universality of the Qur'an and Interfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge Islamic Texts Society, 2006) for further discussion.