

Moral Development and the Islamic Ethics of Pluralism

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Abstract

How does a religious tradition construct moral relations with people of other faiths and cultures? Believers and scholars of Islam have raised this question with special urgency in recent decades. This essay offers brief critical analyses of two main lines of thinking within this burgeoning field of study, and argues for the necessity of a third. The first stream of thought contends that epistemic or cognitive postures are the most basic factors determining how Muslims construct moral relations with non-Muslims. Scholars ask what forms of knowledge Muslim groups are willing to engage, and reformers argue that Islamic traditions warrant more inclusive styles of knowing than contemporary “extremist” or “puritan” forms of Islam allow. A second line of thought analyzes Islamic Scriptures and early jurisprudential literature, seeking to uncover, retrieve or reform Islam’s historical and/or normative approaches to religio-cultural diversity. I discuss strengths and weaknesses of both strategies, and then argue that a crucial missing piece within the field is attention to the centrality of embodied, communal practices of character development and ethical formation in Islamic moral traditions. Future studies of the Islamic ethics of pluralism should attend to this neglected domain.

This essay engages the development of ethics in Islam around questions of particular controversy and contestation around the world today: How does Islam develop and evaluate relations with people of other faiths and cultures? What is Islam’s posture toward non-Islamic peoples? What are the Islamic ethics of pluralism?¹ These are perennial questions, and they are not unique to Islam. But in the past few decades

¹ Throughout this essay, I use the term “pluralism” in the descriptive rather than the normative sense, meaning simply “diversity” or “religious and/or cultural difference.”

there has been a great flurry of activity around these questions among believers and scholars of Islam.² In what follows I offer some critical and constructive remarks about several broad trends in this discourse. There seem to be two basic intertwined lines of thought in contemporary literature on Islam and pluralism in the West; each is exceedingly common and together they shape the scholarship of both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars of Islam's relations to non-Muslims. To see each strain more clearly, and to think carefully about their arguments, it is useful to treat them separately and to ask critical questions about their assumptions, methods, and goals. Ultimately, I suggest that a third line of thought, as a supplement to this discourse, would be a promising way forward as scholars continue to explore the Islamic ethics of pluralism historically and perhaps normatively.

“Plurality in the Mind”

The first stream of thought argues that *epistemic or cognitive postures* are the most basic factors determining how Muslims construct moral and social relations with non-Muslims.³ Consider the following four examples (although many more could be given).

² For a brief discussion of the first wave of literature on Islam and pluralism in Europe in the late nineteenth century, see Yohann Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2-3.

³ This reflects wider discourse on religious pluralism. For one useful example, from perhaps the most prominent proponent of the study of religious pluralism in America, see Diana Eck, “Is Our God Listening? Exclusivism,

1. Robert Hefner, an anthropologist, identifies two broad camps in contemporary Islam on the question on pluralism: moderate “reformers” and conservative “strict constructionists.” Confronting the conditions of modernity and post-modernity, the reformers devise a “plurality in the mind”; that is, they embrace the natural sciences, social sciences, and philosophy. But the strict constructionists respond to the same conditions by doubling down on the view that “the shari’a is perfect and finished, and, contrary to the claims of some reformists, it requires no deep knowledge of science and society to be applied.”⁴ For Hefner, the key debate in contemporary Islam is about the proper sources of knowledge and the appropriate epistemic posture toward differentiated reality.

2. Khaled Abou El Fadl, a Muslim scholar and Distinguished Professor in Islamic Law at UCLA, frames the issue similarly. “Traditionally,” he claims, “Islamic epistemology tolerated and even celebrated divergent opinions and schools of thought,” but today, Islamic “puritans” all “insist on a normative particularism that is fundamentally text-

Inclusivism, and Pluralism” in *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press), 166-178;

⁴ Robert Hefner, “Modern Muslims and the Challenge of Plurality,” *Society* 51, no. 2 (April 2014), 136-137.

centered,” and closed inwardly by the belief that “Muslims are the inheritors of an objective ascertainable and realizable divine truth.”⁵

3. Gudrun Krämer argues in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* that the key difference between “Islamists” and “moderates” lies in their respective religious epistemologies.⁶

4. Abdulaziz Sachedina wants to help revive classical Islamic institutions within the new socio-political conditions of modernity, but he warns that this requires taking “a fresh look at a religious epistemology requiring extensive rethinking before it can guide decisions affecting the lives of Muslims in a modern [pluralist] nation-state.”⁷

So the modern battle over the Islamic approach to pluralism is basically a dispute about knowledge and its proper sources. The external conflicts—over the status of non-Muslims in Muslim lands, or about a Muslim’s moral relations to people outside the *umma*, or about the legitimacy of treaties with non-Muslim political actors, or about the legitimacy of other faith practices, etc.—it turns out, are not primarily disagreements about politics or even ethics, but rather about *how* (not what) Muslims think. These scholars suggest that the crucial factors dividing Muslims over the question of religious pluralism and shaping how Islam interprets the Other are not at root commitments to

⁵ Khaled Abou El Fadl, “The Place of Tolerance in Islam,” in *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*, ed. Joshua Cohen and Ian Lague (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 6, 10, 13.

⁶ Gudrun Krämer, “Pluralism and Tolerance,” in Gerhard Böwering, ed., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 419.

⁷ Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 13.

divergent theological or exegetical schools, or allegiances to competing ethnoreligious factions, or context-shaped practices and encounters amidst real diversity; the kernel is not ultimately about substantive beliefs about God or the content of *shari'a*, nor is it reducible to political and economic interests or grievances. What matters are the cognitive faculties Muslims employ and the academic faculties they are willing to learn from.

In this picture, the challenge of pluralism starts to morph. The “diversity” at stake is now diversity in the mind. The ethical and legal questions have now migrated to concerns about cognitive licensure, and the implication seems to be that circling back to the original query (about ethics and relationships) requires sorting through the epistemic issues first. Epistemic problems need epistemological responses, so it is no surprise that a great deal of this literature on Islam and pluralism is preoccupied with the question of how to think Islamically.

However, by engaging the contemporary challenge of pluralism on the battleground of an epistemological conflict with “puritans” and “extremists,” have the Islamic tradition’s important moral and legal questions about interreligious engagement been subsumed by the stock problem of scriptural literalism? Are the answers to these questions, raised by centuries of intense exegetical and jurisprudential disputation amidst internal and external pluralism, now simply predetermined by one’s attitude to

Western education? This would seem to overvalue beliefs about belief, especially since historically the tradition has engaged these questions on other grounds, and also because historical events, communal practices, and lived experiences likely also shape how various Muslim groups think about and act amidst religious diversity. In any case, scholars of Islam and pluralism should carefully consider whether cognitive styles can carry the burden of socio-political questions, and whether epistemology can so easily substitute for ethics.

Scripture, Law, and Pluralism

This leads to the second line of thought. Scholars analyze Islamic Scriptures—the Qur'an and the *hadith*—and also (sometimes) early jurisprudential literature. Here, scholars seek to uncover, retrieve or reform Islam's historical and/or normative approaches to religious and cultural diversity.

Islamic Scriptures and early jurisprudence dealt extensively with questions about the status of Islam *vis a vis* other religions, and the tradition retains a rich legacy of reflection on the moral and political classification of non-Muslims. The most widely commented upon issue concerns the Qur'anic concept of “the People of the Book,” (*ahl al-kitab*), a category which applied most prominently to Christians and Jews.⁸ Yohann Friedmann argues that the Qur'an likely contains an early layer in which “Jews and

⁸ On a fifth Qur'anic classification, the *hanifiyya*, see Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 48-49.

Christians were actually considered part of the Muslim community,” but by the Prophet’s *later* years in Medina Islam had transformed into a “totally independent faith” beginning to actively “disengage” from the other religions.⁹

Many studies on Islam and pluralism have made much of this earlier period, citing especially the famous “Constitution of Medina” (*‘ahd al-umma*) beginning in 622 CE, which, according to Hefner, makes clear that, originally, “religions other than Islam were to be tolerated,” especially Jews.¹⁰ Abou El Fadl argues that the compact sets a precedent for peaceful relations and conflict resolution between Muslims and non-Muslims.¹¹ Things changed in 624, however, when conflicts with a Jewish tribe (Banu Qaynuqa) led to their invasion and expulsion by Muhammad and his forces.¹² Conflicts then erupted with another Jewish tribe (the Banu Nadir), who were expelled the following year, leading to a period of prolonged conflict. The charter, in short, lasted only a few crucial years, and its legacy is mixed.

Related to the concept of “People of the Book” is that Jews and Christians under Islamic jurisdiction are considered “protected people” (*ahl al-dimma*) on the basic

⁹ Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam*, 32-33.

¹⁰ Robert Hefner, “Islam and Plurality: Old and New,” *Society* 51, no. 6 (Dec. 2014), 638.

¹¹ Khaled Abou El Fadl, “Conflict Resolution as a Normative Value in Islamic Law: Handling Disputes with Non-Muslims,” in *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik*, ed. Douglas Johnston (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 187. He also cites Muhammad’s peace agreements with Meccans, and non-Muslim tribes in Thaqif, Ahl Najran, Yemen, and Bahrain. He appeals to treaties after Muhammad’s death with Egypt, Sham, Jerusalem, Demascus. Nubia, however, he acknowledges that these treaties were premised not on equality and reciprocity, and that on the whole the historical and legal record is “ambiguous”; see 187-188.

¹² For commentary on the expulsion, with reference to the famous verse “There is no compulsion in religion” (Qur’an 2:256), see Friedmann, 94-95 and 100-103.

conditions that they pay the poll tax (*jizya*) and follow the category of laws that apply to them. Historically *dhimmihood* entitled people to a degree of political protection and a measure of religious freedom. But as Friedmann and others point out, this status meant different things at different times, was interpreted by jurists differently—some drifting toward what we would call tolerance, others toward what we would call persecution—and was always an evolving concept and a dynamic state of affairs for those non-Muslims who held *dhimmi* status.¹³

This introduction barely scratches the surface, but it hopefully gives a picture of the complexity and the ambiguity in Islamic scriptures and legal traditions on the question of pluralism. The ambivalence of this legacy perhaps helps to explain why scholars interested in *promoting* tolerance prefer to start by constructing a religious epistemology that encourages expansive and creative forms of scriptural reasoning. There are resources for an ethic of tolerance within the Islamic tradition; the open question is how to unearth them and how much weight to give them in the face of inevitable counterevidence. One can see how a given moral or religious epistemology might well tip the balance toward tolerance, or away from it.

¹³ See Friedmann, 58-76.

Conclusions: Virtue, Practices and the Ethics of Pluralism

Even when combined, these two streams of thought are limited because they neglect an important, even central dimension of Islamic ethics, namely, moral development. I suggest that a promising new direction for inquiry into Islam and pluralism would be to explore the moral formation of Muslims and Muslim communities through various practices of self-cultivation. A major feature of Islamic ethics, ignored in the literature on pluralism, involves personal and communal practices of moral development through embodied habits, public comportment, ritual performances, patterns of speech, emulation of Muhammad, and other forms of moral praxis. Significant strands in the history of Islamic ethics and the organization of public and professional life in Islamic civilizations hinged upon the performance of disciplines designed to develop moral excellence and mold civic identities. So if Islamic ethics are about disciplines that develop virtuous character, then studies of the Islamic ethics of tolerance should consider how attitudes and norms of tolerance or intolerance are interpreted and enacted in the embodied practices of Muslim communities.

Ignoring these disciplines tunes out vital aspects of the tradition, perhaps the ones most important to the moral formation of lives facing the real, lived challenges of pluralism. Although it makes good sense to seek general principles deduced from scriptural passages, or to highlight adaptable resources culled from legal traditions,

pluralism is ultimately negotiated in communal practices, in the habits of body and mind by which people not only form themselves but also, in the process, *interpret* and *perform* what faith means for common life amidst difference and diversity.