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**BUNTZIE ELLIS CHURCHILL**

# ISLAM

**THE RELIGION AND THE PEOPLE**





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BERNARD LEWIS

BUNTZIE ELLIS CHURCHILL

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Look to the neighbor before the house.  
Look to the companion before the road.

—Arab proverb

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# Preface

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More than three hundred years ago, in 1689, the great English philosopher John Locke published *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, in which he argued that “neither Pagan, nor Mahometan, nor Jew, ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the commonwealth because of religion.” In this, he gave a classical formulation of an idea which helped to inspire both the French and American revolutions, and has become an essential guiding principle of the free world. This idea, sometimes called secularism, means that religion is a private and personal matter, outside the realm of government; that membership of the political community, and the rights that go with it, belong to all citizens, of any religion or of none.

Religion remains, however, an immensely powerful factor in human affairs, with profound influence on almost every aspect of public and private, social and economic, cultural and even artistic life. No study of society, whether directed by historians at the past, by social scientists at the present, or by either at the future, can afford to disregard the religious factor. To neglect or even to underrate that factor can lead to serious misunderstandings and open the way to dangerous consequences. A French statesman once said that war is too important to be left to the generals. One might also argue that religion is too important to leave to the theologians.

There are many ways of studying religion, besides that of the theologians. Some study it as an art-historian studies paintings; others, as a bacteriologist studies bacteria. We are committed to no specific ideology or method, beyond that of dispassionate scholarship, which sees religion as a strand, or group of strands, among others, in the intricate pattern of human life. Such a study, in context, of the religious factor in human affairs is indispensable to understanding. In the Christian, or as some nowadays call it, the post-Christian world, religion has become, to a large extent, a personal and private matter. In the world of Islam, now in the early fifteenth century of its era, religion retains its centrality and remains a major force in public life, a basic theme of identity and therefore of loyalty.

For any sort of dealings with the Muslim world, some understanding, and therefore some knowledge, of Islam is essential. Unfortunately, this is rarely available and the more common perception is based on ignorance, sometimes varied by prejudice. This is particularly dangerous at a time when the Islamic world itself is undergoing major internal struggles, the outcome of which is still far from clear. It is our hope that the following pages may provide some knowledge, and thus some understanding, of one of the world's great religions—of its glorious past, its tumultuous present, and its bitterly contested future.

## CHAPTER 5

# *Diversity and Tolerance*

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In traditional Islam, diversity, within certain limits, was seen as not only acceptable, but even beneficial. This diversity finds its most characteristic expression in the emergence, within Sunni Islam, of four different schools of doctrine and law, each with its own centers of learning, masters, and literature. These differ from each other on a number of points, but each respects the others as forming part of the community of orthodox Islam (see pp. 30-36).

The use of the term orthodoxy in a Muslim context raises another issue. Orthodoxy is a Christian, originally Platonic, term meaning “correct belief,” as opposed to heterodoxy, literally “other belief,” and, worse, “heresy.” Heresy, a Greek word meaning “choice,” soon took on a negative connotation and was specialized to mean “wrong choice.” It was used from early times in Christian literature to designate doctrines that deviated from correct belief as formulated by constituted authority.

It is precisely on this point that Islam differs significantly from Christianity. Until comparatively modern times, there were in the world of Islam no constituted authorities empowered to define correct belief and thus, by implication, to define and condemn incorrect belief. For Muslims, as for Jews, what mattered was not so much correct belief as correct behavior, and it is to the definition and elaboration of these standards of correctness that much of the religious literature is devoted.

But of course, in a world as large as Islam, in a history as long as that of Islam, differences of doctrine and practice developed, and sometimes these went beyond what were generally regarded as the acceptable limits of diversity. The notion of “heresy” in the sense of incorrect belief remained alien to Islam. While the rich theological language of Islam contains names and descriptions of many heresies, it has no single word meaning heresy—or rather, it did not until the modern age, when a new word, *hartaqa*, was coined to express this notion. This word, now commonly used in Arabic, is obviously derived from the Western term heretic. In earlier times, beliefs and practices that did not conform to accepted norms and deviated from what one might call “mainstream Islam” were usually designated by terms meaning innovation, deviation, or excess. *Ghuluww*, “excess” or “exaggeration,” is used for those groups, such as the Isma‘ilis or the Druze, who carry their deviation beyond the generally acceptable limits of diversity. The term *bid‘a*, literally “novelty” or “innovation,” is used to condemn those who violate sacred precedents by introducing new ideas. The term is thus, in a sense, the opposite of Sunna, denoting the precept and practice of the Prophet. Some Muslims took the view that any such innovation must of necessity be false and evil; others recognized that new situations might arise, requiring new rulings, and made a distinction between good and bad *bid‘a*. The general presumption, however, was that innovation as such was bad unless shown to be good. This perception was extended from religion to other matters and became a serious obstacle to development and progress.

From the record, it will be clear that in general, Islam, as a religion, community, and authority, has been remarkably tolerant of diversity within its own ranks. But there are limits and, at a certain point, the deviant Muslim ceases to be a Muslim and becomes a *kafir*, an unbeliever.

To be a *kafir* among *kafirs* is no problem, provided that his form of unbelief meets certain Muslim requirements for tolerance. But if one who has been or claims to be a Muslim is judged to be a *kafir*, this

is a much more serious offense, and he is deemed to be an apostate. According to the prevailing interpretation of the holy law, this is a capital offense, and the offender must be put to death, whatever the circumstances. In this interpretation, even if he later repents and reverses his apostasy, he must still be executed. God may forgive him, but no human authority is empowered to do so. This penalty applies even in the case of a new convert to Islam, of however brief duration, who reverts to his previous faith. The death penalty normally included not only the convert but also anyone responsible for converting him. The term *takfir*, meaning “to denounce one who claims to be a Muslim but is in fact an infidel,” has come into increasingly common use and is used to condemn those who diverge beyond what are seen as the permitted limits. A charge of *takfir* is in effect a charge of apostasy, a capital offense in most systems of Islamic law (see p. 219). In the traditional Muslim state and society, *takfir* normally meant a judgment or ruling by an Islamic court or dignitary, executed by the police or other public authority. In some, though by no means all, modern Muslim states, execution for a change of opinion is no longer acceptable. In practice, sadly, this has often meant that the classical procedure of trial and sentence has been replaced by incitement and murder. The same problems and similar solutions arise in a more acute form among Muslim communities living in non-Muslim countries and, therefore, not subject to Islamic law.

The most obvious form of apostasy is the abandonment of Islam and the adoption of another religion. The usually strict enforcement of this rule has been a major impediment to the work of the Christian missions. In some Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, they are totally forbidden. In some others, such as Syria and Lebanon, their work has been in effect limited to converting Christians from one church to another.

In addition to an explicit renunciation of the faith, some actions, for example, certain forms of blasphemy, are considered tantamount to apostasy and incur the same penalties. It was on this basis that the

Ayatollah Khomeini accused the Anglo-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie of having insulted the Prophet and issued a fatwa sentencing him to death. A more insidious form of apostasy, from the traditional point of view, was the introduction of new and strange ideas and doctrines under the guise of Islam. Some of these, following new prophets, became in effect new religions. Such, for example, are the Ahmadiyya and the Baha'is. The first of these was founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in the Punjab; the second in Iran, by Baha'allah (1817–1892). In 1868 he was banished from Iran and settled in Acre, which was then in the Ottoman Empire, now in Israel. It remains the world center of the Baha'i faith. Both of these groups were at times denounced and persecuted as apostates; both in time achieved a measure of sometimes precarious tolerance. Baha'ism is forbidden in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

From the traditionalist point of view, the danger presented by such movements is limited and has been contained. A much more menacing form of apostasy, according to that view, is the wave of new ideas coming from the West. And against these, new and more powerful responses have been developed.

Diversity within the community poses the most severe test of religious tolerance and, by this test, the record of Islam does not compare badly with that of other religions. True, there have been polemics and persecutions, insurrections and even wars but, until our own day, nothing remotely comparable with the inquisitions and persecutions, the insurrections and wars, that mar the history of Christendom until the rise of secularism. Even today, when intra-Islamic conflict has reached unprecedented levels of bitterness and ferocity, it has not yet reached that level, and there is still hope that this may be averted.

Another test of tolerance, less searching but no less important, concerns the attitude toward followers of other religions—of the believers toward those whom they regard as unbelievers.

On this point, there is a clear distinction between two types of religion, designated by their critics and opponents as relativist and

triumphalist. Both are terms of abuse. The relativist view of religion is that just as men have invented different languages to talk to each other, so they have invented different religions to talk to God, and God understands them all—perhaps not equally well, but well enough. The classical formulation of this approach is contained in the Jewish Talmud, where it is said that the righteous of all peoples have a place in heaven. The righteous are defined as those who observe certain rules—monotheism and the basic social and ethical rules of human society. Triumphalists, in contrast, believe that they are the fortunate recipients of God’s final message to mankind, which it is their duty not to keep selfishly to themselves, like the Jews, Hindus, and others, but to bring to the rest of humanity, removing whatever obstacles there may be in the way. The two obvious examples of this perception are Christianity and Islam.

Between two such religions, with a shared past, similar aspirations, and almost identical self-perceptions, living in adjoining areas, conflict was inevitable and gave rise to the long sequence of jihad and crusade, conquest and reconquest, starting with the advent of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century of the Christian era.

In the Muslim perception, those who do not accept Muhammad as Prophet and the Koran as God’s scripture are unbelievers. But not all unbelievers are the same, and there is a clear distinction between what one might call the predecessor religions and the rest. In the Muslim perception, Muhammad was the last in a long series of Prophets, and the Koran the final perfection of a series of books of revelation. Of these earlier groups of believers, the Koran names three: the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians. Two have survived, each with their own revealed book: the Torah, that is, the five books of Moses, and the Gospels. But these earlier revelations had been disregarded and, worse, corrupted. They were, therefore, superseded and totally replaced by the final perfection of the Koran.

Nevertheless, these groups of earlier recipients of divine revelation were different from the polytheists and idolaters who comprised the rest of mankind and, therefore, qualified for a certain measure of

tolerance in Muslim society and under the rule of the Muslim state. This tolerance is ordained and in some measure defined in the Koran, the traditions of the Prophet, and the rules of the holy law. The basic rules and limits of this tolerance are clearly set forth. Members of these three groups are to be allowed the free exercise of their religions in their own places of worship. They should be invited but not compelled to embrace Islam. If they persist in their unbelief, they may continue to practice their old religions, but subject to a poll-tax and some other disabilities, variously defined. These are set forth in a kind of pact or contract known as the *dhimma*, and those who participated in it were called *dhimmi*, the term normally used for the tolerated non-Muslim subjects of the Muslim state. The *dhimma* was only available to the permitted religions. For others, regarded as polytheists and idolaters, the options were conversion to Islam or death, which might be commuted to slavery and service. In fact, as Islam spread eastward first into Persia and then into India, it was found expedient to extend the scope of toleration to include other religions. For this purpose, the enigmatic Sabians were useful.

The enforcement, even the definition of the status of *dhimmi*, has varied enormously at different times and places in the fourteen centuries of Muslim history. In our own day, as with so many other aspects of Islamic history and culture, it has given rise to two contrasting myths: the one of a ferocious and unremitting persecution, the other of an interfaith utopia of complete equality and harmonious cooperation.

As is usual with such myths, both contain elements of truth; both are wildly, at times absurdly, distorted. As noted, practice varied greatly in different places and periods. But this much could be said with a reasonable certainty, that until the rise of secularism in Europe from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward, the position of non-Muslims in the Muslim world was in general far better than the position of non-Christians or, still worse, deviant Christians in most Christian countries.

The clash between Christian Europe and the Muslim Ottoman Empire from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century has sometimes been compared to the clash between the West and the Soviet Union in more recent

times. The comparison has some validity, but in making it, one should recall that in the earlier clash between Christendom and Islam, the movement of refugees, of those who in Lenin's famous phrase voted with their feet, was overwhelmingly from west to east and not, as in more recent times, from east to west.

The most obvious form of discrimination was the payment of the *jizya*, the poll-tax levied on non-Muslim subjects of a Muslim state. The *jizya* varied both in amount and in manner of collection. In some times and places, it was collected at a flat rate, and at other times, at different rates according to income. In the Ottoman Empire, the collection of *jizya* was entrusted to the various communities, who combined it with their own communal taxes on their own subjects and remitted an agreed amount to the state treasury. In principle, they were not allowed to build new places of worship, but only to maintain and where necessary to renovate old ones. In practice, this rule was usually disregarded, and many new churches and synagogues were built in lands under Muslim rule. One ban, however, was strictly enforced. In no circumstances were non-Muslims permitted to build places of worship that overtopped Muslim buildings. According to a classical dictum, "Islam overtops; it is not overtopped." Other disabilities included a ban on riding horses (donkeys were permitted) and bearing arms, and the imposition or prohibition of certain garments and the wearing of distinguishing signs or marks. These, like other rules, were sometimes rigorously enforced, sometimes intermittently, sometimes not at all.

By the standards of modern democracy, these forms of discrimination are, of course, unacceptable. But at the time, they represented a considerable improvement on what was available elsewhere and even included one element missing in the modern open society—that of communal autonomy. In the Ottoman Empire, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century reforms, *dhimmi* communities, Jews and Christians of various churches, formed their own communities, under their own heads and subject to their own laws, administered by their own courts, in such matters as marriage and divorce, inheritance, and much else. This autonomy included education, jurisdiction of their own courts in civil

matters and, even in some criminal matters, of a religious nature. Thus, a Christian could be tried and punished by a Christian court for bigamy, or a Jew by a Rabbinic court on a charge of violating the Sabbath, though these were in no sense offenses against the generally accepted laws of the state and of the society.

The laws of the state were only enforced on the religious minorities where matters of public security were involved. Otherwise non-Muslims were exempt from rules that were strictly enforced against Muslims. Thus, for example, wine was, in accordance with their faith, forbidden to Muslims, but Jews and Christians were free to make, sell, and drink it without interference. There is an agonized correspondence in the Ottoman archives of the 16<sup>th</sup> century about an urgent problem of the time—how to prevent Muslim guests at Jewish and Christian weddings from drinking wine. The obvious and simple answer—a total ban—was apparently not considered. Curiously, the question of eating pork does not seem to have come up. Wine was obviously the greater temptation, and the wine tax a useful source of revenue.

The rising power of Christendom—first in the reconquest of some of the lost Christian lands, then in the extension of Christian power to Muslim lands—posed the problem of toleration in a new form—one in which the Muslim was the recipient, not the dispenser.

The juristic and theological discussion of this question began at an early date. At first, it was limited to those few Muslims who traveled or were taken to non-Muslim countries. The first group consisted of diplomats and merchants, the second of prisoners of war and slaves. The question acquired a new urgency with the advance of the Christian reconquest—in Spain and Portugal, in Sicily and, for a brief interval, in the Near East during the Crusades.

Two views crystallized among the jurists discussing this question. According to the first, Muslims must emigrate, since it is not possible to live a true Muslim life under infidel rule. Following the example set by the Prophet in his migration from pagan Mecca to Medina, they must go to a place where they can freely practice their religion, until

such time as they can return as conquerors to their homes. According to a dissenting view, Muslims might remain in their homes under the rule of infidel conquerors, provided that they were free to practice their religion and fulfill their religious duties. As more and more Muslim countries came under Christian rule, notably in the British, French, and Russian empires, emigration ceased to be a practical possibility and adjustment became necessary. In the event, this proved not to be too difficult, since the imperial powers were for the most part cautiously conservative in their treatment of their new Muslim subjects and preferred not to interfere with existing practice. In some areas, as for example in the African colonies, the Islamization of society and the replacement of African custom by Islamic law proceeded apace under the Imperial yoke.

Muslim communities living as minorities in non-Muslim countries fall into two main groups. One of these, the more recent, is the new communities established by migration in Europe, the Americas and, to some extent, Australasia. The second group is the Muslim communities left behind in countries which were once part of the Muslim world but are no longer. The most important of these is India, where a community of many millions remains, from the time of Islamic conquest and domination. Smaller groups remain in southeastern Europe, in lands that once formed a part of the Ottoman Empire. These include, notably, the Muslim communities in Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia. Other surviving Muslim communities are in the Russian Federation and in the central Asian regions of China, in countries that were at one time ruled by one or other of the great Muslim or Islamized empires in central Asia. To these we may add Israel, with a Muslim population comprising approximately one-fifth of the total.

What never seems to have occurred to any of the jurists in any place at any time was that Muslims would voluntarily migrate from Muslim lands to infidel lands and become residents, even citizens, of non-Muslim states. There are many reasons for this previously unthinkable migration, notably the great and growing discrepancy between the economic and social situations—standard of living, opportunity,

public services—between the Islamic and the Western worlds. This has led to a massive migration from the Muslim lands of Asia and Africa into Europe and recently also to many countries in North, Central, and South America. By migration, demography and, to a significant degree, conversion, there are now large and growing Muslim communities in many of these countries. In the course of time, they pass from the status of immigrants to that of legal residents and, in due course, citizens by naturalization. In most though not all places, the second generation, born in the country, are citizens by birth.

How are they treated in their new homes, and how does this treatment compare with their expectations, with what they regard as their legitimate rights? The answers to these questions vary considerably according to differences both of reality and of perception. In material things, most would agree, they are better off than they were at home, in terms of standard of living and of social services. In terms of status, or in Western language, of rights, they are getting both more and less than what they expect and see as an entitlement. In terms of economic opportunity and of political and social self-expression, they enjoy opportunity and access vastly better than in almost any Muslim country. On the other hand, they are denied the autonomous communal status that was granted as a matter of course to non-Muslim minorities in most Muslim countries in an increasingly remote past.

Despite the efforts of some European governments to be accommodating in this matter, for example by approving welfare payments to plural wives, these problems remain unresolved.

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