

ISLAMIC THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: QUR'AN'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS OTHER RELIGIONS

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Abstract

This paper deals with the teachings of the Qur'an regarding the role of religion in human history, and its attitudes towards different religions. The paper also contends that the distortion of these teachings within Muslim history is due to reasons of power and politics and its influence on Islamic theology. Finally, the paper urges the Muslims to view other religions such as Buddhism from the perspective of the Qur'an - a perspective which recognizes religious pluralism.

1) Introduction

Being involved in teaching research in Islamic Studies and Religion in Thailand for the last 19 years (ten years at public universities and nine years at Assumption University) I have come to appreciate Islamic – Buddhist – Catholic relations in Thailand and Asia. As a result, I feel I am a Muslim among Buddhists and a Buddhist among Muslims and also as a Muslim among Catholics and Catholic among Muslims.

Religions coexist in Thailand but they are rarely in dialogue. While this mere coexistence maybe good, the worldwide process of globalization and emerging multicultural types of living is illustrating that peoples and societies tend to become more insular and exclusivist resulting ultimately in ethnoreligious violence in different parts of the world as seen in Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, and Indonesia. Hence the emergence of exclusivist religious tendencies which draw lines of theological and doctrinal difference

between religious communities. This phenomenon is largely influenced by the rise of fundamentalist and puritanical tendencies in all religions which spread between geographic regions e.g. the rise and spread of puritanical Wahhabi Islam in Saudi Arabia and its export to Asian and African Muslim communities; the spread of Western Christian evangelism to Asia; rise of Hindu and Buddhist fundamentalism in Asia. Fundamentalist/puritanical religious trends are exclusivist and non-dialogical in orientation, they view their own religions as correct and divinely ordained and depict other religions as unbelief, false and misguided. They also cast the followers of other religions in negative light, as communities to be shunned or opposed. The arrival of such fundamentalist/puritanical trends in Thailand does not augur well for the future of religions here.

In light of the above development, this paper aims at dispelling the misunderstanding concerning Islam's view of other religions proliferating in the Thai Muslim community and also elsewhere. This objective of the paper is in line with commitment to the strengthening of religious tolerance and pluralism.

Religious pluralism means accepting religious validity and equality between religions, it holds that religious truth is not the exclusive property of one religion but is available through the teachings of different religions. Religious pluralism promotes the building of unity, cooperation, dialogue and understanding, both between different religions and within a single religion. It aims at peaceful coexistence between religions and promotes the recognition that religious diversity is a boon and not a bane for humanity.

This paper draws its information from the teachings of the Qur'an regarding the role of religion in human history and its attitudes towards different religions. The paper also contends that the distortion of these teachings within Muslim history due to power struggles and politics and its influence on Islamic theology. Finally, the paper urges the Muslims to view other religions such as Buddhism from the perspective of the Qur'an – a perspective which recognizes religious pluralism.

2) Islamic Theology of Religions – The Meaning of “Muslim”

As the youngest religion, Islam faced a religiously pluralistic space from its start. The Qur'an contains many verses concerning the existence of plurality of religions. And

Thus the topic of *al-ilm al-illahiyat al adyan* - Islamic theology of religions constitutes an important topic of discussion within Islamic discourse.

Muslims have discussed this topic throughout Islamic history since the time of the Prophet Muhammad when he established it practically through instituting the *misaq-i-madina* or the constitution of Medina determining interreligious relations in the city of the Prophet.

The earliest Qur'anic reference to the word “Muslim” in Qur'an chapter/*surah* 68 verse 35 is universal in meaning. The Qur'anic usage of the term Muslim means, one who submits/surrenders [or “has surrendered”] himself/herself to God or Ultimate Reality. It is important to note that this has been a human religious practice in all times of human history, it does not only refer to the followers of the prophet Muhammad.

Muhammad Asad comments that, “the term Muslim signifies (means) ‘one who surrenders himself to God’; correspondingly, *Islam* denotes ‘self-surrender to God.’ Both these terms are applied in the Qur’an to all who believe in One God and affirm this belief by an unequivocal acceptance of His revealed messages. Since the Qur’an represents the final and most universal of these divine revelations, the believers are called upon, in the sequence, to follow the guidance of its Apostle and thus to become an example for all mankind.”¹

Islam always accepts possibility of salvation outside its boundaries. It affirms the religious truth of Judaism and Christianity and those of all religions. Prophet Muhammad himself laid no restrictions on the interpretation of the above verses. For the *deen* or the religion is one but the *shariah* or the paths to it are different.

Both the Islamic revelation and Islamic history support a theology of pluralism which is founded upon the belief in surrender to God and righteousness.

However, this Qur’anic view of the recognition of other religions was lost when, “the universal narrative that emphasized the common destiny of humanity was severed from its universal roots by the restrictive Islamic conception of its political order based on the membership of only those who accepted the divine revelation to Muhammad.”²

Islam recognizes religious diversity as a normal aspect of human life. It calls for the recognition of other religions and also for the freedom of religion for all. It is only when Islam became a political force that such concepts were pushed into the background.

The Islamic theology concerning other religions seeks to address and resolve issues that affect us all across cultural boundaries. Its goal is to do things in ways different from the past for there has been a fundamental change in the ways in which

societies communicate and interact with each other. It emphasizes adopting an attitude of friendliness towards all religions. Hence, a mere superficial or literal understanding of the pieces of religio-cultural puzzle is no longer sufficient, rather the putting of these puzzle pieces together is the need of the time.

It aims at facing the ongoing regional crises and global challenges in a multi-dimensional manner, its demands go beyond rhetoric and repetitions. For what is at stake is a universal message of religion which is inter-cultural and interreligious in orientation and not restricted to the politics of the time. The objective of this undertaking is to build and promote friendly and functional relations between Islam and different religions.

To repeat, the Qur'an does not condemn other religions nor their believers, rather it calls for the building of religious humanism for the benefit of building peaceful inter-human relations and societies. This will hopefully contribute towards starting discourse and dialogue of religions within the Thai Muslim community by removing the spread of the plague of emerging insularism and negative attitudes towards other religious communities currently spreading within the Thai Muslim community and also Muslim community at large at the global level. Such tendencies can only hurt the Muslims themselves and create Islamophobia among non-Muslims.

3) The Qur'an on the Emergence of Religious Diversity

The Prophet Muhammad, his successors and later Muslim scholars have all addressed the question of Islam's view towards other religions. Islamic attitudes towards other religions also contain the trends of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, similar to those found in other religions. This will be discussed in more detail later.

Since no religion is founded in a vacuum hence all of them have to express their attitudes towards other religions through developing a theology/doctrine of religions.

From an Islamic perspective on the history of religions, the religion of the first human beings was *din al-fitrah* or *religio naturalis*.³ The concept of *din al-fitrah* is rooted in the belief of human beings submission/surrender to Ultimate Reality; it is similar to the first pillar of Islam which is belief and submission to God. The Qur'an describes it as follows:

All mankind were once one single community; [then they began to differ -] whereupon God raised up the prophets as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, and through them bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, so that it might decide between people with regard to all on which they had come to hold divergent views. (Qur'an 2:213)

From this first stance of religious belief emerged the different historical religions found in the different parts of the world, which have been recorded and studied by medieval and modern scholars of history of religions such as Mircea Eliade and his predecessors in the East and West. The historical religions include all views and forms of human worship of Ultimate Reality such as personal, non-personal, monism, polytheism, monotheism and non-theism, etc.

The Qur'an does views religious diversity as a natural way of human life, thought and society, which should not be seen as abnormal. Rather it should serve as a means for competition to do good between religious communities.

Unto every community have We appointed [different] ways of worship, which they ought to observe. Hence, [O believer,] do not let those [who follow ways other than thine] draw thee into disputes on this score, but

summon [them all] unto thy Sustainer: for, behold, thou art indeed on the right way. And if they [try to] argue with thee, say [only]: "God knows best what you are doing." [For, indeed,] God will judge between you [all] on Resurrection Day with regard to all on which you were wont to differ.

(Qur'an 22:67-69)

Unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto, you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ.

(Qur'an 5:48)

In order to further affirm the Islamic view of universality of religious belief and commonly shared religious history of humanity, Muhammad Asad, mentioned above stresses that the word meaning submission, as used in the Qur'an has a universal meaning; it is applied to anyone or one who believes in God/Ultimate Reality even though they are not Muslims. Commenting upon the Qur'anic verse 6:52 which reads:

Hence, repulse not [any of] those who at morn and evening invoke their Sustainer, seeking His countenance. Thou art in no wise accountable for them-just as they are in no wise accountable for thee -and thou hast therefore no right to repulse them: for then thou wouldst be among the evildoers.

Muhammad Asad comments that the Muslims should not rebuff followers of other religions, that is, " ...people who, while not being Muslims in the current sense of this word, believe in God and are always ("at morn and evening") "seeking His countenance" ... the exhortation voiced in this passage is directed to all followers of the Qur'an: they are enjoined not to repulse anyone who believes in God-even though his beliefs may not fully answer to the demands of the Qur'an."⁴ For the Qur'an says that God has created

humanity to worship God, “O mankind! Worship your Lord, Who hath created you and those before you, so that ye may ward off (evil).” (Qur’an 2:21). Thus Islam recognizes all believers in religion(s).

4) Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism in Islam

All the three types of religious attitudes of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism are found in Muslim community; Muslims, like followers of other religions interpret their own scripture, the Qur’an, in a variety of manners.

Exclusivists hold that only their religion is true and all others are false, inclusivists believe that their own religion is true and others are included within its salvation plan as anonymous followers, and pluralists believe that all religions are true and to that I also add that in my view all religions are equal.

The Qur’an contains two types of verses: 1) those which have historical and contextual relevance to the situation of Muhammad in Arabia and 2) universal moral teachings of eternal relevance. The majority of contemporary Muslims under the influence of fundamentalist and puritanical interpretations of the Qur’an see the historical and contextually relevant teaching of the Qur’an as being relevant under all times and conditions, hence they attach more importance to such verses of the Qur’an than those with universal moral application. Such an approach to the Qur’an leads to largely exclusivist understanding of Islam. This viewpoint goes against the pluralistic grain of the Qur’an and the principle of religious pluralism as presented in the Qur’an. Most of the Muslim scholars while accepting democracy in the political sphere of life opt for

religious exclusivism or inclusivism which influences their attitudes towards other religions.

Since the Qur'an comments on Judaism and Christianity, but rarely on other religions, several Muslim scholars of the Qur'an tend to be inclusivists as far as Judaism and Christianity are concerned, and exclusivists with regard to other religions of humanity – naively labeling the religions of Asia, Africa, Oceania and also that of the Eskimos and Siberians as being false and polytheistic forms to be rejected, just as Muhammad himself rejected Arab paganism during his time.

Exclusivists and inclusivists interpreters in all religions view pluralism as being a relativistic position which dissolves religious differences and results in an “anything goes position.” Exclusivists and inclusivists largely misunderstand the pluralists. The pluralists stand for both openness and commitment to particular tradition and community. They respect the particularities of each religious tradition.⁵ As a pluralist, Diana Eck comments that the pluralists seek, “to create the space and the means for the encounter of commitments, not to neutralize commitment ... for unless all of us can encounter one another’s conceptual, cultural, religious and spiritual expressions and understand them through dialogue, both critically and self-critically, we cannot begin to live with maturity and integrity in the world house.”⁶ Contemporary religious pluralism is different from Mughal emperor Akbar’s attempt to form a new religion of *Din-e-Ilahi* or ancient Manichaeism.

The problem with the inclusivist position espoused by many religious scholars and theologians is that secretly it may in fact be a "closet exclusivism" pretending to be inclusivist. The inclusivist position represents the controlling role of religious institutions

on religious interpretation. Religious institutions and religious authorities, fear the religious pluralist position for it challenges their power and privilege. Religious institutions are built/constructed after the death of the founders of religions and seek to control religion in the name of the founders. Religious institutions are later developments in religion and seek to control and restrict its freedom of religion from within religion through the use of power. Inclusivists fear the power of religious institutions instead of God.

The religious pluralist position is not a relativist position because it is based on reading of scripture in a way that is different from the inclusivist. This position is a frank and confident position based on sources from within each religious tradition. Religious pluralists cannot afford to be “closet inclusivists.” They develop a free and frank position from within the tradition itself where others fear to tread. While the religious pluralists are committed to building peaceful relations between religions, religious exclusivists and inclusivists – though paying lip service to peace – prefer to keep alive constant quarrels and tensions between religious sects at various intensities.

In spite of the presence of Muslim exclusivists there are still several Muslim scholars of Islam who have embraced pluralistic positions or commented positively on the need for recognition of pluralism in Islam. Some are inclusivists and some are pluralists. While it is not possible here to delve into their individual views, I should mention their names for reference, they are: Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, Muhammad Asad, Prof. Hassan Askari, Frijthof Schoun, Prof. Muhammad Hamidullah, Prof. Ismail al-Faruqi, Prof. Fazlur Rahman, Prof. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Prof. Mahmoud Ayoub, Prof. Abdul Aziz Sachedina, Dr.

Asghar Ali Engineer, Maulana Waheedudin Khan, Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, Prof. Osman Bakar, Prof. Nurcholish Madjid, Prof. Khaled Abou El Fadl, Prof. Farid Esack, Mohammad Khatami, Prof. Abdul Karim Soroush, Abdul Rahman Wahid, and the young scholars of Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL) group in Indonesia.

5) Recognition of Religious Pluralism in the Qur'an

All religions claim to be true religions, offering true revelation and true path of salvation. Such claims amount to what Paul Knitter calls as “myth of religious superiority.”⁷ It is difficult for exclusivists and inclusivists to accept religious pluralism that recognizes all religions as true paths for salvations and being equal in terms of interreligious relations. Yet, each religion’s claim of superiority is historical, spatial and contextual. Contemporary research in the history of religions demands a shift from above mentioned types of perspectives to one that recognizes equality of religions. This is not an easy task but a struggle for the adherents of different religions. Yet there will remain many who stubbornly hold onto exclusivist or inclusivist positions and will continue to deny the equality of religions.

There are many Muslims who hold exclusivist or inclusivist perspectives about Islam in its relations to other religions, be they Middle East, Asian, African, etc. Yet, a deep, reflective, historically researched and holistic understanding of the message of the Qur’an points to Islam’s recognition of religious pluralism. Some of the verses of the Qur’an are a source for building an Islamic pluralistic theology of religions. Such a theology is based on the distinctions between the teachings of the Qur’an, the practices of the prophet Muhammad, and the later exclusivist/inclusivist Islamic theology. This latter

form took shape when Islam took on the forms of a religious, missionary and legalistic institution whose power was managed by the political authorities and knowledge came to be narrowly interpreted by the *ulama* – the religious scholars who claimed sole authority in the task of interpreting Islam.

An historically researched and phenomenological reading of the Qur'an and the *hadith* – narratives of Muhammad – point to the theological recognition of religious pluralism.

In light of the fact that the Qur'an employs the term "Muslim" to mean a believer in Transcendent or Ultimate Reality and does not refer to an ethnic Muslim community, hence the Qur'an embraces the following positions on religious pluralism.

a) Everyone who believes in Ultimate Reality and does good, is guaranteed salvation.

This is mentioned in the following two verses of the Qur'an.

Verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds – shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (Qur'an 2:62)

For, verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Sabians, and the Christians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds – no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (Qur'an 5:69)

The above verse which occurs twice in the Qur'an sets down a fundamental teaching of Islam that salvation/liberation/enlightenment is conditional upon three

beliefs: belief in God/Ultimate Reality, belief in the Day of Judgment and performing of good deeds and righteous action in life.

b) Allah and other definitions of Ultimate Reality are identical.

We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you: or our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that We [all] surrender ourselves.
(Qur'an 29:46)

c) Diversity of Religions is a part of God's plan and will last as long as the world lasts.

Unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto, you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ.
(Qur'an 5:48)

Muhammad Asad comments on the above verse as follows, "Thus, the Qur'an impresses upon all who believe in God - Muslims and non-Muslims alike - that the differences in their religious practices should make them "vie with one another in doing good works" rather than lose themselves in mutual hostility."⁸

d) Muslims must be tolerant and reverential toward other religions.

In keeping with the spirit of religious pluralism the Qur'an categorically declares, "There is no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256). This means that nobody is to be

forced to believe or convert to Islam, and everyone is free to leave Islam. Everyone is free to believe or disbelieve in Islam, “Then whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve.” (Qur’an 18:29). Prophet Muhammad did not only reject compulsion in religion but also practiced it as seen from below mentioned events.

Many commentators cite some events in which the Prophet himself implemented the requirements of verse 2:256 and prohibited his companion from compelling people to accept Islam. For instance, Tabari mentions that when the two Jewish tribes of Qaynuqa and Nadr were expelled from Medina, they had in their charge children of the Ansar (Medinian Muslims) who had been placed with Jewish families. The biological parents asked the Prophet’s permission to take their children back and raise them as Muslims, but the Prophet said, ‘There is no compulsion in religion.’ Tabari mentions another event which indicates how this verse worked in practice. A Muslim named Al-Hussayn had two sons, who having been influenced by Christian merchants, converted to Christianity and left Medina to go to Syria with these missionary merchants. Al-Hussayn pleaded with the Prophet to pursue the convoy and bring his sons back to Islam. But the Prophet once again said, ‘There is no compulsion in religion’, that is let them follow the religion of their choice, even though it is not Islam.⁹

Furthermore everyone is free to choose and practice their religions. “To you your religion and for me mine” (Qur’an 109:6). The diversity of languages, races, and ethnicities are to be honored and respected. This natural diversity is also considered from a divine perspective. The Qur’an remarks:

O human beings! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware.
(Qur’an 49:13)

Muslims are reminded to be cordial toward non-Muslims. Muslims should neither be judgmental nor condemnatory towards non-Muslims.

Hence, repulse not [any of] those who at morn and evening invoke their Sustainer, seeking His countenance. Thou art in no wise accountable for them-just as they are in no wise accountable for thee – and thou hast therefore no right to repulse them: for then thou wouldst be among the evildoers. (Qur'an 6:52)

God is our Sustainer as well as your Sustainer. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no contention between us and you: God will bring us all together – for with Him is all journeys' end. (Qur'an 42:15)

e) Islam is not a new religion but a re-confirmation of truth revealed before. Muslim believe in all prophets without making any distinction between them.

The Qur'an attitude towards religious pluralism is reflected in its contention that Islam is a reconfirmation of the message brought by previous prophets.

And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a watcher over it ... For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto Allah ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.

The apostle, and the believers with him, believe in what has been bestowed upon him from on high by his Sustainer: they all believe in God, and His angels, and His revelations, and His apostles, making no distinction between any of His apostles; and they say: We have heard, and we pay heed. Grant us Thy forgiveness, O our Sustainer, for with Thee is all journeys' end! (Qur'an 2:285)

And it is the fundamental belief of the Muslims that though Muhammad is the last of prophet, Muslims believe in all prophets without making any distinction between them.

Say: “We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed by their Sustainer unto Moses and Jesus and all the [other] prophets: we make no distinction between any of them. And unto Him do we surrender ourselves.” (Qur’an 3:84)

Behold, We have inspired thee [O Prophet] just as We inspired Noah and all the prophets after him - as We inspired Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants, including Jesus and Job, and Jonah, and Aaron, and Solomon; and as We vouchsafed unto David a book of divine wisdom; (Qur’an 4:163)

Above Qur’anic references and comments illustrate that contemporary Muslims in their efforts to brand the followers of other religions as *kafirs* – unbelievers, infidels have very much deviated from the tolerant and pluralistic spirit of their own scripture.

6) Is Islam, God’s Only Religion? A Need for Reinterpretation

The majority of Muslims opine that Islam is the only religion preferred by God and it will prevail over other religions. This Muslim view is based on a literal reading of the following verse in the Qur’an.

Behold, the only [true] religion in the sight of God is Islam. (Qur’an 3:19)

And whoso seeketh as religion other than the Surrender to God (Islam) it will not be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the Hereafter. (Qur’an 3:85)

Actually, the Qur'anic use of the word "Islam" in the above mentioned verses and as discussed above means "self-surrender" and thus applies universally to all those who have surrendered to belief in God/Ultimate Reality since the dawn of human history, it does not refer the ethnic usage of the term Islam which refers to the Muslim community only.

Secondly, the above verse has a historical context, it tells the pagan Arabs of Muhammad's time that the only true religion is self-surrender to God and not idolatry. For the Arabs were conscious of the historical presence of monotheism in Arabia since Abrahamic times. Often it became corrupted into idolatry.

The above verse necessitates a distinction between philosophical Islam, which regards faith as belief in God/Ultimate Reality and righteous living, and institutionalized Islam of the post-Muhammad era. A narrow literal and legalistic interpretation of the usage of the word "Islam" in the verses above, contradicts the Quranic view of religious pluralism as illustrated in the verses provided in this article.

Hence, for the sake of religious pluralism, there is a need for Muslims to engage in a broadened reading of their own religious sources. The Qur'an is book with a universal message. It is not a book of contradictory teachings, if it was, it could not be considered a divine revelation.

8) Conclusion

Contemporary Islamic exclusivism present in the Muslim world and wherever Muslims reside as minorities is the result of the rise and impact of narrow minded and

exclusivist approach of Islamic religious nationalism, this phenomenon emerged in 1970s and 1980s as a reaction to nationalist secularism.

The development of religious nationalism and radicalism was not only an Islamic phenomenon but is found across all religions of the world as evident in the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, Jewish nationalism in Israel and Christian fundamentalism in the West.¹⁰

The second reason for the spread of Muslim religious exclusivism is educational; the majority of Muslim scholars attended religious seminaries which offered narrowly-based religious studies curricula which bred insularity and supported narrow approaches to life and views about others.

The third factor for the development of Muslim exclusivism is the challenges from globalization and modernity which have led to the strengthening of parochial ethnic and religious identities and nationalisms as evident from the rise of various ethno-religious conflicts such as in Rwanda, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, southern Thailand, southern Philippines, Irian Jaya and the Moluccas in Indonesia, etc.

Pluralism is itself an ideal environment in which to project not narrow formalisms but core Islamic values, including the genuinely Islamic concept of human dignity. These core Islamic values are the same values that promote unity in the secular world – values such as seeking knowledge, equality, freedom, human rights, justice, and altruism. The principles of a new world are embedded in the pluralistic vision of Islam and were embodied in the prototype of an Islamic society existing during the time of the Prophet and in al-Andalus – a vision capable of reconciling the demands of diversity and unity in humane framework.¹¹

Thus if a Muslim minority such as that in Thailand prefers to adopt an exclusivist and narrow interpretation of the universal message of the Qur'an it will lead to its own peril. Instead it should opt for a religiously pluralistic understanding of the message of the Qur'an with focus on participating in the building of Thai civil society with democratic institutions, along with Thai Buddhists and Thai Christians. And this has to be initiated not only at the level of elites but at the grass-roots level. The contemporary age asks Muslims to rethink their views and attitudes towards other religions. The way of the future is that of religious pluralism.

Verily, God does not change the condition of a people unless they change it themselves (with their own souls). (Qur'an 13:11)

¹Endnotes

Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Quran* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980) p. 518.

² Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 50.

³ The concept of *din al-fitrah* or *religio naturalis* of the Qur'an is different from the eighteenth century Enlightenment view of religion concept of "natural religion" founded by liberal theologians influenced by Deism.

⁴ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Quran*, p. 179, n. 41.

⁵ Jeremy Henzell-Thomas, *The Challenge of Pluralism and the Middle Way of Islam* (Richmond, Surrey: The Association of Muslim Social Scientists (UK), 2002) p. 16.

⁶ Quoted in above, *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁷ Paul F. Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004).

⁸ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Quran*, p. 154, n. 68.

⁹ Quoted in Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 1994) p. 191.

¹⁰ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

¹¹ Jeremy Henzell-Thomas, *The Challenge of Pluralism and the Middle Way of Islam* p. 16.