

Rational and Religious Roots of Peaceful Coexistence with the Religious Other

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In this article, rational arguments and religious teachings that underlie the necessity of peaceful coexistence with the followers of other religions will be discussed. Moreover, the core impediments to coexistence, such as lacking self-knowledge and being ignorant about the others, will be examined, and practical ways for effectively interacting with the followers of other religions will be suggested. Without a doubt, being rational and following the instructions of the Holy Quran and the teachings of the Holy Prophet and his family can result in the prevalence of peace for all human beings in the world. In this essay, we will present rational arguments for, and religious teachings on, peaceful coexistence, taking into account the conditions of the contemporary world.

Keywords: interaction, coexistence, peace, pluralism, salvation.

Introduction

As Shiite Muslims, we believe that Islam is the true religion and the last divine revelation for mankind; it will lead to guidance, righteousness, and ultimate salvation. However, the reality is that in that the majority of Muslims are not Shiite, and the majority of the world's population is not Muslim. How to interact with the religious other is an important issue that can have a significant impact on the survival and success of

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Islam and Shiism.

It should be noted at the outset that the attitude of many Shiite scholars, especially jurists¹ and theologians,² on this issue has been to a great extent exclusivist, and its results can be seen in the rulings pertaining to ritual purity and impurity, marriage, burial rituals, and their definitions of faith. As a result of different worldviews and ways of thinking, this exclusivist approach is less found among Shiite philosophers (e.g., Tabataba‘i 1417 AH, 1:193) and mystics (e.g., Rumi 1336 Sh, 72.2; Shabistari, 1365 Sh, 79).

Of course, rejecting the religious other is not exclusive to Shiite scholars; prominent figures among Sunni Muslims³ and among the adherents of other religions also have the same attitude. For instance, in 1854, Pope Pius IX stated the following: “It must, of course, be held as

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1. A group of Shiite jurists, such as Shaykh Ansari (n.d., 325), Yusuf al-Bahrani, (n.d., 5:6 -164), Sahib al-Jawahir (Najafi 1367 Sh, 6:42), and Tusi (5:234), among others, maintain that the People of the Book and Zoroastrians are polytheists and therefore ritually impure. Some other Shiite jurists, such as Sayyid Abul Qasim al-Khoei (n.d., 1:107), Makarem Shirazi (1392 Sh, ruling 113), Sayyid Ali Sistani (1379 Sh, 26), and Jawad Tabrizi (n.d., ruling 107), question the viewpoint of the former group but avoid taking a position on the matter. A third group, such as Sayyid Mohsin al-Hakim (Jannati 1986, 22), Muhammed Jawad Mugniya (1379 Sh, 33), Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (1403 AH, 1:319), Sayyid Ali Khamenei (n.d., 1:97), Fadil Lankarani (1386 Sh, ruling 109), and Nuri Hamadani (1393 Sh, ruling 106), however, maintain that all human beings are essentially pure. Comparing the views of the recent and past jurists shows us how the changes in the attitude of our jurists toward the followers of other religions has led to changes in their fatwas.
 2. For instance, al-Shaykh al-Saduq considers the rejection of imamate the same as the rejection of prophethood and divine unity (1418 AH, 27). Al-Shaykh al-Mufid (1413 AH, 44) and al-Sharif al-Murtada (1405 AH, 1:165-66), among others, also have the same viewpoint.
 3. For instance, Muhammad b. Musa al-Hanafi, the judge of Damascus, excommunicated Shafi‘i Muslims (Haydar 2002, 1:200), and Ibn Hatim al-Hanbali stated that “he who is not a Hanbali is not a Muslim” (1:202). The recent Salafi groups have also surpassed all other sects in excommunicating other Muslims.

a matter of faith that outside the apostolic Roman Church no one can be saved, that the Church is the only ark of salvation, and that whoever does not enter it will perish in the flood” (quoted in Sulaymani 1393). But when the Church faced the real world and decided to open its doors to everyone, it changed its attitude. In 1962, the Second Vatican Council, modified some of the previous teachings of the Church, including the teachings on the salvation of the followers of other religions and also of non-Catholic Christians, in significant ways:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do His will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. (quoted in Sulaymani 1393)

Even the Jews, who strongly believed that they were the chosen people and superior to the others, later changed and adapted themselves to the conditions of new world (Gandomi ۱۳۹۴ Sh).

We live in a new world with advanced communications technology that has connected people with various cultural and religious backgrounds to each other. In such a world, what should be our strategy, based on Islamic teachings, in our interactions with the others? This is the main question we seek to answer in this article.

It is necessary here to briefly discuss the topic of pluralism and exclusivism. The latter is the belief that salvation is achieved only through following one particular religion. Other religions may contain some truths, but there is only one true religion (Peterson et al. 1390 Sh, 402). Pluralism stands in contrast to exclusivism and can be divided into two types: pluralism in truth and pluralism in salvation. Pluralism in truth is the idea that all religions are true and valid, because they all are manifestations of, and ways to, the Truth. We do not adhere to this type of pluralism. According to our beliefs, Islam has been the only

true, unaltered, valid religion since its advent: “Indeed, with Allah religion is Islam” (Quran 3:19). Therefore, other religions are no longer valid, even though they may have been valid prior to the advent of Islam.

However, this does not mean that the followers of other religions will not be saved. According to pluralism in salvation, for every person who believes in God and worships Him and sincerely seeks the Truth, salvation is possible, even if they cannot find the true religion. This kind of pluralism is accepted in Shiite thought. The scope of salvation must not be narrowed down to such an extent that only a very small number of people could be saved. In this regard, Shahid Mutahhari says:

By God, seventy or eighty percent of them [i.e., Christian clergy] have a deep sense of faith, piety, and sincerity, and they have given, in the name of Christ and Mary, so much truthfulness, piety, and purity to people. They have no fault; they will go to Paradise; their pastors also will go to Paradise. (Mutahhari 1362 Sh, 1:51).

In another place, Shahid Mutahhari introduces the criterion of salvation and mortality as follows:

If someone pays attention to the narrations, he will discover that the Imams (a) have emphasized that whatever befalls man is because when the truth is presented to him, he rejects it, or because he does not seek the truth when he must. Therefore, those who do not reach the truth because of their weak intellectual faculties or because they are in certain circumstances and thus do not knowingly deny the truth will not be at the same rank as the deniers and opponents of the truth. The pure Imams considered many people from this category. Such people are in an unfortunate state, and God will hopefully forgive them. (Mutahhari 1392 Sh, 1:320 ff.)

From a Shiite Islamic perspective, it can be argued that peaceful coexistence and interaction with the followers of other faith traditions is a necessity, especially in our world today. Arguments based on both reason and tradition can be presented to demonstrate this claim.

Tradition-Based Arguments

The Holy Quran and the hadiths of the Prophet (s) and Imams (a) are the main source of Shiite Islamic tradition, which provide us with important teachings regarding interaction and coexistence with the religious other. For instance, in Sura al-Nahl, we read: “Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good advice and dispute with them in a manner that is best. Indeed, your Lord knows best those who stray from His way, and He knows best those who are guided” (Quran 16:125). This verse is counted as one of the most comprehensive verses of the Quran with regard to interaction with the followers of other religions. It explains the steps of calling people to the path of God: “wisdom,” “good advice,” “dispute” in the best manner, and finally leaving the outcome to God. This is the best method of calling people to God, which was the essential mission of the Prophet (s), and in which no traces of cursing, bigotry, or arrogance can be found. Having wisdom, philanthropy, and tolerance are among the important points that this verse teaches us.

In another verse, God portrays the worst situation and the most difficult circumstance in interaction and gives the following instruction: “Repel [evil] with what is best. [If you do so,] behold, he between whom and you was enmity, will be as though he were a sympathetic friend” (Quran 41:34). This is one of the most important commandments of the Quran with regard to creating constructive interaction, which unfortunately has been neglected. According to this verse, when someone wrongs the Prophet and becomes his enemy, the Prophet not only should not retaliate but rather he is commanded to do good in return. Such a kind and benevolent reaction, which is a manifestation of the truth upon which Islamic beliefs are founded, transforms the heart of the enemy and makes him a friend or even a follower. Unfortunately, however, there is a big gap between what this verse teaches and the way

many Muslims deal with the religious other.

In Sura al-Saba', God commands the Prophet to call the people to his way, using the following proofs, which are rational and rooted in their primordial nature (*fitra*):

Say, "Who provides for you from the heavens and the earth?" Say, "Allah! Indeed either we or you are rightly guided or in manifest error." Say, "You will not be questioned about our guilt, nor shall we be questioned about what you do." (Quran 34:24-25)

In the first step, the verse focuses on the common beliefs between Muslims and polytheists (i.e., the fact that God provides for all creatures), and then asks the polytheists to refer to their conscience and decide whether the Prophet is saying the truth or not. But even if the polytheists insist on their beliefs and reject the call of God, the Prophet adopts a peaceful position by simply stating that everyone will receive the fruits of his own actions. And he says this with great humbleness, since he uses the term "guilt" for the Muslims ("You will not be questioned about our *guilt*") but avoids using this word for his opponents ("nor shall we be questioned about *what you do*") as it may offend them and leave a counter-productive impact. To be sure, not judging the opponents and being polite with them in dialogues and debates are among important points that need to be observed.

Of course, we cannot have a comprehensive discussion of the Quranic view on interaction with the followers of other religions in one article. Such topics as freedom of thought, rejection of racism and tribalism, priority of peace, co-operation in righteous affairs, fighting against ignorance, recognizing the past Prophets and sacred scriptures and places, inviting to peaceful dialogue, paying attention to the common grounds, and respecting the rights of minorities are some of the themes that have been discussed in the Quran.

Shiite Islamic tradition also has many teachings with regard to the

topic of interaction and coexistence with the followers of other religions. Instances of these teachings can be found in *Bihar al-anwar* (vol. 58), which not only address personal and individual ethics but also principles of forming a global society in which people can learn about Shiism and willingly embrace it.

In the accounts of the life and conduct of the Prophet and his family (Ahl al-Bayt), no traces of ridicule, threatening, slander, or cursing the religious other can be found; rather, all one can find is wise and respectful encounters and dialogues, rooted in the high morals of the Prophet and Ahl al-Bayt.

Nahj al-balagha reports one of the important sayings of Imam ‘Ali (a) against Kharijites, who would negate any kind of human rule over other humans by referring to the Quranic verse “Judgement belongs only to Allah” (6:57):

A true statement to which a false meaning is attributed. It is true that verdict lies but with Allah, but these people say that (the function of) governance is only for Allah. The fact is that there is no escape for men from ruler good or bad. The faithful persons perform (good) acts in his rule while the unfaithful enjoys (worldly) benefits in it. During the rule, Allah would carry everything to end. Through the ruler tax is collected, enemy is fought, roadways are protected and the right of the weak is taken from the strong till the virtuous enjoys peace and allowed protection from (the oppression of) the wicked. (Nahj al-balagha, sermon 40)

In this statement, the Imam points to the necessity of having a ruler for society based on the necessity of security and order, without which the foundation of society will be destroyed and there will remain no place for anyone, whether believer or disbeliever. Therefore, anything that harms social security and public order has to be avoided.

Interpreting Quran 2:83 (“and speak kindly to people”), Imam Sadiq (a) is reported to have said,

We must speak to all people, believers and non-believers, kindly. This is obvious in the case of believers, but, in the case of non-believers, one should talk to them kindly so as to attract them to faith. This is also the easiest way to protect oneself and one’s believing brothers from their harm. (Majlisi 1403 AH, 68:309).

In this hadith, reference has been made to rational tenets such as attracting the hearts and repelling the threats of the opponents from oneself and from other believing brothers. Our strategy in facing the opponents in all circumstances, whether we are weak or in power, must be tolerance and peaceful coexistence. If a person is in a position of power, tolerance toward his opponents will be the cause of attracting their hearts and inviting them to faith; and if he is in a position of weakness, it will protect him from being persecuted by his powerful opponents. This hadith also clearly shows the rational bases of being tolerant and kind to one’s opponents. An important teaching that can be derived from Quranic verses and traditions is that we need to have an inclusive attitude in order to be able to live peacefully with the followers of other religions, even with unbelievers and polytheists.

The way the Prophet and Ahl al-Bayt treated their opponents is completely different from the way Muslims treat their opponents today. The Prophet (s) visited a Jew who was ill, Imam Rida (a) visited a Christian at his bedside, Imam Ali (a) walked with a Christian as a farewell, he also allocated a share of public treasury to a poor Jew, and Imam Sadiq (a) prohibited cursing a non-Muslim. These are among the many instances of constructive, ethical interaction between Ahl al-Bayt and the followers of other religions. Of course, exclusion and battle have their respective places, but they must be restricted to the cases in which peaceful measures cannot solve the problems and the faith, lives, or properties of believers and the oppressed ones remain in

danger. Therefore, the default principle is peaceful coexistence with all people.

Rational Arguments for Interaction

The foundation of creation is laid upon difference and diversity. God created all creatures, including human beings, in different shapes and colors, and the basis of the survival of the world is this diversity. Of course, this diversity is part of a coherent and purposeful system, which is progressing towards perfection. Many Qur'anic verses refer to this point; for instance, in Sura al-Rum, we read: "Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colours. There are indeed signs in that for those who know" (Quran 30:22). In this verse, God clearly states that He has purposely created diversity and that this diversity is one of His signs. Although it is possible to remove the differences, but God declares that this is against the purpose of creation: "[H]ad Allah wished He would have made you one community" (Quran 5:48). The Quran considers the diversity of religions and sects natural, and rejects the use of divine power in unifying religions: "Had Allah wished they would not have ascribed partners [to Him]. We have not made you a caretaker for them, nor is it your duty to watch over them" (6:107). Elsewhere, we read, "And had your Lord wished, all those who are on earth would have believed. Would you then force people until they become faithful?" (10:99) and "With Allah rests guidance to the straight path, and some of them are devious, and had He wished He would have guided you all" (16:9).

The difference between forcing the masses to convert and giving them free choice (which may lead to some people's going astray) is evident, but what is valuable in the eyes of God is the latter; that is, God has placed the perfection of human beings in their choosing the path of perfection on the basis of their free will, which leads to higher and lower

degrees of spiritual growth among human beings, and it is important is to keep the flow of this divine tradition in leaving people free to choose their religion.

The reports of the conduct of the Prophet (s) show that not only he strove to resolve conflicts but he also tried to make positive use of the conflicts and change the threats into opportunities. As an example, Bilal, a former Abyssinian slave, was regarded as a threat by some people, but the Prophet turned him into an opportunity; even with the stuttering of his tongue and the darkness of his skin, he became one of the closest people to the Prophet, and the Prophet's friendly, non-biased attitude toward him, among other things, resulted in the conversion of a great number of Africans to Islam (seven hundred million African Muslims today). On the other hand, referring to Jewish and Christian scriptures is not only found in the Qur'an but also in the traditions of the Prophet and Ahl al-Bayt. Many hadiths also contain direct quotations from the scriptures of other religions, which paves the ground for the followers of other religions to embrace Islam.

In order to achieve the truth, we should have a holistic rather than particularistic approach in our study of hadiths and try to understand the depth of the meaning and philosophy behind the words. For example, in his famous letter, Imam Ali wrote the following to Malik al-Ashtar: "People are of two types: either they are your brethren in faith or they are similar to you are in creation" (Nahj al-balagha, letter 53). This instruction was given by the Imam to Malik when Malik, considering the power and authority that he could have had over Egypt, was able to easily force non-Muslims to convert to Islam or to create significant restrictions for them. It is in this context that Imam Ali (a) commands him to respect the principle of justice and to avoid oppression, and that by reminding him of religious commonalities or at least of the similarity in creation. In these valuable words, Imam Ali (a) introduces humanity, rather than religion, as the base of coexistence and justice. Of course, if

religious commonalities also exist, the responsibilities and obligations also increase. This commandment is rational, and even non-Muslims would agree with the truth and wisdom behind it.

Another rational reason is that the Shia, except in a few regions, are in the minority throughout the world. The only way to preserve this minority, which has gone through various religious, economic, and even genocidal crises, is to ensure that their religiosity and their social activities are in such a way that does not harm coexistence, mutual respect, and consequently survival. Thus, one of the important teachings of Shiism, which has guaranteed the survival of this religious minority throughout history and in the most critical times, is precautionary dissimulation, which is also rational, because being religious is dependent on being alive, and being alive is contingent upon staying away from dangers, which is possible through peaceful coexistence. So, it is entirely rational that all people must respect each other's rights to live; if we respect the rights of others, they will respect our rights.

Considering the fact that in the contemporary world the geographical boundaries have faded away, especially as a result of the advanced information and communications technology, it is no longer possible to consider precautionary dissimulation specific to a certain place; rather, dissimulation should be observed more than before, because the slightest error will cause waves of trouble and difficulty for fellow believers in other parts of the world. Therefore, peaceful coexistence and interaction and precautionary dissimulation are all rational principles that guarantee peace around the world for everyone.

Rejecting Coexistence and Its Root

Rejecting peaceful interaction and coexistence has a fundamental cause, and that is ignorance. Undoubtedly, evil people are found among the

followers of different religions, but many of them do not claim that their beliefs are universal and absolutely true. Moreover, their social conduct is not based on their religion but on the laws and regulations of where they live, which in many cases have nothing to do with religion. This is a fundamental difference between Shiism and those religious traditions, because Shiism considers itself a universal faith that regulates both individual and social aspects of human life. Therefore, the importance of engagement and interaction for Shiism is doubled. This is clearly stated in the following hadith of Imam Sadiq (a), in which he said to one of his followers: “A good deed is good from everyone, but it is better from you, because you are related to us; and an evil act is bad from everyone, but it is worse from you, because you are related to us” (Hilli 1408 AH, 153). Therefore, being ignorant of the place of Shiism and not knowing anything about leading a global community, consisting of various religions and sects, lead to exclusivist and monopolistic attitudes among some religious people. The Holy Quran condemns such attitudes and actions, which are rooted in ignorance: “Ah! You are the very ones who argue about that of which you have knowledge. Why then do you argue about that of which you have no knowledge? And Allah knows and you do not know” (3:66).

Therefore, an analysis of the foundations of peaceful coexistence is not possible without having an efficient anthropology that covers two important areas: knowing oneself and knowing others. If a person does not know himself, he cannot understand the extent of his expectations from others; he cannot realize whether he is a fanatic that considers himself the criterion of truth, who thinks that others can be true only if they think and behave completely like him. We need to think clearly about such points. If we look at the world from such a narrow and one-sided angle, we will naturally reject any kind of interaction and coexistence with those who think and live differently from us.

The second aspect of the anthropology that underlies peaceful coexistence is the way we look at others and how much we know them. Do we look at them the way they are or the way we like to see them? Have we ever tried to understand the world from their perspective? Here, a sympathetic look towards others and a sincere effort to know and understand them is crucial.

The Quran and hadiths contain many teachings about people and their nature. For instance, Imam al-Husayn is reported to have said, “Verily, people are the slaves of this world, and [their claim of adherence to] religion is merely lip service” (Harrani 1404 AH, 245). These words are not to disparage people, but to acquaint us with the reality that the relationship between religion and people is the weakest relationship. Without deep and accurate fundamentals in theology and anthropology, our efforts to strengthen this relationship would be fruitless.

Conclusion

Based on the rational and traditional evidence that was presented, we realize that in order to reach peaceful coexistence we need to change our view and emphasize humanity, not racial, regional, or religious affiliations. We must admit that all humans are honorable. If a person is guilty of a crime, he must be punished regardless of whether he is a Shiite, a Sunni, or a Christian; otherwise, there is no reason to persecute or exclude him. This can be verified on the basis of rational arguments and the teachings of our religion. The necessities of the world today also lead us not only to thinking about peaceful coexistence and interaction in theory but also to putting it seriously into practice.

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