
DISCOVERING RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN ISLAMIC TRADITION: AN EFFORT TO GAIN UNDERSTANDING OF OTHERS

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji peran multiplisitas agama dan kepemimpinan yang diperankan oleh Nabi Muhammad (SAW) untuk memperluas masyarakat multikultural di mana tempat tinggal dan hak yang sama diberikan kepada semua orang terlepas dari prinsip dan praktik agama. Metode penelitian ini menggunakan studi kepustakaan atau literature review dengan mengumpulkan sejumlah karya yang berkaitan dengan kehidupan subjek penelitian untuk mencari sumber lain yang dapat menambah referensi dan melengkapi biografi politik tokoh yang diangkat dalam penelitian ini. Hasil penelitian ini adalah perjanjian Nabi Muhammad (SAW) dengan hubungan Kristen pada masanya digunakan sebagai kerangka untuk menghidupkan kembali semangat demokrasi dari perjanjian dengan mentransfer kebebasan beragama yang simpatik dan hak-hak kota, yang dapat mengarah pada masyarakat koeksistensi yang damai. Pakta Nabi Muhammad (SAW) dengan umat Kristen pada masanya dapat digunakan untuk mengembangkan narasi yang lebih kuat tentang kemitraan demokratis antara Muslim dan Kristen dan lainnya di dunia global dan sekitarnya. Nabi Muhammad mengakui keragaman agama dan perbedaan budaya dan terlibat di dalamnya untuk mendapatkan pemahaman yang baik tentang nilai-nilai dan komitmen yang berbeda lainnya.

Kata kunci: Perjanjian, Pluralisme, Nabi Muhammad.

Abstract

This article examines the role that devout multiplicity and municipal rights played by Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) in extending a multicultural society in which residency and equal rights were granted to all people irrespective of devout principles and practices. This research method uses a literature study or literature review by collecting a number of works related to the life of the research subject to find other sources that can add references and complete the political biographies of the figures raised in this study. The result is Pacts of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) with the Christian relation of his time are used as a framework for reviving the democratic spirit of the covenants by transferring sympathetic religious freedom and municipal rights, which can lead to peaceful co-existence of society. The pacts of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) with the Christians of his time can be used to develop a stronger narrative of the democratic partnership between Muslims and Christians and others in the global world and beyond. Prophet Muhammad recognizes diverse religious and cultural differences and engages in them in order to gain a sound understanding of the values and commitments of the different others.

Keywords: Covenant, Prophet Muhammad, Pluralism.

INTRODUCTION

Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) is designated by the Qur'an as the preceding messenger of Allah Almighty, calling people to all that is good and cautioning about the consequences of refusing reality and perfect preparation for the day of resurrection. Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) faced a lot of challenges in his duty. Starting from his family members those who ganged against him and stated provocative acts, they were claiming that he was devaluing their idols (Polytheism) and calling towards monotheism.

The Muslim ummah is bespoke to play a proactive role in creating peace, justice, balance, moderation, and fairness within the Muslim community (ummah) as well as in human civilization at large. In fact, the terminology, *ummatan wasaatan*, which the Qur'an uses to describe a distinguishing feature of the Muslim ummah, conveys a description of the ummah as one of moderation, balance, and the middle way. The Qur'an, accordingly, strongly condemns an excessive or embroidered attitude in any aspect of life, and considers extremism of any sort to be misguided.

The holy Prophet's attitude (PBUH) with non-Muslims was impressed indeed especially when he migrated to Medina, he drafted the first World constitution (*Meethaq l Madina*) which pave ways to Christians and Jews to respect each other. Many even embraced Islam. Moreover, after evaluating current trends in Muslim-Christian relations, there is an inclination to view this complex relationship through the prism of contemporary events alone. Any account of Muslim-Christian relations, however, must consider historical processes and events in order to position current developments in their appropriate context. Before embarking on contemporary issues affecting Muslim and Christian communities, a few historical issues are in order. In the modern era (1500–1945 CE), the major part of the "Muslim world" was ruled by "Western civilization".

Throughout this retro, the Islamic world, as noted by Armstrong, was "trembled by the transformation process. Instead of being one of the leaders of world civilization, Islamdom was quickly and permanently reduced to a dependent bloc by the European powers". Europeans assumed that European culture had always been progressive and that Muslim societies were backward, inefficient, and corrupt (Armstrong, 2011). European colonialists in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia also wreaked destruction by plundering Islamic economies and supplanting Islamic educational systems with secular or Christianity-based systems (Siddiqui, A., 2007)). These kinds of colonial interactions had a decisive influence on the religious and political relations between Muslims and Christians, and shaped not least the mutual theological images and assessments of the other.

Muslims today see these historic events as influencing the development of Islamic societies as well as shaping perceptions of Christians living within their own borders and around the "Western world". In recent years, relations between



Muslims and Christians have been described in light of a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, S. P., 2000) in which the “Muslim world” (Islamic civilization) and “the West” (Christian civilization) are situated in binaries such as “us versus them”, “good versus evil”, “civilized versus uncivilized”, and “secular versus non-secular”. The “clash of civilizations” gained particular prominence after the events of 11 September 2001 and the West’s succeeding military operations in Muslim-majority countries, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, and Syria.

The widespread violence caused by these invasions helped fan the flames of “radical Islam” and fostered opposition to the “Western world” and Christianity alike. To further complicate relations between Muslims and Christians, Muslims today might perceive “Christian nations” like the Philippines and the United States as severely oppressing Muslims, whereas Christians may perceive “Muslim nations”, like Pakistan, Iraq, and Sudan, as severely oppressing Christians. Furthermore, Muslim-Christian relations today are negatively shaped by centuries-old fears of “Islamic jihad” and the “Christian crusade”. Daesh—or otherwise known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS or IS)—has taken over a large swath of territory across Mesopotamia. Daesh has claimed to declared a Caliphate and professed a plan to establish political and religious hegemony over Muslims and non-Muslims across the Middle East and beyond, but unfortunately their activities can’t be justify with Islamic rules and regulations for holy Jihad, rather Islam was by means as an gadget to achieve their evil goals.’ (Laub, Z., & Masters, J., 2014)). Concern over Daesh activities in the United States and the so-called “tide of Muslim migrants” coming into Europe (Moravcsik, 2012) have served to further the suspicion between Muslims and Christians. All of these political, religious, and cultural expansions throughout history have shaped how Muslims and Christians perceive each other today; for example, there is currently a high level of “anti-Muslim world” sentiment in the United States and “anti-Western world” sentiment in Muslim nations across the globe.

Issues of the authenticity of the Covenants are one potential reason as to why these texts have been largely ignored. The Covenants of Prophet Muhammad with Christians have been the subject of much discussion among scholars. An examination of their authenticity is necessary in order to address the legitimacy of these documents Religions 2016, 7, 15 3 of 21 and the integrity of their messages.

As a framework of analysis, four of the Covenants will be used to explore the concepts of religious pluralism and civic rights in a “Muslim nation”. These Covenants include: “The Covenant of the Prophet with the Monks of Mount Sinai”; “The Covenant of the Prophet with the Christians of Najran”; “The Covenant of the Prophet with the Christians of Persia”; and “The Covenant of the Prophet with the Christians of the World”. The authenticity of each of these documents will be discussed on an individual basis below. It is worth noting that a complete and detailed account of the authenticity of these documents is outside the boundary of

this paper. Morrow, however, provides a more in-depth breakdown on issues pertaining to authenticity. Christians have reportedly guarded the “Covenant of the Prophet with the Monks of Mount Sinai” for nearly nine centuries (Morrow, 2013).

Based on the various meetings and treaties between Prophet Muhammad and the Christians of Najran, the messages in the Covenant with the Christian Najrans appear at the least feasible, if not authentic. Far fewer scholars are familiar with “The Covenant of the Prophet with the Christians of Persia” than they are with the previous two Covenants (Morrow, 2013). The Covenant with the Christians of Persia was first discussed in detail by the historian Arpee, who wrote that the document “was preserved in the archives of the Armenian Bishop of New Julfa” and presented to the Armenian Bishop of New Julfa in the 17th century by Shah Abbas I of Persia (Morrow, 2013).

METHOD

This research method uses literature study or literature review by collecting a number of works related to the life of the research subject to find other sources that can add references and complete the political biographies of the figures raised in this study. Literature study can be described as a systematic way of collecting and connecting previous research (Snyder, 2019). In a literature review study, researchers combine findings and various perspectives from several empirical findings (Snyder, 2019). One of the key instruments in this research method is references from previous research which can be form of books, scientific journals, reports, or news related to the research subject.

The subject of this research is Prophet Muhammad, a political figure who described pluralism in Islam from his actions through various sources. The life of Prophet Muhammad will be explained in chronological order and major themes to show the continuity of the political actions of the research subjects. The main instruments in this research are books, journals, reports, and news which will then be arranged according to the existing time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To discover the pluralism, it's will refer to Diana L. Eck's four elements; active assignation with diversity, understanding of other differences, encounter of commitments and inter-religious dialogue. The result of present study will be described and followed by discussion.

Scholars of pluralism, such as Eck, suggest that four elements must be in-place if a community or in this context, a nation aims to consider itself “pluralistic”. First, “pluralism is not diversity alone, but the active assignation with diversity”. Eck suggests that pluralism is not a given in socially diverse societies, and that reaching a state of pluralism requires genuine social interactions and the building of authentic relationships. Second, Eck states “pluralism is not just tolerance, but the



active seeking of understanding across lines of differences” (Eck, 2006). While religious tolerance, broadly speaking, encourages a level of respect for religious traditions, it does little to counter ignorance and stereotypes of religious communities. Tolerance, Eck argues, reproduces old patterns of division and violence; as a result, it “is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity”. Tolerance also does not require Muslims and Christians to know anything about each other. In essence, Eck calls on individuals and groups to move beyond the “indifference” of tolerance and towards the “celebration of difference” as found in the pluralist tradition. Pluralism can be further distinguished from tolerance in another other way. While pluralism treats religious diversity as something to be celebrated in order to produce positive social changes, tolerance can be said to encourage social isolation and impenetrable social group boundaries. The third feature of pluralism, as put forth by Eck, is that pluralism “is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments”.

In this regard, pluralism can be seen as open and supportive of various religious values and institutions. Finally, Eck’s last feature of pluralism stresses the importance of inter-religious dialogue, which she summarizes as “encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism”. She adds: “Dialogue means both speaking and listening and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences” (Eck, 2006). Eck’s fourth feature of pluralism follows Kamali in that pluralism “does not simply aim at the tolerance of the other but Religions 2016, 7, 15 6 of 21 entails an active effort to gain an understanding of the other” (Kamali, 2009).

People of different religious backgrounds can live side-by-side with one another in a relative state of tolerance, yet these people can remain ignorant of the lifestyles and beliefs practiced and expressed in other religious communities. Unless individuals actively engage with people outside of their immediate religious circles, there is no pluralism. In light of this overview of pluralism, it is important to recognize that there are different types of pluralism, among them being cultural, political, and religious.

In the Covenants, Prophet Muhammad can be seen as an advocate for a religiously pluralistic society (Eck, 2006). He did not only considered the interests of Christians, but he safeguarded them; he also demonstrates a preference for pluralism in the sense that he viewed Christianity as containing some “true values” that were in line with Islamic values and principles (Hoodhboy, 2005). The Covenants of the Prophet—in addition to the Qur’an and hadiths—attest to Islam’s affirmative stance on pluralism (Kamali, 2009). A special place is reserved in Islamic scripture for Christians as well as Jews. In the Qur’an, beliefs in the truth of Christian and Jewish doctrine are encapsulated in the term *ahl al kitab* (“People of the Book”), or people who have received and believed in earlier revelations from the prophets of the Abrahamic tradition.

Emon, however, argues that the discursive intersection of Islamic law and the rights of minorities creates the “dhimmi rules”, which often lie at the center of debates about whether Islam as a “political system” is tolerant or intolerant of non-Muslims (Emon, 2012). The “dhimmi rules”, he argues, means that non-Muslims are subjected to various rules regulating the scope of what modern layers would call their freedom and liberty, whether to manifest their religious beliefs or to act in ways contrary to Islamic legal doctrines but in conformity with their own normative traditions (Emon, 2012).

While Emon claims that dhimmi rules are important indices of the inherent intolerance in the Islamic tradition, they appear to contradict several hadiths. Prophet Muhammad, for example, stated “Whoever oppresses a dhimmi or burdens a weight over him more than he can carry, I will be his enemy” (Yahya, 2004). Similarly, Prophet Muhammad stated “*I am claimant of anyone who depresses a dhimmi. The one who I claimant of (in this world), I am also claimant of on the Day of Judgment*” (Yahya, 2004). Yet, despite these favorable hadiths towards “People of the Book”, there are also passages of the Qur’an which appear to support the “dhimmi rules” as described by Emon. One particular verse of the Qur’an verse (9:29) states the following: Fight against those who do not believe in God or in the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and his Prophet have forbidden or practice the true religion, among those who have been given the Book, until they pay the jizya [poll tax] from their hand, they being humbled (Ali, 2015). This verse has been traditionally interpreted to mean that the jizya was intended as a symbolic expression of the subordination of Jews and Christians (Lewis, 2013).

However, this verse stresses that certain conditions have to be met to fight against “People of the Book”. Abualrub elaborates: This verse stresses the necessity of fighting against the People of the Scripture, but under what conditions?... The Islamic State is not permitted to attack non-Muslims who are not Religions 2016, 7, 15 7 of 21 hostile to Islam, who do not oppress Muslims, try to convert Muslims by force from their religion, expel them from their lands, wage war against them, or prepare for attacks against them.

If any of these offenses occur, however, Muslims are permitted to defend themselves and protect their religion. Muslims are not permitted to attack non-Muslims who signed peace pacts with them or non-Muslims who lived under the protection of the Islamic State (Karipek, 2020). Abualrub’s analysis suggests that verses of the Qur’an must be examined in a scriptural and historical context. Another contentious verse of the Qur’an (8:55–56) is frequently taken out of context; according to some critics of Islamic scripture, this verse refers to non-believers of Islam as “The worst of beasts”: *Verily, the worst of beasts in the sight of God are those who conceal (the truth), and do not acknowledge it. These are those whom you have made a peace treaty with, but they break their treaty at every*



opportunity and have no fear of the law (Ali, 2010). This passage, however, goes on to clarify the cause of the condemnation of the “non-believers”.

Prophet Muhammad condemned them not simply because they were “non-Muslims”, “but because they violated a treaty they had agreed to, which resulted in the deaths of many Muslims” (Considine, 2016). Treating this verse as supposedly “violent” quickly dissolves with a brief consideration of the textual and historical context. As discussed below, the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of his time are further substantiated when one looks at verses of the Qur’an and hadiths in their historical context. In his Covenant with the Christians of Persia, the Prophet is nothing less than emphatic on the issue of complete religious freedom: And even as they honor and respect me, so shall Moslems care for that people as being under our protection and whenever any distress or discomfort shall overtake [Christians], Moslems shall hold themselves in duty bound to aid and care for them, for they are a people subject to my Nation, obedient to their word, whose helpers also they are.

It therefore is proper for my sake to attend to their comfort, protection, and aid, in the face of all opposition and distress, suppressing everything that becomes a means to their spoliation (Morrow, 2013). A similar—if not identical passage—is found in the three other Covenants addressed in this paper. Muhammad makes it clear that freedom of religion is an inherent right for Christians living in a Muslim nation. Christian Persians are allowed to practice Christianity and they are under no compulsion whatsoever to accept or reject Islam. In viewing Christian Persians as *mu’minin* or believers, the Prophet is consistent with the Constitution of Medina, one of the earliest known documents in Islam (Morrow, 2013). Although this particular document addressed the *ummah’s* relations with Jewish tribes, it nevertheless highlights how Prophet Muhammad wanted Muslims to interact with “People of the Book”. Article 20 of the Constitution notes how non-Muslim minorities have the same rights as Muslims: “A Jew, who obeys us (the state) shall enjoy the same right of life protection (as the [Muslims] do, so long as they [the Muslims] are not wrong by him” (Qadri, 2012). Jews and Christians were not only given the same rights as Muslims within the realm of the Muslim nation but also “throughout Christendom”, as clearly noted in the Covenant with the Christians of Persia.

According to the Covenant with the Christians of Persia, Muslims who coerce Christians into converting to Islam commit an act of *fitnah*, or sedition, and, therefore, must be resolutely avoided. The Covenant explicitly points out: “There shall be no compulsion or restraint against them in any of these matters” (Morrow, 2013). This commandment, which mirrors a verse of the Qur’an (2:256) on religious freedom, indicates that coercion and faith are not to mix in a “Muslim nation”. Lapidus explicitly claims that Prophet Muhammad separated religious matters from political matters; he also argues that secular governments have existed in the

Muslim world throughout history. He notes: Religions 2016. In fact, religious and political life developed distinct spheres of experience, with independent values, leaders, and organizations. From the middle of the tenth-century effective control of the Arab-Muslim empires had passed into the hands of generals, administrators, governors, and local provincial lords; the Caliphs had lost all effective political power. Governments in Islamic lands were henceforth secular regimes—Sultanates—in theory authorized by the Caliphs, but actually legitimized by the need for public order. Henceforth, Muslim states were fully differentiated political bodies without any intrinsic religious character, though they were officially loyal to Islam and committed to its defense (Lapidus, 1975).

In modern times, there are many “Muslim nations” that can be considered secular states. Turkey, for example, has negated its Islamic Ottoman system and adopted a secular-oriented system of government (Berkes, 1999). Turkey adopted a secular civil code to replace sharia; the secular code provided equal rights to men and women in matters of marriage and divorce and dropped the Islamic court system as well as institutions of Islamic education (Berkes, 2013). Other Muslim-majority nations said to have “secular governments” include Albania, Gambia, Kazakhstan, Senegal, and Uzbekistan (Dako, 1919). These secular countries maintain their loyalty to Islam as the dominant religion in a similar manner to how many Americans consider the United States to be “secular” but still loyal to Christianity. Islam might be the religion of the majority, but the state or nation itself has no overt religious identity. The emphasis the Qur’an places on respecting the “People of the Book” indicates that Muslims are tolerant of religious groups so long as they are monotheists or believers in “one God”.

While the Qur’an frequently calls on and encourages non-Muslims to worship God according to “Islamic principles”, the Islamic holy text can be interpreted as extending freedom of religion to “disbelievers” or those outside the Abrahamic tradition. Verse 9:6 of the Qur’an, for example, provides protection for “idolaters”: *“And if anyone of the idolaters seeks your protection, protect him till he hears the word of Allah, then convey him to his place of safety. This is because they are a people who don’t know”* (Ali, 2015). While this verse calls on “disbelievers” to embrace Islam as the “truth”, it does not call on Muslims to convert—whether by persuasion or force—non-Muslims to Islam. According to Ali, this verse leaves no doubt that the Holy Prophet was never ordered by God to oppress anyone on account of his or her religion (Ali, 2015). While the Covenants of Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of his time deal specifically with Christian communities in his midst, there is reason to believe that the Prophet would extend freedom and protection to polytheists as highlighted in the Qur’an. According to Prophet Muhammad, a “Muslim nation” must also extend rights to Christian religious leaders, as discussed in the Covenant with the Christian Monks of Mount Sinai. This particular community had complete freedom in anointing leaders and control over their places of worship.



Consider the following passage from the Covenant: A bishop shall not be removed from his bishopric, nor a monk from his monastery, nor a hermit from his tower, nor shall a pilgrim be hindered from his pilgrimage. Moreover, no building from among their churches shall be destroyed, nor shall the money from their churches be used for the building of mosques or houses for the Muslims (Morrow, 2015). This passage suggests that an Islamic state must not harm Christian churches in any way, nor can any Muslim leader intrude on how Christian groups anoint leaders. So long as Christians submit to Muslim authorities and seek the protection of Muslims, all help would be given to them by Muslims in every way legitimate (Morrow, 2013). In this agreement with the Monks, Muhammad showed himself to be a religious pluralist rather than a religious absolutist, or denier of religious diversity (Afsaruddin, 2008)

Recent Pew Global Religions 2016, Attitudes surveys, in fact, show that majorities in the “Arab world” favor democracy as a form of government (Schneier, 2015). As noted above, most experts cite Turkey, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Malik, and Senegal as democracies (Otterman, 2003). Indonesia, the world’s largest “Muslim nation”, is an interesting case study in observing how the pluralist spirit of the Covenants has been applied to modern societies. Article 28E of the Constitution reflects much of what was written in the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai: (1) Every person shall be free to choose and to practice the religion of his/her choice, to choose one’s education, to choose one’s employment, to choose one’s citizenship, and to choose one’s place of residence within the state territory, to leave it and to subsequently return to it. (2) Every person shall have the right to the freedom to believe his/her faith and to express his/her views and thoughts, in accordance with his/her conscience. (3) Every person shall have the right to the freedom to associate, assemble, and express opinions (www.ilo.org). Moreover, Article 28D states that every Indonesian citizen—regardless of ethnic or religious background— “shall have the right of recognition, guarantees, protection, and certainty before a just law, and of equal treatment before the law”. The Constitution of Indonesia clearly protects religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respects the religious freedom of the six officially recognized religions (www.state.gov). However, in some instances, the government fails to protect citizens from discrimination and abuse based on religion.

For example, the central Indonesian government holds authority over religious matters, but in previous years has made no effort in some regions of the country to overturn local laws restricting rights otherwise provided by the Constitution (Morrow, 2015). Despite these shortcomings, the Constitution of Indonesia can be seen as closely mirroring the Covenants of Prophet Muhammad, who did not subscribe to “Islamic absolutism”; he respected Christians as equal members of the Muslim nation, and showed appreciation for cultural and religious diversity as something to be protected. The relations that he forged with the Monks

at Mount Sinai were based on plurality and not sectarianism. Prophet Muhammad, nonetheless, did enforce the jizya, or poll tax, on Christian communities. In fact, the jizya is enforced in all of the Covenants discussed in this paper.

The jizya is one area in which Christians criticize Islam for its oppression and creation of “second-class” citizens in Muslim societies. However, the Prophet made it clear in the Covenants with the Christians of Mount Sinai, Persia, Najran, and the World that in the levying of taxes, it is necessary not to exact from Christians more than they are able to pay. Rather, Muhammad asks Muslims “to adjust matters with their consent, without force or violence” (Morrow, 2015). The Prophet added “Whosoever shall not do as is here prescribed, but shall do contrary to my behests; the same shall be held a despiser of the Compact, and a gainsayer of the word of God and of his Prophet” (Morrow, 2015). Similarly, in the Covenant with the Christians of the World, Prophet Muhammad suggested that—in extraordinary cases—the jizya can be dismissed altogether: “*I remove from them the harm from taxes and loan in the supplies borne to the People of the Pact except what they themselves consent to give. They should not be compelled or unfairly treated in this matter*” (Morrow, 2015). Nonetheless, the money that Muslims collected through the jizya was to be placed in the Treasury for public use (Morrow, 2013)

This is an important point because corrupt individuals or groups were not meant to acquire money collected through the jizya. The jizya was collected for the betterment of the “public good”, of which Christians were a part. It is also worth noting that during the reign of Umar, the third Caliph of the ummah and Companion of Prophet Muhammad, the jizya was abolished in light of all non-Muslims that were unable to earn their livelihood (Zawadi, 2015). Such conditions were clearly stated in contracts and other documents signed by Muslims and non-Muslims during the reign of Umar (CENTURY, 2014). Prophet Muhammad PBUH, was a religious pluralist because he engaged in “a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing the well-being of each and all” (Patel, 2007). Consider how he embodied religious pluralism in his Covenant with the Christians of Najran: Religions 2016, 7, 15 11 of 21 The Muslims must not abandon the Christians, neglect them, and leave them without help and assistance since I have made this pact with them on behalf of Allah to ensure that whatever good befell Muslims it would befall them as well and that whatever harm befell Muslims would befall them as well (Morrow, 2015).

The passage encapsulates the spirit of religious pluralism in that it fosters mutually inspiring relationships and common action among members of different religious groups for the “common good” (Patel & Meyer, 2010). As Patel and Meyer remind us, religious pluralism is “not simply relativism, but makes room for real and different religious commitments” (Patel & Meyer, 2010). In the Covenant with the Najrans, Muhammad encourages Muslims and Christians to become mutually dependent upon one another for safety and prosperity. Benevolence, encouraging



goodwill, commanding charity, and deterring evil are the sincerest mechanisms to reaching these aims (Morrow, 2015).

This particular passage from the Covenant with the Christians of Najran aligns closely to verse 16:91 of the Qur'an: *"And fulfill the covenant of Allah, when you have made a covenant, and do not break (your) oaths after making them firm, and you have indeed made Allah your surety. Surely Allah knows what you do"* (Ali, 2010).

On the other side of the spectrum, however, there are verses of the Qur'an that can be viewed as contradicting the messages of the Covenants. For example, the Qur'an (9:29) commands Muslims to *"Fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the Last Day, nor forbid what Allah and His Messenger have forbidden, nor follow the Religion of Truth"* (Ali, 2010), which can be interpreted to mean fight "infidels", or non-believers, such as Christians. In the Qur'an, however, the term "infidel" is not just a noun or an adjective; "infidel" is the word that the Qur'an uses to describe exclusively the Meccan aristocracy with which the Muslim community was at war with. Scholars of the Qur'an tell us that verses dealing with "infidels" are not meant to encourage the use of violence among Muslims.

In fact, "such an interpretation is completely false and contradicts authentic Islamic teachings" (Musaji, 2004). Consider the following commentary for further evidence of the defensive nature of verse 16:91: *If the non-Muslim country did not attack the Muslim one nor mobilize itself to prevent the practice and spread of Islam, nor transgress against mosques, nor work to oppress the Muslim people in their right to profess their faith and decry unbelief, then it is not for the Muslim country to attack that country.*

Jihad of a military nature was only permitted to help Muslims defend their religion and remove oppression from the people (Karipek, 2020). The context of Qur'an (9:29) must also be placed in its proper historical context.

The equitable ethos of the Covenants—in tandem with the Qur'an—challenge those who declare Islam as fundamentally intolerant of Christians. In line with the message of the Covenants, the Qur'an (5:82) establishes Prophet Muhammad as an admirer of Christians: *"... you will find the nearest in friendship to the believers to be those who say, we are Christians. That is because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not proud"* (Ali, 2010). In the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai, Muslims, and Christians are asked to work with one another in order for members of each group to recognize valuable gains in interfaith interaction: Religions 2016, 7, 15 12 of 21 *If in the interest of the benevolent Moslem public, and of their faith, Moslems shall ask of the Christians for assistance, the latter shall not deny them what help, as an expression of friendship and goodwill, they are to render . . . we deem all help and succor rendered to them every way legitimate* (Morrow, 2015). This passage follows Patel in that pluralism occurs when people of different religious traditions make their unique contribution for the common good of society by actively assisting each other in ways that are mutually beneficial to

both parties (Patel, 2010). The nearest Arabic word that captures the essence of this passage is al-tasamuh, often translated as meaning “tolerance” (Kamali, 2009). Tasamuh “denotes generosity and ease from both sides on a reciprocal basis” (Haleem, 1999).

Building on Abdel Haleem, Kamali argues that the more precise Arabic equivalent of pluralism is al-ta’addudiyah, which he translates literally to mean “pluralism” (Kamali, 2009). Prophet Muhammad’s commitment and recognition of diversity is not an attempt to assimilate Christians into Muslim society; on the contrary, this kind of “deep pluralism” recognizes religious and cultural differences and engages in them in order to gain a sound understanding of the values and commitments of the different other (Kamali, 2009).

At this stage of the paper, it is important to distinguish Prophet Muhammad’s religious pluralism from toleration, which allows only for coexistence (Eck, 2016). In addition to encouraging Muslims and Christians to form bonds of solidarity, he advises individuals in each group to vigorously defend each other. The Covenant with the Christians of Persia reads: All pious believers shall deem it their bounded duty to defend believers and to aid them whosoever they may be, whether far or near, and throughout Christendom shall protect the places where they conduct worship, and those where their monks and priests’ dwell. Everywhere, in mountains, on the plains, in towns and in waste places, in deserts, and wheresoever they may be, that people shall be protected, both in their faith and in their property, both in the West and in the East, both on sea and land (Morrow, 2015). The text declares that defending Christian communities is the responsibility of the ummah. The text, furthermore, states that membership of a particular religious grouping does not set the standard of citizenship in Muslim nations.

With regard to Christian citizens, the Prophet valued them and validated their beliefs by protecting them by means of his army. In the Covenants with the Christians of the World, he echoed the treatment of the Christian of the World by stating: The covenant of Allah is that I should protect their land, their monasteries, with my power, my horses, my men, my weapons, my strength, and my Muslim followers. I place them under my protection, my security, and my trust at every moment (Morrow, 2015). Muhammad’s protection of Christian communities is diametrically opposed to Muslim absolutists who view Christians as morally inferior to Muslims and thus incapable of becoming equal members of an Islamic state. Consider several recent events during which Daesh destroyed the property of Christians.

In July 2014, Daesh set fire to a 1800-year-old church in Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul (Considine, 2016). A statement released by Daesh a week before this incident stated that Mosul’s Christians should convert, pay a special tax, leave, or face death (Considine, 2016). Months later, in February 2015, Daesh members rounded up 220 Christian civilians in the village of Tal Tamir and burned two



Christian churches. According to reports, they were peaceful villages that had nothing to do with the war (Joya, 2012).

The Covenants show that Muslim leaders are not advised by Muhammad to prohibit citizens from expressing non-Muslim identities or ruin churches, but are instead commanded to treat them as equal members of the ummah. Considering that the “People of the Book” have a special status in the Islamic tradition, critics have wondered about the rights of non-Abrahamic communities living inside the territories of the ummah. Muslims during the time of Prophet Muhammad used the term “polytheists” to refer to people who do not have a tradition of a revealed book in their religion.

A hadith reports a particular story that highlights the Prophet’s position on dealing with religious groups outside of the Abrahamic tradition. Religions 2016, 7, 15 13 of 21 In calling his Muslim army to defend themselves against polytheist aggression towards the ummah, the Prophet stated: don’t exaggerate, don’t cheat, don’t mutilate, don’t kill a new-born child. If you meet your enemies of polytheists call them for one of three options. Whatever they take, you must accept, and stop fighting them. Call them to Islam . . . they will have the same rights and duties of the immigrants (Bidabad, 2018). Although he encouraged Muslims to engage in defensive warfare against the polytheists, it is clear that Muhammad was willing to grant them the same rights that he would later grant Christians (immigrants) in the Covenants. History shows us that Muslim rulers and empires followed in the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad by granting non-Abrahamic communities’ privileges and political rights under “Islamic rule.”

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

In the line for effort to provide direction for refining relations between Muslim and Christians, this article sketched upon the Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) Covenants as establishing freedom of religion and civic rights for Christians living within the ummah. The Covenants of the Prophet (PBHU) with the Christians of his time bring to the foreground the question of how Muslim leaders govern in relation to non-Muslim communities.

The value of the Covenants lies in their moral authenticity and their virtue. The Covenants do not simply provide theoretical possibilities of Muslim and Christian coexistence; they are, on the other hand, historical realities that provide a framework on which future prospects can be envisaged for Muslim and Christian understanding.

The “re-discovery” of these documents provides an opportunity to give new birth to Islam and regenerate the essence of Islamic teachings. Prophet Muhammad PBUH, developed a democratic aptitude towards Christian Religions societies. The Prophet’s relationships with Christians can be characterized by more than mere tolerance, but rather by compassion and the fostering of peace. The Covenants

convey common message of dignity and equality and help to minimize the scope and scale of current polarization between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East and beyond.

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