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Peace through Pluralism in the Muslim World

A Historical Validation

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“Acquire knowledge, it enables its professor to distinguish right from wrong; it lights the way to heaven. It is our friend in the desert, our company in solitude and companion when friendless. It guides us to happiness, it sustains us in misery, it is an ornament amongst friends and an armour against enemies.”

These lines ... where are they from? They are not from a humanist manifesto. They were not uttered by Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi. The above passage was taken from the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed. Islam, the religion of Khomeini, Bin Laden, terrorism’s handmaiden – has set understanding as its most sacred goal. This flies in the face of most Western assumptions about Islam. The Muslims are not a dogmatic people – history knows of the many times when peace flourished in their lands. However, three faiths – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, all alike in their monotheism and Scripture, have been fighting incessantly for not simply the holy city of Jerusalem but for the ability to say that *their* faith, and not someone else’s, is the one path to truth. The clash continues today, and has only escalated with the development of modern weaponry. The terrorist organization Hamas has sent on average three rocket attacks per day, according to the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces), who responded with the assassination of a leader there. The Christian-majority United States of America has backed Israel, with Pat Robertson, a prominent leader of the Evangelical Christian movement (which dominates the center-right Republican Party), declaring:

“...evangelical Christians support Israel because we believe that the words of Moses and the ancient prophets of Israel were inspired by God. We believe that the emergence of a Jewish state in the land promised by God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was ordained by God.”

The Muslims and Arab nationalists fire back with invective such as the statement by Mohammed Badie (the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) that:

“The Jews have dominated the land, spread corruption on earth, spilled the blood of believers and in their actions profaned holy places. Zionists only understand the language of force and will not relent without duress. This will happen only through holy Jihad.”

Amid such passionate rhetoric, it seems as if cool heads shall never prevail, for even university professors go on wild rants and children’s TV shows debate whether to annihilate or expel an entire people. Yet all is not lost. Practical level-headed people are in the majority, and the region has the seeds for its renewal. The region has seen periods of prosperity and toleration, unenforced by foreign powers. The storied empires of the past such as those of the Moors, Fatimids, Ottomans, and Mughals can attest to that.

The earliest period of peaceful coexistence was in Spain, then a region known as Al-Andalus. Since the Muslim invasions of 711 CE, the majority of the Iberian Peninsula was ruled by the Umayyads, Caliphs of the Muslim empire who had presided over a Golden Age of learning and culture in their capital of Damascus. Naturally, they wished to spread their glorious achievements to their newly-conquered dominions, especially after 755, when the rival Abbasids ousted them from the Caliphal throne in Damascus. Finding refuge in Spain, they focused on improving these territories, and their capital of Córdoba became a dazzling place with sewage systems, paved roads, and handsome buildings. Later, in the 1100s, Toledo became the center of what developed into “Moorish” culture, and it is there where Christians, Jews, and Muslims truly mingled and influenced each other. It did not matter what religion one was, so long as he did what was expected of him. A Toledan Jew named Samuel HaLevi became the vizier of Granada and was a trusted adviser to two Muslim kings who ushered in Toledo’s Golden Age. Like many of his fellow non-Muslims, he was more than ready to receive toleration and a chance at a good living in exchange for loyalty to his sovereign. It must be remembered that in the 12th century, there were no representative institutions – the king was the State – and as today, a government job meant a steady paycheck with more guarantees than in the private sector. Consequently, the rulers of Al-Andalus used the promise of toleration and economic improvement to lure diverse talents to their land. Intercommunal violence was mitigated by the fact that the regime handed out favors according to merit and loyalty to the State rather than on a confessional basis. A reputation for hardheaded tolerance meant that unlike in Christian Western Europe, where toleration was rare and monarchical power was mercurial and uncertain, Al-Andalus and its rulers had no surprises in store for their subjects. A prime symbol of what became known as the *Convivencia* (“cohabitation”) is the church of Santa Maria la Blanca (“St. Mary the White”). Originally a medieval synagogue (coincidentally supported by the aforementioned Samuel HaLevi), it was constructed and built by Muslim craftsmen in the Mudéjar style of the time, with some aspects of the detailing, such as the capitals of the column, coming from Christian (Western and/or Byzantine) sources, while other details, such as the mosque-like layout of the building, are clearly Muslim in inspiration. Unlike the Christian Crusaders, who fought long and savage wars to impose a rigid dogma on an unwilling population, the Christians, Jews, and Muslims of Spain, under the firm hand of their rulers, created rather than destroyed. The art wasn’t the only field to be influenced by the melding of three cultures; Western thought benefited greatly from Muslim translation and analysis of “rediscovered” classical works, and some ideas lead to the development of Scholasticism, which would steer the course of the Roman Catholic Church for centuries. The School of Translators, founded in the 12th century CE, was the

place where the monumental task of translating these historically crucial documents occurred. Despite being under Christian control since 1085, Toledo remained diverse, since the local ruler Don Raimundo I still held fast to the ideal of Convivencia, and supported the creation of this school of the human spirit. The enterprise's success depended on tolerance and respect. As the University of Castilla-La Mancha explains, "first an Arabist, generally a Jew or a Mozárabeⁱ, translated the original texts into Romance language orally; after that, a Latinist wrote them up in Latin, the language of science at that time." If a dispute or spat occurred, the resulting misunderstanding could doom the entire translation effort, necessitating some sort of friendship and understanding. As a result of this collaboration, the techniques of pioneering Muslim scientists such as Al-Biruni were passed on to the West, increasing the diffusion of knowledge. Additionally, many Greek and Latin authors whose works had been destroyed in Western Europe but not in the East were "rediscovered", paving the way for the Renaissance. It was due to the collaboration of the three Abrahamic religions in Iberia that these priceless works were preserved and passed on to subsequent generations.

At the same time, the Fatimids of Egypt became another beacon of tolerance and culture in an era better known for religious wars. While Christian Crusaders were massacring the inhabitants of much of present-day Israel and Lebanon in the early 12th century CE, the Fatimids, an Ismaili (Shiite) dynasty, established an oasis of peace in the southern Mediterranean. The encyclopedia *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia* relates that "At the peak of their power, their empire spanned Egypt, north Africa (present day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya), Syria, Palestine, Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, parts of Iraq, Sicily, and northwestern India, with additional covert cells in Byzantine and central Asian lands". The encyclopedia postulates that the Fatimids' success was due to "Their unique institution of religiopolitical proselytizing and education...the da'wa". Da'wa, with its emphasis on comprehending Islam rather than insisting on blind obedience, became attractive to an Egyptian population which had suffered under the repressive orthodoxy of the Abbasid-run Sunni sect. The Fatimids' appeal came from a very secular source: the people's hatred of the distant, uncaring Abbasids. Egypt and the surrounding provinces were prosperous and had many contacts across the Mediterranean. It was natural for the Egyptian populace to resent being at the beck and call of some desert sheik in far-off Baghdad, and their fellow Maghrebinsⁱⁱ offered a local, understanding alternative to the ossified caliphate in Baghdad. As outsiders in the Caliphate (being Ismaili Shiites under a Sunni caliphate), the Fatimids had no established support base, so they recruited, unlike the previous administrators of Egypt, competent people who would owe their high station to the dynasty, thereby securing loyalty. The Sunni Kurdish leader Saladin, known for his successes against the Western

European crusaders in the Outre-Merⁱⁱⁱ, was appointed vizier (the equivalent of Prime Minister) by the Fatimid caliph in the early thirteenth century^{iv}. These are hardly the actions of bigots, wallowing in an ossified culture. Due to tolerance and respect for talent, the Fatimids succeeded where most insurgencies do not: winning the hearts and minds of the people. The support of the people strengthened the State further by making its role not antagonistic but uniting. The State would no longer need to throw all of its energies into consolidating its power. With its support among the populace secure, the Fatimids could look forward to peace and could settle into their role as guardians of the peace and the vibrant intellectual traditions of Egypt. To that end, the Fatimids created a greenhouse of sorts for new ideas at a time when elsewhere in Europe and Asia, repressive orthodoxy was the norm. The University of Chicago's Center for Near Eastern Languages and Cultures states that "The Fatimid palace library was arguably the largest of the age, with approximately 1.6 million manuscripts (including 1,200 copies of the multivolume History of Tabari, and some rare autographed copies). These manuscripts expounded scholarship from the Islamic world and also from Greek, Persian, and Indian sources." It seemed as if the Fatimids were following in the footsteps of their royal predecessors the Ptolemys, who built and supported the Alexandrian Library, the greatest collection of international knowledge in the Hellenistic world. Filled with the zeal of knowledge, the Fatimids could count on support from their subjects – indeed, many prominent individuals, of all faiths, immigrated to this realm of culture and syncretism. Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher who laid the foundation for the neo-Aristotelian Scholastic creed^v, fled once-tolerant Toledo (after Christians of a more fanatical cast came to power) to the relative safety of Fatimid Egypt. There, he settled in Cairo, where he was well-respected and given due praise. The Fatimids' patronage of learning and talent, which lasted for almost three centuries and gave Greek, Jewish, Roman, and Indian works international exposure, contributed to the rise of modern philosophy and thought.

Alas, future generations of Christian rulers proved less willing to uphold tolerance and culture. The Muslims and their allies were swept from the Iberian Peninsula by a vengeful Reconquista in 1492, and many were forced to flee. The first choice of many was the new and rapidly-expanding Ottoman Empire, which to them seemed to hold the standard of *Convivencia* firmly. Indeed, a European traveler to Ottoman-occupied Buda in the 1550s and 60s marveled that:

"No distinction is attached to birth among the Turks; the deference to be paid to a man is measured by the position he holds in the public service. There is no fighting for precedence; a man's place is marked out by the duties he discharges. In making his appointments the Sultan pays no regard to any pretensions on the score of wealth or rank, nor does he take into

consideration recommendations or popularity, he considers each case on its own merits, and examines carefully into the character, ability, and disposition of the man whose promotion is in question.” (de Busbecq, *The Turkish Letters*, 1555-62)

It does not seem that religion was a major concern of the Ottoman rulers, for a truly religious Prince would have certainly made religion a factor for job candidates. Allegiance was the only necessary criteria for the early Sultans. This is visible, according to Halil Inlacik, in the “fundamental institutions of the classical Ottoman regime, which attained their ultimate form under the great reign of Suleyman, in particular the gulam^{vi} system under which slaves were trained as loyal instruments of the sultan's absolute centralist power”. A further example of the emphasis on loyalty is that a Hungarian Roman Catholic was Sultan Mehmet II’s gun-caster at the Siege of Constantinople, despite the fact that inside were Christians of all different denominations, including fellow Roman Catholics. This man clearly must have felt that he was not betraying his faith, which in a time when religion controlled many aspects of European life says much about the spiritual assurance the gun-caster must have had to fortify himself with before embarking on such an unusual mission. The Sultans took great pains to protect the different religious groups from any harm. As the traveler Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq remarked, “They [the Jassinaries^{vii}] are scattered through every part of the empire, either to garrison the forts against the enemy, or to protect the Christians and Jews from the violence of the mob.” Dennis Papazian adds that “This system recognized non-territorial nationality as compared with the territorial specific nationality more prevalent today.” It should be remembered that modern nationalism has led to ethnic tensions and violence in Rwanda, Timor-Leste, and the Congo, to name a few. The State thus guaranteed the safety of all of its subjects, regardless of their status and religion. This policy stands in complete contrast to that of 16th century Europe, where the continent was divided between Roman Catholics and Protestant states. In this divided land, each ruler chose one of these faiths and ruthlessly persecuted all others. This division was what consequently allowed the Ottomans to make rapid gains by taking advantage of the divided and distracted Christian forces. The Ottomans understood that religious tensions could grow at any moment, so they did not shrink from using force to preserve order in extreme cases. Yet the Sultan’s primary way to balance the power of each religious group was the millet system. According to historian Avigdor Levy,

“The millet system was, in effect, an extension of Ottoman general administrative practices. In an age that lacked modern technologies of administration, communication, and control, the Ottomans, like other contemporary states, had little choice but to deal with the masses of their population corporatively, allowing each group wide latitude in the conduct of its internal affairs. The same principle was also applied to minorities. On the other hand, the impulse to control their population as much as possible brought the Ottomans to develop

hierarchical governmental structures, where each man's place was precisely defined. Superiors were held accountable for the performance and conduct of those under their authority, and the discharge of governmental responsibility was closely regulated.”

This flexible pragmatism allowed the secular Ottoman state to retain control over its population and prevent the delicate religious situation from descending into violence. Nowhere was this more important than Jerusalem, a sacred city for all of the Abrahamic religions, bitterly contested, especially by the Muslims and Christians. The sultans decided to give each religion control over their own sacred locations, allowing religiously homogenous neighborhoods to grow up around these areas. Since each religion had what it desired, the conflict was rendered null in the eyes of the ever-pragmatic Ottomans. Due to the absence of powerful rivals with whom to grapple with for control of the country, the sultans could devote their attention to creation.

At around the same time as the Ottomans, another Muslim dynasty – the Mughals – created religious tolerance and an oasis of peace and prosperity in the Indian subcontinent. Though the groups concerned did not involve significant numbers of Jews and Christians, the situation was the same: inter-religious clashes which if unchecked could imperil trade and security. Religious conflict was far more dangerous than India's political instability, since the Muslim Mughals, descended from the warlike Mongols (hence the name Mughal), were viewed by Indians as less than just another Indian *janapada*^{viii} and more as foreign aggressors bent on conquering the rich subcontinent. However, the Mughals employed a variety of methods to keep order and to consolidate their power. The first two rulers, Babur and Humayun, tended to rule by force (needless to say, the latter was forced to flee temporarily), but Babur's grandson, Akbar, who ruled from 1556 to 1605, was a ruler of a wholly different cast. Using alliances with Hindu rulers such as the Rajputs^{ix}, he became master of much of the Indian subcontinent. He abolished the *jizya*, a tax which all non-Muslims had to pay, and eventually treated most religions and sects with equality. Indeed, so preoccupied was he with finding a way to unite his disparate peoples that he created a faith combining most of the major tenets of Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, Din-al-Ilahi, in order to limit the internecine warfare that had previously kept India weak and disunited in the face of foreign meddlers. Inter-religious cooperation was not simply political. As Saumitra Jha of Stanford University's Graduate School of Business writes, “Muslim traders around India provided commercial taxes and explicitly endowed local public goods, including water projects and even Hindu temples”, building strong bonds of friendship in the community. As a gesture of goodwill, Akbar was known to give away his weight in gold to various subjects, irrespective of their religion. Again, as witnessed in the previous two examples, loyalty to religion was not a criterion for winning the State's

favor. Akbar debated rabbis, imams, and Jesuit missionaries, and avidly read about new ideas. His tolerance is further magnified by the fact that his son and successor, Jahangir, was the son of the Hindu princess Jodhabai. Though less inclined to pursue peace instead of war, Akbar, through the application of rewarding faith in the secular State rather than religion, built the framework for a stable subcontinent. The results of the *pax akbarica*^x remain visible in our times. Mr. Jha adds that “Towns with medieval trade legacies [which would have had a lot of interaction with foreign cultures] experienced around five times fewer religious riots than similar towns between 1850-1950^{xi}.” Thus, Akbar’s unilateral demand for tolerance brought peace and prosperity to a conflict-torn India, a peace which has lasted for centuries. One sees the fruits of Akbar’s labors in the story of Azim Premji. A Muslim in majority-Hindu India, he worked his way up from obscurity to become India’s richest man. In developing his family’s business into the IT giant Wipro, he has become the face of India. According to *Stanford Alumni Magazine*,

“In the past three decades, he has transformed the family vegetable-oil business into one of India’s top four technology services firms. When American newsweeklies run cover stories about the rise of India, they’re talking about successes like Azim Premji’s. When U.S. politicians and pundits wring their hands about the effects of outsourcing engineering work in nearly every sphere to Indian companies, they’re talking about Wipro and a handful of counterparts.”

Without the order and stability which Akbar imposed, the whole subcontinent could have devolved into a trouble-spot, a land of petty princelings that would have been easy prey for foreign adventurers and colonizers that would have never given birth to the dynamic nation which produced Mr. Premji.

So what do these events, all of which have been covered in the dust and mildew of history, have to offer to the modern world? It is supposedly a world where God is far from the minds of men, as the importance of materialism over soul is so clearly shown by the alacrity with which globalization has been praised and/or loathed. But in the Middle East, a land touched by neither secular enlightenments nor impersonal, efficient capitalism, religion still plays a supreme role in the lives of the inhabitants. To ignore religion and assume that the average resident of the Gaza Strip thinks in a manner similar to that of the average American suburbanite is a gross miscalculation which countless well-meaning Western aid organizations have made. In its charter, Hamas, by far the most popular Islamist movement in the region, declares:

“The Islamic Resistance Movement is a distinguished Palestinian movement, whose allegiance is to Allah, and whose way of life is Islam. It strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine, for under the wing of Islam followers of all religions can coexist in security and safety where their lives, possessions and rights are concerned. In the absence of Islam, strife will be rife, oppression spreads, evil prevails and schisms and wars will break out. How excellent was the Moslem poet, Mohamed Ikbal, when he wrote: ‘If faith is lost, there is no security and there is no life for him who does not adhere to religion. He who accepts life without religion, has taken annihilation as his companion for life.’”

Can this be considered in any way parallel to the thoughts of the average Westerner? Of course not – blood-and-soil nationalism has become taboo in Western politics. This is why any attempt to create a lasting political peace in the Middle East must involve a reconciliation of the three competing Abrahamic faiths, who all claim the Holy Land as their spiritual center. As we have seen, however, the people are all in the grip of amoral individuals like Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Meir Kahane, hardliners who foment violence simply to preserve their power. It is equally clear that all sides want peace and an end to the senseless violence that has split them – 70% of Jewish Israelis and 89% of non-Jewish Israelis support the peace process, according to Gallup, as do 72% of West Bank Palestinians and 62% of Gaza Strip Palestinians^{xii}. Then what could possibly be the cause of these fatal splits? Gallup suggests that the leaders have simply polarized the sides with charismatic but substance-less rhetoric. The report continues by explaining that only “2% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have a ‘very favorable’ or ‘favorable’ opinion of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This is comparable to the 1% to 2% favorability Jewish Israelis show to Palestinian leaders in the West Bank and Gaza.” The high visibility (and partisanship) of the leaders, who are in charge of the deal making, makes it difficult for many to see beyond the leadership. Thus it is not a failure to agree but a failure to communicate, and in a world where image means everything, visible and practical leaders are key. The flexible pragmatism of *Convivencia*-era Spain, the Ottoman Empire, the Fatimids, and the Mughals all rested on one factor: the ability of the State to intervene and keep the various religious communities at peace.

Only the secular State has the ability to be a unifying force, drawing together people of various religious faiths for a common cause. Secular governments, such as the New Monarchies of the 16th Century, can transcend various petty ideologies because of their all-encompassing policies. The State, through its power over the citizenry, has the ability to provide security. Additionally, its inclusive nature (for what State has ever existed without the support of a large segment of the population?) gives the State a semblance of impartiality in regards to religious conflicts. The secular nature of the State also makes it largely immune to the siren’s song of the religious radicals who clamor for favors or theocracy. One only needs to see the secular State in action by examining Egyptian dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser’s

actions when the Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) threatened his hold on power with their call for an Islamic democracy. Though the Ikhwan assisted Nasser in his coup d'état, he later turned on them, executing their chief ideologue, Sayed Qutb. The journal *Military Review* opines that "Nasser's decision to set aside the Brotherhood had much to do with the Coptic Christian and Muslim secular members of his Free Officers' Association who did not espouse Al-Banna's^{xiii} vision of an Islamic Egypt." It did not matter that Nasser was a Muslim (as were the rulers of all three of the states examined in this piece). He used the power of the State to preserve pluralism, which as seen in the quote above, was the bedrock of support for the State and its goals. In a region where a lack of order and of a restraining hand has led to unnecessary bloodshed, a strong, pluralistic State is the only quickly-implementable solution to the Middle Eastern conflict available to the inhabitants of the Middle East and the international community at large.

The crisis in the Middle East, as any other great world event, is not interminable or unsolvable. If prolonged, however, this conflict, with so many involved parties, can quickly degenerate into an unstoppable maelstrom of chaos and violence that can utterly destroy the balance which the world's leaders have so carefully built up. There is no other option, if the world is to at last put an end to the disgrace of seeing a region impotent, flayed by nefarious forces from within and without, but to encourage and facilitate the creation of strong secular states. The secular State, due to its non-confessional nature, will have no allegiance to any faith. These states already have roots in the region, as the examples I have provided above show, so the common extremist cry of western imperialism can at last be effectively silenced. And those cynics who think that multiculturalism is nothing more than a liberal pipe dream forget the shining example of South Africa, where popular pressure led to the fall of the white Afrikaner-dominated government. It was mainly due to the will of the whole population, white and black alike, that the odious system of apartheid was dismantled and full equality was restored. There is also the example of India, which despite historical tensions between Muslims and Hindus has the largest Muslim population in the world. The presence of a strong, secular State will stabilize the inter-communal quarrels that have made the middle East prey to any imperialist power, and as nations such as Russia and China seek to increase their spheres of influence, the need for a native defense of self-determination is critical. Cooperation between the three religions, managed by a secular State, is therefore the only sure vehicle towards a multicultural Middle East. Perhaps, under the steady hand of the secular State, the Middle East will rise up and will flourish as in times of old, fueled not simply by modern technology but by the creative forces of its diverse inhabitants.

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ⁱ A Christian living under Moorish rule who adopted aspects of the ruling culture.
ⁱⁱ The Maghreb is a Franco-Arabic term for the whole of North Africa. Typically only used regarding Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, from whence the Fatimid dynasty came.
ⁱⁱⁱ The European kingdoms along the Mediterranean coast.
^{iv} Needless to say, Saladin later would rise up and take over the empire, but without Fatimid patronage he would have never achieved the fame and honor that he was granted by them.
^v Ironically, Scholasticism is a Medieval Christian creed, propagated by the same men who banished Maimonides from Western Europe.
^{vi} "Slave solider" in Turkish

- vii Christian conscripts who were encouraged to convert to Islam and given various privileges. They were the best-trained and most fearsome troops at the Sultan's disposal.
- viii A large Indian State in the Mediaeval period
- ix A powerful Hindu group in Northern India which had resisted Muslim invasion until Akbar.
- x From the Latin "Peace of Akbar". A play on *Pax Romana*
- xi The period of direct British colonial rule
- xii It should be noted that the religion of the Palestinian respondents was not specified.
- xiii A leader of the Muslim Brotherhood