

The Muslim and religious ‘Other’: Reflections on early Islam and beyond from the perspective of contemporary scholarship

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How do the primary sources of Islamic teaching, the Qur’an and Sunna (i.e. the living tradition), approach the relationship between the Muslim Self and the religious Other?

To begin to answer this question more needs to be said about the environment in which the Qur’anic revelation and the early living tradition unfolded. Even a cursory examination of the nature of the Qur’an as Revelation and its content shows it was [organically linked](#) to this context, including its dimension that relates to the relationship between Muslims and the religious Other. Beyond scripture, the approach taken by various Muslim communities in history in relation to this question has also varied.

Ze’ev Maghen, a noted scholar of the nature of interactions between Muslims and non- Muslims in early Islam, [described](#) the context and the dynamics behind the relationship between Muslims and their normative tradition and non-Muslims, with what the Qur’an terms the communities of the People of the Book (ahl al-kitab - Christians, Jews and others), in the following manner:

‘Islam’s relationship with the People of the Book has had its ups and downs. The growing familiarity of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula with the ideas,

institutions and communities of the surrounding monotheisms, followed by the initial and increasingly intense encounters of the nascent Muslim umma with the same, bred the complex mixture of attitudes to Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism discernable through the classical literature of the faith. The seminal texts and genres— Qur’ān, Hadīth, Tafsīr, Sharh, and Fiqh— evince a multifaceted and pendulating posture vis- à- vis the religio- cultural “other” that partakes more of dialectic than dogma’

Based on Maghen’s analysis, in addition to studies done by noted scholars Yohanan [Friedmann](#) and Jacques [Waardenburg](#), several general points need to be considered.

First, as noted briefly above, the context behind the emergence of Islam was such that it took place alongside other already well- established religious communities, the most important of which, apart from Arabian pre- qur’anic beliefs, were Judaism, *Hanifiyya*, and Christianity. The very fabric and nature of the message embodied in the Qur’an clearly [depicts](#) many of the events and attitudes of the Muslim community toward the non-Muslim Other and *vice versa*.

Second, as noted above, it is essential to point out that the qur’anic attitude (and Muhammad’s praxis) toward the non-Muslim Other is highly contextual in nature and therefore could be described as context-dependent. As such, [scholars](#) have talked about the presence of salvifically inclusivist and exclusivist verses in the Qur’an.

Additionally, for the large part of the ‘formative period’ of the Muslim community in Medina, a climate of conflict, friction, and hostility prevailed among Muslims, Arab polytheists, large Jewish tribes, Christians, and what Qur’an terms religious hypocrites (*munafiqun*), under which Muslims were constantly concerned about the sheer survival of their community.

William Montgomery Watt, a noted scholar of the formative Islamic period, [described](#) the circumstances and the motives behind the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially between the Prophet of Islam and Jews in

Medina, as follows:

'In Muhammad's first two years at Medina the Jews were the most dangerous critics of his claim to be a prophet, and the religious fervour of his followers, on which so much depended, was liable to be greatly reduced unless Jewish criticisms could be silenced or rendered impotent. . . . in so far as the Jews changed their attitude and ceased to be actively hostile, they were unmolested'

This context often expressed itself in a reactionary, antagonistic type of identity toward the religious Other. This is [well evidenced](#) not only in the Qur'an but also in additional 'canonical' literature such as the hadith and Islamic jurisprudence. This has led to the development of ideas and religious/legal concepts such as *al-wala' wa'l bara'* and *tashabbuh bi-l kuffar* that emphasised the distinctiveness of Muslims in relation to the Religious Other.

In the modern context, Islamic fundamentalist and extremist groups have employed these concepts to not only distance themselves from whom they consider to be unbelievers (*kuffar*) but from what they view to be deviant Muslims. Proponents of Islamic moderation (*wasatiyya*) and progressives are rethinking these concepts through applying a contextualist and historical lens to them, thereby either restricting their applicability or challenging their validity.

This context-dependency of the scriptures toward the view of the Religious Other (and, therefore, by implication the religious Self) led scholar Jacques [Waardenburg](#) to assert that 'Looking back at the interaction of the new Islamic religious movement with the existing religious communities, we are struck by the importance of socio-political factors'.

Religious ideas were also significant in understanding the nature of the Muslim Self and Religious Other relationship, since, as alluded to above, Qur'anic Islamic religious identity is inextricably linked with the religious identity of others, notably Jews and Christians. Thus, the religious aspects of, and interactions between, various religious communities in the qur'anic *milieu* led to the construction of

religious identity of Muslims and played a particularly important role in it. For example, in his study on the question to what extent Qur'anic scripture emphasised confessional distinctiveness, Scholar Fred [Donner](#) asserted that, scripturally (that is, based upon qur'anic evidence) and in early Islam, the community which Donner terms the Believers (*mu'minin*) seems to have been originally conceptualised as independent of confessional identities. (It was only later— apparently during the third quarter of the first century A.H.— that membership in the community of Believers came to be seen as confessional identity in itself: Being a Believer and Muslim meant that one could not also be a Christian, say, or a Jew.) In other words, Donner adduced substantial evidence that it could be argued that Qur'anically (some) Jews and Christians qualify as *mu'minun* (believers) as well as *muslimun* (those who submit to God).

Friedmann [detected](#) a similar ancient layer in the Islamic tradition during which the boundaries of the Muslim community had not been precisely delineated and according to which 'the Jews and the Christians belonged to the community of Muhammad.' This 'ancient layer of tradition ... was in general more considerate toward the People of the Book than that which eventually became the established law'.

Another trend significant in the historical development of the Muslim religious Self vis-à-vis the Religious Other was the gradual, ever-growing, religious self-consciousness of the Prophet of Islam and his early community. While attempts to find common ground occurred more frequently during the earlier periods of Muhammad's life, later periods increasingly stressed confessional and self-conscious Muslim identity.

An additional point to be considered is the qur'anic concept of a *hanif/millat Ibrahim*. Qur'anically, this belief system is presented as a primordial, monotheistic *Urreligion* based on the belief in One, True God as embodied by Abraham's message (Arabic, *Ibrahim*)— considered as the universal belief system and as *potentially* the final evolution in Qur'an's attitude toward the religious Self and the Other. As noted

by [Waardenburg](#), it is, however, unclear whether the Qur'an identified what became historical Islam 'as *the only* or merely as *one possible* realization of the primordial religion, the *hanīfiya*, on earth.'

Beyond Early Islam

In the post-revelatory times, the major delineating feature that marked the relationship between the Muslim religious Self and the religious Other was the fact that Islam became an imperial faith, and that Muslims in many contexts belonged to the ruling elite. Hence, Muslims were in a [position](#) 'to determine the nature of their relationship with the others in conformity with their world-view and in accordance with their beliefs.' How Muslims determined this relationship is varied, with examples of both the ethic of pluralism and exclusivism. My focus will be on the ethic of pluralism.

The notion of 'ethic of pluralism' that I use here is embodied in the idea of intrinsic metaphysical unity between human beings. It is akin to the argument that in the soul of each human being resides a spark of Divine flame which connects all to the Divine as well as to each other. One consequence of this spiritual unity of the entire human race is the idea of respecting the religious Other and, on this basis, working together toward the achievement of common goals and interests. This is only possible if coexistence and mutual respect regarding the religious Other are the norm. This ethic of pluralism in Islam was, to various degrees of success, implemented in past and present Muslim societies. [Historians of Islam](#) name the Umayyad Spain, Fatimid Egypt, Ottoman Turkey, and Mughal India as examples of Muslims 'who based their policies towards minorities on the Qur'an's intrinsically humanist ethos, exemplified to them by the Prophet in his community at Medina'.

In more contemporary times, some attempts by Muslim political and religious leaders, such as those behind the [Marrakesh Declaration](#) on the rights of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim majorities can be seen to stay true to and

amplify this ethic of pluralism. The immediate context that saw the urgent need for the establishment of this legal framework and call to action was the rise of violent extremist Muslim groups such as ISIS/Da'esh, but the timing of the Declaration itself was to mark the 1,400th anniversary of the Charter of Medina which [it](#) describes as a 'constitutional contract between the Prophet Muhammad, God's peace and blessings be upon him, and the people of Medina, which guaranteed the religious liberty of all, regardless of faith.'

Among others, the Declaration calls upon the various national religious groups 'to address their mutual state of selective amnesia that blocks memories of centuries of joint and shared living on the same land; we call upon them to rebuild the past by reviving this tradition of conviviality, and restoring our shared trust that has been eroded by extremists using acts of terror and aggression' and to 'affirm that it is unconscionable to employ religion for the purpose of aggressing upon the rights of religious minorities in Muslim countries.'

Some contemporary [progressive Muslim groups](#) have taken the ethic of pluralism beyond its moral, ethical, legal and socio-political dimensions and have developed an Islamic soteriology and theology of pluralism.

The Muslim Other

Early Islam witnessed several foundational events that not only significantly shaped the relationship between the Muslim Self and the Religious Other, but also the idea of the Muslim Internal Other. Faced by the mushrooming of diverse Muslim theological and juristic schools of thought in the first two to three centuries of Islam in particular (some of which are still present today despite a millennium of attempts by many to enforce an Islamic orthodoxy) as the Islamic interpretive tradition began to take shape one of the main questions that entertained the minds of many a Muslim scholar/theologian is what it means to be a true Muslim and what are the boundaries of faith (*iman*). Some answers to these questions are documented by

pre-modern Muslim scholars such as Shahrastani (d.1153 CE), one of the earliest Islamic 'heresiographers' and scholar of comparative religion in his work *Religious Parties and Schools of Philosophy* [i.e. *Kitāb al-milal*].

It is noteworthy that, historically speaking, the major theological schools in Islam have theologically invested a lot in the idea of a Saved Sect, a trend that still exists [today](#) predominantly in Athari/Salafi and Asha'ri schools of thought providing a very narrow understanding and definition of the [concept](#) of a religiously ideal believer. Relatedly, the [accusations of unbelief](#), including in what today are considered mainstream approaches to the Islamic tradition, were not infrequent.

The answer to the questions of correct belief remains contested as does the idea of what constitutes (Sunni) [Islamic orthodoxy](#) to this very day, reminding us of the reality of a very diverse number of Islamic sects and denominations over time. Over the last two decades we have witnessed an increase in [Islamic sectarianism](#) and despite some [efforts](#) to enhance Islamic ecumenism the current socio-political and religious reality suggests that the major religious players are too invested in their own versions of Islamic history to be able to [overcome](#) this sectarian heritage that they carry and, in many ways, embody.

Conclusion

In summary, it would be fair to conclude that the relationship between the Muslim religious Self and the religious Other was contextual and underwent several shifts and developments that are evident both in the nature of the Qur'anic revelation and in early Muslim history. Given the nature of the historical sources, the exact dates of these shifts cannot be ascertained with certainty and therefore no uniform normative stance on the nature of this relationship can be deduced. This conclusion is reflected in the ongoing debates between various Muslims groups as to what this attitude or approach toward the Religious Other should be. The aforementioned Marakesh Declaration, the path of Islamic extremist and progressive groups are examples.

Just as importantly the Islamic tradition, not unlike any other world religion, is also steeped in debates pertaining to intra-Muslim differences, theological or otherwise, and has given rise to an extraordinarily rich tapestry of Islamic sects and denominations. In this respect the continued diversity of ways of being a Muslim today and associated debates about what constitutes Islamic orthodoxy is a timely reminder that the question of the normative relationship between the Religious Self and the Religious Other is not something that applies just *across* reified religious traditions but is also an integral part of the very dynamic, historically contingent *self-understanding* of every religious tradition, Islam included.

Image: Cordoba Mosque/Church, Spain. Credit: [Marianne/Flickr](#).