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**Interpreting Islam On Plural Society**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to provide a descriptive and analytical perspective about how Islam can be interpreted by Muslims in plural societies with two contrasting results. The paper will then build on these results, provides two other variations, thus providing a spectrum of views on Islam and a plural society in one continuum.

The paper also offers an extrapolation of the Muslim's attitude and treatment of non-Muslims in two different contexts; Muslims as a majority group in a Muslim country or a minority in a non-Muslim country. The two contexts are chosen because they represent the current contemporary modern settings, which Muslims are facing today.

Finally, the paper offers some reasons that explain the divergence of views and sometimes even contradicting interpretations that influences and shapes Muslims' attitude towards plural society.

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# **INTERPRETING ISLAM ON PLURAL SOCIETY**

## **Introduction**

The post 9/11 period has witnessed an increased interest in the Islamic world, although there have been scholarly studies about Islam and the Muslims for hundreds of years. One of the major topics on Islam and Muslims after 9/11 concerns Islam and tolerance, and Muslims' attitude towards other cultures.

This paper seeks to provide a descriptive and analytical perspective about how Islam can be interpreted by Muslims in plural societies with two contrasting results. The paper will then build on these results provides two other variations, thus providing a spectrum of views on Islam and a plural society in one continuum.

The paper also offers an extrapolation of the Muslim's attitude and treatment of non-Muslims in two different contexts: Muslims as a majority group in a Muslim country and as a minority in a non-Muslim country. The two contexts are chosen because they represent the current contemporary modern settings that Muslims are facing today.

Finally, the paper offers some reasons that explain the divergence of views and sometimes even contradicting interpretations that influence and shape Muslims' attitude towards a plural society.

This paper hopes to provide insights about the dynamics and divergence of an Islamic-based thought held by Muslims on plural society. This will help to provide better understanding and appreciation about Islam and Muslims. By understanding the ideas that underlie Muslims' behaviour, one will be better prepared to relate with Muslims, develop policies concerning them, counter intolerant ideas held by them and many other possible benefits.

In the context of this paper, the term "plural society" refers to a society that is derivative of diverse ethnic, cultural and religious groups. The word "plural" is used for its generic interpretation as covering various forms of diversity such as multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society; which is the context that this paper wishes to cover.

## **Islam and Plural Society: A Negative Viewpoint**

The first view holds that Islam promotes a negative attitude towards plural society.

### ***Contradiction between Fundamental Teachings of Islam and a Plural Society***

The proponents of this viewpoint hold that, fundamentally, Islam requires Muslims to believe that it is the truth and the only religion recognized by God (Allah) (3:19, 85)<sup>1</sup>. It is the religion for all mankind (39:3). *Kufr* (Disbelieving) is the gravest sin in the eye of God (31:13, 4:48, 98:6, 5:72, 18:110). Muslims are commanded to enjoin good and forbid evil (3:104, 110). The Muslim's attitude towards evil is stipulated by the Prophet: "Anyone among you sees disobedience to God (*munkar*), should change it with his hand. If he is not able to, then with his tongue (advice). If he is not able to, then change it in his heart. That is the weakest of faith." There is no good that is greater than bringing people to the fold of Islam and there is no greater evil that Muslims must forbid than *kufr* (disbelieving).

Allowing non-Muslims to practise their religions freely in the public is a negation to the command that all mankind must submit to God (Allah) only (51:56).

A plural society necessitates tolerance for public manifestation of other faiths. This means that Muslims have to tolerate evil practices in the public, which is in contradiction with the above prophet's injunction. As for allowing propagation of other faiths in the public, it is tantamount to endorsing *kufr* (disbelieving), the greatest evil, and this must be prevented. Furthermore, it could lead to apostasy among Muslims, which is strictly forbidden. Free public propagation of other (false) faiths is a direct challenge to Islam (the true faith) that cannot be allowed.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Ultimatum: Embrace Islam, Submit under Islam's Rule or War***

The revelation of Chapter 9 of the Quran contains verses that call upon Muslims to wage unconditional war against non-Muslims. This, according to this view, in itself abrogates all verses on jihad for self-defence, patience and tolerance towards non-Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Quran, chapter 3, verse 19 and 85.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Sa'id Salim Al-Qahtani, *Al-Wala' Wa Al-Bara' Fi Al-Islam*, Dar Tayyibah, Riyadh, 1404H, pp. 352–3.

<sup>3</sup> Declaration of War Against Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places, *PBS Online Newshour*, August 1996; World Islamic Front statement on Jihad against Jews and Crusaders, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 23 February 1998; Tayseer Alouni's interview with Usamah bin Laden, *Al-Jazeera*, October 2001; Text of Al-Qaeda's statement, *AP*, 9 October 2001; *Sout Al-Jihad*, No. 3, 1424H, p. 18, 25–30; Muhammad Abdul Salam Al-Farj, *Al-Jihad: Al-Faridhah Al-Ghaibah (Jihad: The Neglected Obligation)*, p. 16, available at [www.e-prism.org/images/ALFAREDA.doc](http://www.e-prism.org/images/ALFAREDA.doc) (4 February 2008). Al-Farj was a leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad Organization which Ayman Az-Zawahiri also belonged to before its merger with Al-Qaeda. The book was the organization's primary reference of its ideology; Al-Qaeda in Iraq, *Limaza Nuqatil? Man Nuqatil? (Why we fight? Who we fight?)*, available at [www.tawhed.ws/r?i=3421](http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=3421) (4 February 2008); Hamd bin Abdullah Al-Humaidi, *Hatta La Tasma' Li Al-Jihad Munadiyan (So you will not hear a caller of jihad)*, 8 Jumada Al-Ula 1423H, available at [www.tawhed.ws/r?i=749](http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=749) (4 February 2008).

Verse 5 of the chapter stipulates that all peace treaties with pagan Arabs would be considered null and void and they would have no other option other than to embrace Islam or face war. Verse 29 of the chapter allows a special concession for non-Muslims to remain with their faith, only if they agree to submit under the rule of Islam.

The practice of giving the ultimatum can also be seen in many *hadiths* (Prophets Traditions). One *hadith* records the Prophet's instruction to his military commanders:

“Fight with the name of God and in the path of God. Combat those who disbelieve in God. Fight, yet do not cheat, do not break trust, do not mutilate, do not kill minors.

If thou encounter an enemy from among the associators (infidels), then offer them three alternatives. Whichever of these they may accept, agree to it and withhold thyself from them:

So call them to embrace Islam. If they accept, then agree to it and withhold thyself from them. Then ask them to quit their territory in order to immigrate into the territory of the migrants (i.e. Muslim state), and inform them that if they do that they will have same rights as the migrants and same obligations as they. If they refuse to migrate, then inform them that they will be considered as bedouin (nomadic [sic.]) Muslims, the same Divine laws being obligatory on them as on other Believers, except that they will not benefit by booty and other state income unless they join forces and fight along the Muslims.

If however they refuse, then call them to pay *Jizyah* (protection tax). If they accept, then agree to it and withhold thyself from them.

If they refuse, then seek help from God and combat them ...”<sup>4</sup>

After the revelation of Chapter 9, armed jihad is understood as a standing obligation until the end of the world and its aim is to fight non-Muslims until all lands submit under the rule of Islam. Thus, the basis of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims relates to armed war, not peace and tolerance. Muslims are not allowed to enter into any permanent peace agreement with non-Muslim countries. If at all, the period of the peace agreement

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<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Hamidullah, *The Muslim Conduct of State*, Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1987, p. 299.

should not exceed ten years, as practised by the Prophet during the Treaty of Hudaibiyah with the pagan Arab of Mecca.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Non-Muslim Inherent Hostility Towards Islam***

The Quran constantly reminds Muslims about the attitude of non-Muslims. They will never be pleased unless all Muslims abandon their religion and follow the non-Muslim's way of life (2:109, 120, 4:89). They share a common hate towards Islam and will never cease conspiring against, subvert, or try to subjugate and fight it when there is an opportunity (2:9, 105, 217, 9:8, 5:82, 63:7–8, 3:69). They will commit treachery and all possible means to fulfill their common hate towards Islam (3:118–20, 2:75–7). Due to that, Muslims are enjoined to be wary, strict, stern and firm towards all non-Muslims (48:29, 5:54, 63:4).

The nature of the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslims is always in conflict due to the fundamental differences between both communities; the former is based on full submission (*ubudiyah*) to God only and the latter is based on submission (*ubudiyah*) to fellow humans or false gods.<sup>6</sup> There are plenty of historical events to support this view. Historical examples include the conspiracy between the pagan Arab and the Jews against the Prophet even though in Islam, the Jews are accorded a special status as People of the Book. Other examples include the peace agreement that they have agreed upon, the war of the crusade and colonization of Muslim land. More contemporary examples would point towards the cases of cooperation between communists, polytheist and Christians against Muslims in Russia, China, Yugoslavia, Albania, India and Kashmir in the same light.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Al-wala' (Allegiance) and Al-bara' (Disassociation) Doctrine***

*Al-wala'* means total loyalty and allegiance to God only and all that He pleases and *al-bara'* means total disassociation from all that displease God.

Since only Islam and its followers pleases God, Muslims must have full loyalty and allegiance to the teachings of Islam (the truth), all that conform with it and fellow Muslims only.

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<sup>5</sup> Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybani's Siyar*, The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1966, pp. 16–7.

<sup>6</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilal Al-Quran (Under the shades of the Quran)*, Dar Asy-Syuruq, Beirut, 1985, Vol. 3, pp. 1586–7. See also Sayyid Qutb's commentary on offensive *jihad* in the same book at pp. 1431–52.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 1593; Hizbut Tahrir, *The inevitability of the clash of the civilization*, Al-Khilafah publications, London, 2002, pp. 28–39.



However, a Muslim's faith will not be complete by upholding *al-wala'* only. He must also practise *al-bara'* fully.<sup>8</sup> This means Muslims must disassociate himself from all that are related with *kufir* (disbelieving) and *kuffar* (infidels) that God is displeased with (60:4, 19:49–1, 11:54–6, 43:26–8, 10:41).<sup>9</sup>

Muslims should not associate themselves with the *kuffar* so as to avoid anything that may dilute their identity and sacrifice Islamic principles. Because of this doctrine, together with the non-Muslim's inherent hostility towards Muslims, fraternity with them is, if not allowed, strongly discouraged (3:118–20, 8–72–3, 3:28, 4:89, 5:51).

To protect the faith and identity and in order to convey the beauty of Islam, Muslims are enjoined to always distinguish themselves from non-Muslims. Therefore, Muslims are required to restrict from imitating non-Muslim's behaviour, attire, dress, hairstyle, beard, etc, and observing or participating in their festivals (5:51).

Living together with them in a Muslim country is strongly discouraged. Living in a non-Muslim country or travelling to it is only allowed under strict conditions i.e. for the purpose of *dakwah* (propagation) and with assurance that the faith will not be compromised. For a Muslim to co-exist with the *kuffar* in a non-Islamic environment, this can deny them God's Paradise in the Afterlife (4:97–9).<sup>10</sup>

However, Muslims are enjoined to offer kind treatment and establish justice for non-Muslims provided that they maintain non-fraternity towards them. Muslims are allowed to benefit from non-Muslims, to learn and seek knowledge from them in the field of science and technology (60:8–9).<sup>11</sup>

### ***Some Notes on this Category***

Due to the negative view towards non-Muslims, it can be concluded that this category of view requires Muslims in a Muslim country to restrict and minimize non-Muslim cultural or religious practices in the public sphere. This is either by limiting them in their private homes, places of worship or among their own community only so as to fulfil the Prophet's injunction, "Anyone among you sees disobedience to God (*munkar*) should change it with his

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<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Sa'id Salim Al-Qahtani, *Al-Wala' Wa Al-Bara' Fi Al-Islam (Allegiance and non-allegiance in Islam)*, pp. 89–94, 137–46.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 137–46.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 224, 234, 246–7, 272–90, 306–9, 321–42; See also Shaykh Saalih bin Fawzaan Al-Fawzaan, *Al-Walaa' wal-Baraa' (Allegiance and association with the people of Islaam and emaan and disassociation and enmity with the people of falsehood and disbelief in Islaam)*, Calgary Islamic Homepage, 1997, available at [www.calgaryislam.com/imembers/pdf/manhaj/16.pdf](http://www.calgaryislam.com/imembers/pdf/manhaj/16.pdf) (4 February 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 364–71.

hand. If he is not able to, then with his tongue (advices). If he is not able to, then change it in his heart [boycott]. That is the weakest of faith.” As of Muslims living in a non-Muslim country, they should segregate themselves socially so as to protect the purity of their faith and identity.

Proponents of this view agree that freedom of religion does not include freedom for any Muslim to renounce Islam and convert to other religions. They also agree that the punishment of apostasy is the death penalty. An act that is regarded as blasphemous to Islam is also punishable by death.

Scholars who subscribe to this category agree on the non-Muslim’s right in a Muslim country to practise their religion and culture in the private space. They also agree about the importance of Muslims who have to live in a non-Muslim country to be religiously prudent in their social interaction with the larger non-Muslim community.

However, scholars who subscribe to this category do differ on the intricacies of the issue. Firstly, scholars differ on the extent of allowance which can be given to non-Muslims in the public space. Secondly, they differ on the extent of segregation that Muslims living in a non-Muslim country should observe. Thirdly, they differ on the use of armed *jihad* to ensure Islam’s dominance above other religions and cultures.

The result of the differences, in terms of the extent of its negativity towards plurality and diversity of faith and culture depends on how the proponents interpret the evidence from the Quran and the *hadiths* (Prophetic traditions).

### **Islam and Plural Society: A Positive Viewpoint**

The second view holds that Islam promotes positive attitude towards plural society.

#### ***Diversity is Natural***

This view is based on the argument that Islam fundamentally commands Muslims to embrace diversity because it is essentially the law of nature that God himself has created. To support this position, they highlight numerous references in the Quran that refer to the diversity of nature. For examples, the Quran states that God created the different sexes and ethnic groups among mankind (30:22) for positive reasons, that is, to know and understand each other (49:13). Even fruits, though of one type, may look and taste different (6:141–2).

The Quran constantly describes Muslims and non-Muslims as non-homogenous groups. They come in different forms, types and even colours. God, then, accords each one of them their own status and ruling (8:72–5, 35:32, 4:95, 60:8–9). On that respect, the Quran

allocates a special status to the People of the Book, by declaring the meat (of animals) slaughtered by them as *halal* (permissible) and that it is also *halal* to marry their women (5:5) and there are also different types of People of the Book (5:82–3, 5:69, 2:62).

The focus of Islam is not the homogenization of a society into one culture, faith or identity but an observation of proper conduct so as to ensure that diversity will produce positive results. Diversity that Muslims are called upon to embrace includes diversity in culture, religion and views.

On diversity of views, the Quran commands Muslim to always seek for the best opinion (39:17–8) and this cannot be achieved unless there is diversity of opinions for Muslims to compare, contrast and eventually make his choice.

More pertinently, another verse explains that religious diversity is intentional (5:48). The verse explains that God could have made mankind as a single community or nation. Instead, He created diversity, wherein every people have their own laws and way of life, so as to test who among mankind are truly committed to peace and the common good. The Quran proclaims that differences among human beings will remain (11:118–9). Hence, it is neither possible, nor commanded, to make everyone believe in one faith (10:99).

The overall message of the Quran essentially leads us to one important point—to be careful with ideas that contain generalizations or tendencies to see Muslims or non-Muslims as one monolithic or homogenous group. Such ideas are often reflected in a form of binary vision, which sees a complex phenomenon as a black-and-white or us versus them perspective only, with no room for other spectrum of colours, or shades of black-and-white.

Such generalist views also does not fit with the teachings of the Quran because it produces prejudices and stereotypical thinking that all non-Muslims are being inherently hostile. And this thinking is that which is forbidden (49:12). Prejudice such as this is no different from the misconception among some non-Muslims that all Muslims are terrorists and fundamentalists. It is highly questionable when Muslims argue against non-Muslims' stereotyped perception towards Muslims but at the same time are guilty of stereotyping all non-Muslims as bad and villainous. Such double standard not only exposes Muslims to criticism, but more importantly, this attitude negates the very principles of justice and equity in Islam.

It is also important to understand both verses by looking at the context of its revelation. Al-Qurtubi and At-Tabari cited a view from Mujahid that the verse “[Your enemies] will not cease to fight against you ...” (2:217) was revealed with regards to the

Quraisy of Mecca and their extreme hostilities towards the Muslims.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the verse is more appropriately attributed to the attitude of the Quraisy at that specific time towards the Muslims. Thus, verses in the Quran that call upon Muslims to have negative attitude towards non-Muslims ought to be interpreted as referring to non-Muslims that are specifically hostile only, and not referring to all non-Muslims, as indicated in, “O ye who believe! Take not my enemies and yours as friends (or protectors)” (60:1).

From the perspective of Islamic hermeneutic methodology, the generalized view towards non-Muslims is arguably flawed because of its over-reliance on generalities (*`am*) found in the Quran, over-reliance on the *hadiths* and the failure to observe the rule of *takhsis* (specification) as required and observed by Muslim exegetes (interpreters).

A maxim commonly held by Muslim scholars says, “*la `ama illa wa huwa makhsus*” (there is no generality without exception).<sup>13</sup> Thus, Muslim scholars suggest that no generalities (*`am*) in the Quran and the *hadiths* should be applied as basis of a ruling or judgment before making an exhaustive research for other verses that could qualify its interpretation.<sup>14</sup> By following this methodology, the scholars would be able to determine the limit with regards to the scope in which such verse is to be applied. Consequently, the verse after it has been qualified would be interpreted within the scope only. This is what the proponents of the first category had failed to do which resulted in the views they held.

In other words, verses of the Quran about the character of non-Muslims must not be interpreted detached from other verses of the Quran and the practices of the Prophet in his history.<sup>15</sup> The following are some of the examples from the Prophet that would limit the generalities of the verses:

1. The Prophet was constantly protected by his uncle, Abu Talib, who was not a Muslim until his death, by popular historical account.<sup>16</sup>
2. Under intense persecution by the Meccan people, the prophet commanded his followers to seek refuge in Abyssinia, which was under the rule of a Christian king. He commended the King as a fair ruler who would not wrong any of his subjects.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad b. Ahmad Al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami' li Ahkam Al-Quran*, Dar Al-Kutub Al-Arabiyah, Beirut, 1988, Vol. 3, part 3, p. 32; Muhammad bin Jarir At-Tabari, *Jami' Al-Bayan an Takwil Ayi Al-Quran*, Dar Al-Fikr, Beirut, Vol. 2, part 2, p. 354.

<sup>13</sup> Muhamamad bin Ali Asy-Syaukani, *Irsyad Al-Fuhul Ila Tahqiq Al-Haq Min Ilm Al-Usul*, Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyah, Beirut, 1999, Vol. 1, p. 475; Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Al-Mustasfa Min Ilm Al-Usul*, Dar Ihya' At-Turats Al-Arabi, Beirut, 1997, Vol. 2, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, Vol. 1, p. 465.

<sup>15</sup> Muhamamad bin Ali Asy-Syaukani, *Irsyad Al-Fuhul Ila Tahqiq Al-Haq Min Ilm Al-Usul*, Vol. 1, pp. 532–4; Abu Ishaq Asy-Syatibi, *Al-Muwafaqat Fi Usul Al-Fiqh*, Dar Al-Makrifah, Beirut, 1997, Vol. 3, pp. 97–8, 233–5.

<sup>16</sup> Saifur Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheeq Al-Makhtum*, Maktabah Dar-us-Salam, Riyadh, 1995, pp. 123–4.

3. Once the Prophet went to the city of Taif to seek support for his messages but was rejected. He could not re-enter Mecca safely until Al-Mut'im bin `Adiy, a notable figure in Mecca who was not a Muslim, put him under his protection.<sup>18</sup> Abu Bakr, a companion of the Prophet, also received protection from a non-Muslim leader in Mecca.<sup>19</sup>
4. After migration to Medina, the Prophet entered into peaceful agreement with various non-Muslim Arab tribes. The Prophet maintained his commitment to the agreement until his death.<sup>20</sup>
5. The Prophet launched a big punitive military operation against the Meccans, which led to the fall of Mecca into the hands of the Muslims for attacking his ally, an Arab non-Muslim tribe. It was a blatant violation of the agreement of Hudaibiyah that was concluded voluntarily and contained clauses that favoured the Meccan pagans. Among the content of the agreement was that both parties would cease attacking each other and this included their respective allies as well for the period of ten years.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Peaceful Coexistence, Tolerance and Respect for Other Faiths***

Islam is essentially a religion of peace. This is, firstly, by virtue of its name that is derived from the verb *aslama*, which means, “to submit, surrender” and the verb *aslama* is derived from the root word *salm* or *silm*, which means “peace, security”.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, the greetings that Muslims are enjoined to convey to others is *Assalamualaikum*, which means peace be upon you. Thirdly, the Quran prefers peace than conflict (8:61). Fourthly, history has proven that Islam is better accepted during peace time and through peaceful means. The Hudaibiyah Accord serves as a powerful demonstration of this: record numbers of people came into Islam in the two peaceful years after the accord. It was almost the same number of new Muslims as the total for the preceding 19 years of the Prophet’s mission. History has also shown that Islam has the potential to spread rapidly via peaceful methods as it did in the Malay Archipelago and in China.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp. 99–100.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 140.

<sup>19</sup> Sa`id Hawwa, *Al-Asas Fi As-Sunnah (As-Sirah An-Nabawiyah)*, Dar As-Salam, Cairo, 1985, Vol. 3, p. 1563.

<sup>20</sup> Saifur Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheeq Al-Makhtum*, p. 197–8.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, pp. 388–9.

<sup>22</sup> *Al-Mu`jam Al-Wasit*, Majma' Al-Lughah Al-`Arabiyyah, Cairo, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition., no date, pp. 462–3; Rohi Baalbaki, *Al-Mawrid: A modern Arabic-English dictionary*, Dar Al-`Ilm Li Al-Malayiin, Beirut, 2001, pp. 107, 641; J.M Cowan (ed.), *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, Spoken Languages Services, New York, 1976, pp. 424–5.

Therefore, establishing and maintaining peace and the use of peaceful means to convey the message of Islam is important in Islam. On that note, peaceful co-existence with other faiths and cultures is enjoined upon Muslims. It is a means and a manifestation of their commitment for peace and also serves the objective of sharing the message of Islam more effectively.

Because diversity is the natural state of the universe, tolerance for diversity becomes a fundamental teaching of Islam. This is manifested through Islam's command for respect of other faiths, non-interference in matters of other religion (109:1–6), prohibition of any form of compulsion and coercion in matters of faith (2:256, 272, 10:99) and rebuking or insulting other faiths (6:108), which become the basis for peaceful co-existence of various faiths in a society. Islam requires acceptance of faith based on free choice (18:29). Intolerance in a plural society will only inevitably produce conflict. This will not go well with the claim that Islam is a religion of peace.

Since conflict will produce hardship and difficulties, this will contradict another important characteristic of Islam—that Islam is a religion of simplicity, practicality and ease (2:185, 5:6, 22:78). The following also can be found from the *hadith* that reinforces the Quranic message of tolerance and practicality. There are many *hadiths* that point to the same character. For example, “Make it convenient and do not make it difficult, tell them the good news and do not make them run away” (Narrated by Al-Bukhari).

The claim that verses in Chapter 9 of the Quran abrogated all verses on jihad as self-defence, patience and tolerance towards non-Muslim revealed earlier forms the basis for the idea of perpetual war between Muslims and non-Muslim. This claim, however, is rejected by the majority of Muslim scholars because there is no evidence to support it. With regards to verse 5 of Chapter 9, there is no mention about it abrogating earlier verses on defensive jihad according to At-Tabari and Ibn Katsir, two of the most prominent exegetes of the Quran. In fact, Al-Qurtubi reported that some scholars, among them Adh-Dahhak and Atho', were of the view that verse 5 of Chapter 9 that says, “slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captives and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush”, was abrogated by other verses in the Quran (47:4).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Wahbah Az-Zuhaili, *Al-Tafsir Al-Munir Fi Al-'Aqidah wa Al-Syariah wa Al-Manhaj* (Illuminating Interpretation Regarding Belief, Law & Approach), Dar Al-Fikr, Damascus, 1991, Vol. 10, pp. 110, 175–8; Louay Safi, *Peace and the Limits of War: Transcending Classical Conception of Jihad*, chapter 4—War of Domination, available at <http://lsinsight.org/articles/2001/peace-war/index.htm> (4 February 2008); Muhammad b. Ahmad Al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami' Lli Ahkam Al-Quran*, Vol. 4, part 8, p. 47; Ismail bin Katsir, *Tafsir Ibn Katsir*, Dar Al-Fikr, place not cited, 1980, Vol. 2, p. 338; Muhammad bin Jarir At-Tabari, *Jami' Al-Bayan 'An Takwil Ayi Al-Quran*, Vol. 6, part 10, p. 80–1; vol. 13, part 26, pp. 40–4; Abu Ishaq Asy-Syatibi, *Al-Muwafaqat Fi Usul*

Similarly, on attitudes of non-Muslims towards Islam, the prevalent opinion among Muslim scholars is that verses on jihad cannot be interpreted independently of each other. They are to be studied together to derive the true understanding of jihad in Islam. In this respect, Muslim scholars have agreed that verses that are general and unconditional, such as the command to fight the pagans everywhere and at all times (9:5, 14, 36), must be interpreted as conditional, that is as a command to fight aggressors only (2:190, 194). Thus, the meaning of verses from Chapter 9, which is unconditional, would fall under the meaning of the verses that exhort Muslims to fight the non-Muslims only when Muslims are attacked.

Classical Muslim scholars argued that verses which called upon Muslims to wage unconditional, armed jihad against all non-Muslims referred specifically to the Arab pagans of that time. Some scholars were more specific by saying that the verses were revealed with respect to the people of Mecca or the tribe of Quraish who had been in a prolonged state of war against Muslims through unprovoked aggression and violence. The hostilities remained even after Muslims migrated to Medina in search of peace. Despite entering into various treaties with the Muslims in Medina, the Quraisy and other pagan Arab tribes time and again treacherously violated them. It became clear, near the end of the Prophet's mission, that peaceful relations with those tribes were impossible, hence the instruction in that chapter to denounce the treaties and wage war. An-Nawawi, among many other scholars, wrote that the verse did not refer to the People of the Book (Jews and Christians). Thus, it is inappropriate to apply these verses to all non-Muslims today.<sup>24</sup>

Islam should not be made the cause of difficulty for Muslims to co-exist with non-Muslims. From its early days, Islam in Mecca and Medina existed in a plural society, as seen from the peace agreements signed between the Prophet and the various pagan Arabs and Jewish tribes then in that city.

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*Al-Fiqh*, Vol. 3, p. 97–8; Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Al-Mustasfa Min Ilm Al-Usul*, Dar Ihya' At-Turats Al-Arabi, Vol. 2, p. 50.

<sup>24</sup> Wahbah Az-Zuhaili, *Al-Tafsir Al-Munir Fi Al-'Aqidah wa Al-Syariah wa Al-Manhaj (Illuminating Interpretation Regarding Belief, Law & Approach)*, Vol. 10, p 108–9; Muhammad Khair Haykal, *Al-Jihad wa Al-Qital fi As-Siyasah Asy-Syariyah*, Vol. 3, pp. 1456–7; Muhammad b. Ahmad Al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami Li Ahkam Al-Quran*, Vol. 4, part 8, p. 42; Muhammad bin Jarir At-Tabari, *Jami' Al-Bayan 'An Takwil Ayi Al-Quran*, Vol. 6, part 10, pp. 61, 77; Ismail bin Katsir, *Tafsir Ibn Katsir*, Vol. 2, p. 338; Muhyiddin An-Nawawi, *Al-Minhaj: Syarh Sahih Muslim*, Dar Al-Makrifah, Beirut, no date, Vol. 1, p. 156; See also Mustafa Al-Bugha, and Muhyiddin Al-Mistu, *Al-Wafi: Fi Syarh Al-Arba'in An-Nawawiyah*, Dar Al-Ulum Al-Insaniyah, Damascus, no date, p. 47.

### ***Inclusive, not Exclusive***

One of the important traits for harmonious living in a plural society is that of being inclusive. Inclusive here means the openness to accept others or what comes from others, and not rejecting them purely because they are not from “us”, or from the same group. Inclusivity is founded on the belief that positive universal values and elements exist in various groups and communities. People and views are accepted or rejected based on their positivity or negativity, not on the basis of whether they originated from “us” or “them”.

There are many indications that Islam requires Muslims to be inclusive so that they can help achieve harmonious and peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies. God sent Muhammad as a mercy for all creations (21:107). This tells, in essence, that Islam is an inclusive religion, a tacit call for Muslims to be inclusive in its social conduct.

Islam commands Muslims to carry arms to defend those who are oppressed or persecuted irrespective of their race or religion. The Quran also states that God will ensure that a group of people who can reject and stop the evils and aggressions from another group will emerge till all the mosques, churches and other places of worship are saved from destruction (22:40). This indicates that rejecting evil deeds of any kind is not just to ensure the safety of Muslims, but the safety of all. This points out again that Islam is an inclusive religion, which seeks to secure the rights and safety of all members of a society. This is also in line with Islam being a religion of mercy for all mankind.

Also, Islam encourages Muslims to have an open attitude to positive foreign ideas and influence, to learn from the experiences of others, and to strive for what is good. These are important prerequisites in promoting progress and development. Knowledge is regarded as something that should be sought after regardless of its source of origin. The Prophet has said, “Wisdom/knowledge is like something that was lost by the believers. Whoever finds it, he is entitled to it.” Early Muslim scholars encouraged Muslims to seek knowledge in every part of the known world, even from China because it was then a thriving civilization from which Muslims can learn a lot. It is acknowledged by Western scholars that Muslims were responsible for preserving and subsequently transmitting to the West much of the intellectual heritage of the Greek and Roman civilizations. This would not have been possible had the Muslims then not embraced inclusivity.

Like other religions, Islam requires its followers to preserve its principles and fundamentals. Some of these differentiate Islam from the other faiths and provide Muslims with a distinct identity. Nevertheless, Islam does not call for absolute exclusivism such that



Muslims are to detach or separate themselves from other communities or to reject anything that comes from them just because they are non-Muslim.

Such a positive attitude is not possible if the teaching of Islam is fundamentally incompatible with a plural society.

### ***Non-assimilation Rule***

Islam does not command Muslims to assimilate non-Muslims into their cultural or religious realm. In fact, Islam guarantees non-Muslims the freedom to practise their religion and maintain their culture. Denying such rights or forcing non-Muslims to relinquish their religious beliefs and cultural practices are regarded as a serious breach of Islamic injunction. One of the key principles of social interaction laid in the Quran is “for you, your religion and for me, mine” (109:1–6, 44:15).

When the Prophet entered into a treaty with various Jewish and pagan Arab tribes, the clause stated, “Verily the Jews shall be considered as a community (*ummah*) along with Believers; for the Jews, their religion, and for the Muslims their religion ...”<sup>25</sup>

An agreement between the Prophet and one of Christian tribe of Najran provides more details:

“From the Prophet Muhammad to the bishop Abu’l-Harith, to the bishops of Najran to their priest and those who follow them, as well as to their monks: To them belong all that I sin their hands, whether little or much, their oratories, and their monasteries; (guaranteed by) the protection of Allah and His Messenger. No bishop will be removed from his Episcopal see, no monk from his monastery, no priest from his vicarage. None of their rights, nor any of their powers will be changed, nor anything (custom?) to which they are used to. On this, the protection of Allah and His Messenger is guaranteed for ever, so long as they behave sincerely, and act in accordance with their duties. They will neither be subjected to oppression, nor shall they be oppressors themselves.”<sup>26</sup>

Similar agreement with some addition can also be found in agreements between the Prophet and the dwellers of St. Catherine monastery in Sinai. The Prophet’s act was later emulated, for examples, by Umar, the second caliph after the Prophet, in his agreement with

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<sup>25</sup> Muhammad Hamidullah, *The Life and Work of the Prophet of Islam*, Adam Publishers, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 157–60.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 470.

Christians of Ilya<sup>27</sup> and Khalid, a Muslim military commander in an agreement with Christians of `Anat.<sup>28</sup>

Reading the works of classical and contemporary Muslim scholars, the rights of non-Muslims living in a Muslim society can be summarized as follows:

1. Non-Muslims are free to perform their rituals and worships in accordance to their own religion.
2. Non-Muslims have the right of protection for security with regards to life, property, belief and culture. Muslims carry a duty to fight those who threaten this security.
3. Non-Muslims are free to have their own religious or cultural celebrations and festivals.
4. Non-Muslims should be allowed to build and maintain their places of worship to facilitate their religious activities.
5. Non-Muslims are free to propagate their religion and organize missionary works as long they are conducted in a civil manner.
6. Non-Muslims are free to bring up their children according to their culture and religion. They can have their own vernacular education system.
7. Non-Muslims should have the right to judicial autonomy. This means that they are entitled to their personal law to regulate matters related to marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody of children. They can also choose to settle disputes in accordance to their religion and culture (5:43, 47). Special courts can be established for them and judges can be appointed among them to adjudicate cases.<sup>29</sup>
8. Non-Muslims are allowed to consume food and drink that is permissible by their religion although they are not permissible to Muslims such as pork and alcohol.<sup>30</sup>
9. Non-Muslims have equal civil rights and protection enjoyed by Muslims i.e. freedom of expression, political participation and association and equality provided for in the law.

The commitment to this non-assimilation rule was elaborately institutionalized during the Ottoman Empire in the form of Millet system. In the system, each religious community was regarded as an “autonomous social unit that enjoyed administrative and legal independence. Each millet was headed by clergymen who were responsible for the civil

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 115

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 115.

<sup>29</sup> Ahmad Yousif, “Islam, Minorities and Religious Freedom: A Challenge to Modern Theory of Pluralism”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2000, pp. 36-7; See also, Muhammad Fathi Utsman, *Huquq Al-Insan Baina Asy-Syariah Al-Islamiyah Wa Al-Fikr Al-Qanun Al-Gharbi (Human Rights Between Islamic Law and Western Legal Thought)*, Dar Asy-Syuruq, Beirut, 1982, pp. 106-7; Abu Al-A`ala Al-Maududi, *Al-Hukmah Al-Islamiyah (Islamic Government)*, Al-Mukhtar Al-Islami, Cairo, 1980, pp. 196-211.

<sup>30</sup> A. Rahman I. Doi, *Orang Bukan Islam Di Bawah Undang-undang Syariah (Non-Muslim Under Syariah (Islamic Law))*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1992, p. 74.

status, judicial process, church property, education, charity and even tax collection.”<sup>31</sup> The system allowed peaceful coexistence and preservation of religious and cultural identity of various religious communities under one single polity.

### ***Some Notes on this Category***

Similarly with the first category, the proponents of this second category are not free from differences of opinion on the details, despite sharing a positive attitude towards plural society. The followings are some examples of the differences that will illustrate sub-groups within this.

It is important to understand some of these differences because they will illustrate the extent of tolerant practices propagated by the sub-groups in each category. This allows us to see the clear dichotomy between the contrasting viewpoints and the finer variations within the continuum.

Firstly, the majority of this positive viewpoint is tolerant to people of other religions and cultures. However, they maintain the view that Islam is the *only* true religion and way of salvation or of being acceptable to God, the Quran is the final revelation to complete and correct other holy books and, finally, its teachings are superior to the others.

A minority of this positive viewpoint holds that adherents of other faiths are capable of achieving salvation, God’s pleasure and place in heaven by truly following “islam” defined as believing in one God, full submission to Him and obeying His commandments, not Islam as a special noun for a religion revealed to prophet Muhammad.<sup>32</sup>

Tolerance for the former could simply means putting up in the short term with the others, while actively seek in the long term to convert them and for the latter could means respecting the others’ faiths with the acknowledgement that the others’ belief are equally valid.

The two different positions produce various degree of freedom and form of social interaction. The latter will provide more space and tend to be more relaxed or hold a “live and let live” attitude towards the others.

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<sup>31</sup> Ahmad Yousif, “Islam, Minorities and Religious Freedom: A Challenge to Modern Theory of Pluralism”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> Mahmut Aydin, “Religious Pluralism: A Challenge for Muslims—A Theological Evaluation”, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 38, Issue 2/3, Spring/Summer 2001, paxim; Sohail H. Hashmi, “The Quran and tolerance: an interpretive essay on Verse 5:48”, *Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 2003, pp. 81–3, 101; Ali S. Asani, “Pluralism, Intolerance, and the Qur`an”, *The American Scholar*, Vol. 71, Issue 1, Winter 2002, p. 54.

Secondly, although the majority asserts that Islam forbids any form of compulsion and every individual is free to choose one's faith, they make exception to a Muslim converting to other religion or committing apostasy. They are divided into three opinions: (i) apostasy is a serious sin and, after being convicted by court and given opportunity to repent, is punishable with death penalty; (ii) it is a grave sin and after being convicted by court and given opportunity to repent, is punishable but the form of punishment is left to the discretion of the authority; and (iii) it is a sin, but no punishment in this world can be imposed because any form of punishment is tantamount to coercion.<sup>33</sup>

Thirdly, while all the scholars agree that no rights or freedom is unlimited and unconditional, they differ on the exact details of the conditions with respect to religious and cultural expression in public. Their views are dependent on how the scholars balance up between right for freedom and other social and political interests, which shape their aptitude towards tolerance within certain context. For example, some scholars does not allow the building of a church or temple in Muslim dominated areas so as not to offend Muslims, therefore preserving social harmony and some scholars do not allow any criticism of Islam in public by non-Muslims.<sup>34</sup>

The proponent of this category of view does not argue that by accepting diversity there will be no conflict between various groups. Diversity will cause clashes of interest. Whenever there are differing needs, every party will strive to champion their own interests above the others. This is normal and cannot be avoided. What is important, to them, is to ensure that in striving for its own interests, each party does not contribute to a negative outcome. The striving should be managed to produce a positive outcome, and at the least, a better understanding of each other's aspirations.

### **Spectrum of Views in a Continuum**

Based on what have been written on the two contrasting positions, a preliminary spectrum of views in a continuum can be developed as illustrated in the chart below.

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<sup>33</sup> Muhammad Salim Al-`Awwa, *Fi Usul An-Nizam Al-Jinai Al-Islami*, Dar Al-Ma`arif, Cairo, date not cited, pp. 150–54; “Apostay and the Freedom of Religion”, *Islam Online Special Folder*, available at [www.islamonline.net/English/contemporary/2006/04/article01.shtml](http://www.islamonline.net/English/contemporary/2006/04/article01.shtml) (4 February 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Ahmad Yousif, “Islam, Minorities and Religious Freedom: A Challenge to Modern Theory of Pluralism”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, pp35–6; Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi, *Ghair Al-Muslimin Fi Al-Mujtama’ Al-Islami (Non-Muslim Status in Islamic State)*, available [www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.asp?cu\\_no=2&item\\_no=442&version=1&template\\_id=93&parent\\_id=1](http://www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=442&version=1&template_id=93&parent_id=1) (4 February 2008).

The chart is divided in the middle into two equal parts. The part on the left represents the negative first position while the right represents the positive second position.

In view of the differences within each position, it could be argued that each position can be further divided into two categories—minimum and maximum. Thus, a spectrum of four views can be illustrated from the left to the right.

The continuum starts from extreme left which is the maximum negative position, followed by the minimum negative position close to the middle. It then continues close to middle and into the second position with a minimum positive position and ends at the extreme right, which represents the most positive position towards a plural society.

Elements that characterize the four views in the continuum are described in the four boxes below. Each represents one view from left to right.

The chart also provides an illustration of the attitudes all the four views on two issues: (i) assimilation of non-Muslims in a Muslim country into a Muslim society and (ii) segregation of Muslim minority in a non-Muslim country from the host society.

Assimilation here refers to the process whereby a minority group in a society is put through to absorb the prevailing culture or the culture of the majority in a society. As for segregation, it refers to the process of separating two or more distinctive groups from each other to maintain the way of life (culture, religion, identity, etc) for each group from polarization by the others.

The movement of the position from the hardest to the softest in both situations is from left to right as indicated by the arrow. This means that the view at the extreme left position would tend to support or promote hard assimilation policy on non-Muslims in order to exert Islam's authority and supremacy above all other way of life and ideologies (69:9, 2:193). It would also take the strongest position for segregation of minority Muslims in non-Muslim country in order to protect the purity of their identity, faith and religious practices and as an expression of unwillingness to submit under any authority other than Islam.

Since a predominant Muslim society and a predominant non-Muslim society are two different contexts, the needs, interests and objectives that need to be protected, pursued or achieved are different. This explains the two contrasting positions by the same view in the two contexts. Muslims who hold to the view located on the left of the continuum often views secular Muslim regimes as un-Islamic and in the same category of non-Muslim country. Their attitude, then, in this context would be closer to the position taken for minority Muslims. They will tend to gravitate towards social segregation to protect themselves from the evil of a secular society, which often resembles a Western non-Muslim lifestyle.

## Continuum

Negative Position / First Position

Positive Position / Second Position

Max. Negative	Min. Negative	Min. Positive	Max. Positive
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Islam is the true religion.</li> <li>2. Other religions must be subjugated.</li> <li>3. All manmade ideology i.e. democracy, liberalism and secularism are rejected.</li> <li>4. The establishment of Islamic state and the caliphate is fundamental obligation in Islam.</li> <li>5. Apostasy and blasphemy are punishable by death.</li> <li>6. Maximum restriction to non-Muslim cultural and religious practices in public. Hard assimilation of non-Muslims into Islamic way of life policy.</li> <li>7. Original basis of Muslim-non-Muslim relationship is hostility and war.</li> <li>8. Violent means is justified to put non-Muslims under Islamic rule.</li> <li>9. Living in non-Muslim territory is not permissible. Migration to Muslim country is obligatory.</li> <li>10. Minority Muslims in non-Muslim territory who cannot migrate must observe full segregation—political participation and social interaction are forbidden.</li> <li>11. Democracy and liberalism is anathema to Islam in all circumstance. Participation in democratic processes nullifies faith.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Islam is the true religion.</li> <li>2. Other religions must be subjugated.</li> <li>3. All manmade ideology i.e. democracy, liberalism and secularism are rejected.</li> <li>4. The establishment of Islamic state and the caliphate is fundamental obligation in Islam.</li> <li>5. Apostasy and blasphemy are punishable by death.</li> <li>6. Public restriction limited to pure religious rituals, not cultural activities that does not contradict with Islam i.e. cultural performance is allowed as long it conforms with Islamic code of decency such as no intermingling of different sex. Soft assimilation through careful social engineering and policy formulation to facilitate assimilation and conversion to Islam.</li> <li>7. Maintain theoretically the idea of jihad as a means to subjugate non-Muslims into Islam, not in practice due to theological deference.</li> <li>8. Armed jihad is for self-defence only.</li> <li>9. Living in non-Muslim territory is allowed to pursue the interest of Islam i.e. propagating Islam. Migration is only obligatory if faced with persecution.</li> <li>10. Physical segregation is not required for Muslim minority but negative attitude towards non-Muslims must be maintained.</li> <li>11. View democratic process as un-Islamic but consider it as a lesser evil than authoritarian regime for minority Muslims. Participation in political action in this context is allowed for the purpose of pursuing Muslim interest.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Islam is the true religion.</li> <li>2. Other religions are tolerated and must be treated with full respect.</li> <li>3. Manmade ideologies are not rejected outright. There are common values that need to be recognized. Criticism is directed to those that contradict Islam only.</li> <li>4. Support democratic Islamic state. Secular state is not accepted, but tolerated for Muslim minority as a lesser evil. Democratic processes and Islam are fundamentally compatible.</li> <li>5. Apostasy and blasphemy could be punished by death.</li> <li>6. Imposition of few restrictions to non-Muslim rituals in public for pragmatic reasons i.e. to protect the feelings of Muslims or social sensitivity.</li> <li>7. Original basis of Muslim-non-Muslim relationship is peace and harmonious coexistence.</li> <li>8. Armed jihad is for self-defence only.</li> <li>9. Living in non-Muslim territory is allowed to pursue the interest of Islam i.e. propagating Islam.</li> <li>10. Muslim minority is encouraged to interact with non-Muslims at all levels to allow positive dialogue and engagement. Patience towards un-Islamic environment is virtuous.</li> <li>11. Muslim minority is required to participate in political process to protect Muslim and common interest.</li> <li>12. Islam shares common values with liberalism but also differs fundamentally with it.</li> <li>13. Interfaith marriage is not permissible.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Islam is just one of many ways for salvation in the Afterlife.</li> <li>2. Man's understanding of Islam is subjective.</li> <li>3. Other religions are not only tolerated but treated as equals.</li> <li>4. No need for Islamic state. Secular state is fully accepted.</li> <li>5. Death penalty for blasphemy contradicts Islam's guarantee for freedom of expression. Blasphemy can only be punished, not by death penalty, if it is against public interest i.e. public disorder. Original basis of Muslim-non-Muslim relationship is peace and harmonious coexistence.</li> <li>6. Freedom of religious practice is equal to all. All men are free to embrace any religion. No punishment can be imposed</li> <li>7. No need for armed jihad.</li> <li>8. Free intermingling of Muslims with non-Muslims in Muslim and non-Muslim countries is acceptable.</li> <li>9. There is no different between living in a Muslim country and non-Muslim democratic country.</li> <li>10. Democracy and liberalism are compatible with Islam.</li> </ol>

Hard

Assimilation/Segregation

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Soft

Due to the positive attitude of the last two views on plural society, it is not difficult to anticipate their soft position on assimilation and segregation in the two contexts with the softest position located with the extreme right. A soft assimilation position is due to the importance given to the idea of freedom guaranteed by Islam based on the notion of “no compulsion in religion” and *dakwah* (propagation) must be done “with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious” (16:125).

Similarly, also with the soft attitude towards segregation, it is motivated by the belief that Islam does not encourage social exclusivism because the Prophet has said, “a Muslim who socializes with others and is patient with their misdeeds, is better than a Muslim who does not socialize with others and is not patient with their misdeeds” (narrated by At-Turmuzi) and that the beauty of Islam is better projected through positive engagement and constructive contribution to the society that Muslims live in.

It could be said that views, which gravitate towards the left, is the more intolerant of one’s attitude towards non-Muslims and the opposite is true for views, which gravitates to the right.

However, it is not true that the intolerance towards differences and diversity in a plural society is synonymous with the left position because, in reality, there are many instances of intolerance by the holders of the most right position, especially if they are in the position of power, towards those who disagree with them or those who hold to the spectrum of view in the left. Kamal Ataturk’s policy of hard Westernization and secularization of Turkey Muslims and some secular elements in the power base of contemporary Turkey is one example of this phenomenon.

### **Reasons Behind Two Contradicting Interpretations**

The above two positions on the issue point to a fact that it is possible to interpret Islam into different interpretations that come across as contradictory to each other. In fact, there have been many such contradictory and contrasting interpretations through out history.

Understanding the reasons behind this will enhance one’s understanding of Islam and internal dynamics within Muslim *ummah* (community). They also provide answers to those who are fascinated with the fluidity of interpretation of Islam in history and contemporary situation.

This paper suggests three reasons behind the two contrasting positions of Islam on plural society. While these reasons are not exhaustive, they are sufficient to explain how Islam can be interpreted differently on a single issue.

## 1. Nature of the religion

Islam is a religion for all mankind until the Last Day. To ensure Islam's relevance across time and space, the Quran is purposefully revealed with verses that are non-*muhkamat* (non-definitive).

They are ambiguous and hence allows for various interpretations and understanding. These verses provide flexibility for Muslim scholars to adapt the teaching of the religion in accordance to the changing context. They also allow Muslim scholars to deduce different rulings on one issue, thus, providing a wide opportunity to anyone who needs to make various considerations, or choose an opinion that he feels is closer to the truth and the objectives of *syariah* vis-à-vis his context because certain opinions may be suitable at a certain time, or a certain situation but not in another.<sup>35</sup>

Admittedly, such ambiguity also provides an opportunity for interpretation that justify intolerance and hate that could be found in the first negative position. For example, the Quran provides two types of verses on armed jihad: a) conditional verses that specify armed jihad against the infidels can only be waged if Muslims are under attacks (9:5, 4, 29, 36, 73, 123), b) unconditional verses that call Muslims to wage armed jihad against all infidels (2:190, 193–4, 4:175, 22:39–40).

In an attempt to reconcile the verses, some Muslims, especially the jihadist, who subscribe to the first negative position invoke abrogation argument. They argue that the unconditional verses abrogated all previous verses on armed *jihad* because they were revealed at a later period. This then perpetuates to the misunderstanding that war is the primary basis of a relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The above view is in contradiction to the view held by the majority of Muslim scholars who reject the abrogation argument of the jihadists because there is no strong evidence that the above verses were revealed to abrogate the other revealed texts, as explained in the second positive position.

## 2. Crisis in the mind

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<sup>35</sup> Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi, *Al-Khasais Al-'Ammah Li Al-Islam (General Characteristics of Islam)*, Maktabah Wahbah, Cairo, 1977, pp. 231–2.



The term “crisis in the mind” was coined by Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman in his book titled *Crisis in the Muslim Mind*. It refers to a state of Muslim mind that has lost the ability to “understand what is really important, distinguish between what is fundamental and absolute and what is temporary and limited; or even appreciate what is essential and what is a matter of performance and style.”<sup>36</sup> The result of this weakness is Muslims either accepts the past with all peculiarities or they reject it entirely with all its values. The mind becomes stagnated due its inability to take a critical look at what they have inherited on the legacy of the past scholars.<sup>37</sup>

The most extreme left negative position in the continuum is one example of this “crisis”. The proponents today fall into such intolerant interpretation because they fail to understand the context of which the opinions of traditional Muslim scholars hundreds of years ago were built on and to consider the context or situation in offering Islamic viewpoint, perspective or solution to various issues and problems.

One example is the idea of *Dar Al-Islam* (Land of Islam) and *Dar Al-Harb* (Land of War) formulated by classical Muslim scholars and held by them. In their mind, *Dar Al-Islam* refers to a land ruled by a Muslim ruler and the *syariah* is held as the rule of the land. In contrast, a land is considered as *Dar Al-Harb* when it is ruled by non-Muslim or when the *syariah* is not recognized as the rule of the land. They view that the use of *Dar Al-Harb* as a terminology to describe non-Muslim land by classical Muslim scholars suggests that all such lands should be considered as at war with them until they come under the rule of *Dar Al-Islam*.

This wholesale application of the concept in today’s context without recognizing it as time-bound, and their juxtaposition of the concept and the idea of *jihad* as a perpetual war against non-Muslims, strengthen their binary perspective—“either you are with us or against us”. This contributes to shaping the negative attitude to all non-Muslims.

### 3. Context

The problem of intolerant interpretation is two-fold: the misinterpretation of the text and the opportunity and context that provide for such (mis)interpretation.

In the case of acts of violent intolerance against non-Muslims and Muslims viewed as apostates practised today by jihadists, most of them occur within an environment of

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<sup>36</sup> Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman, *Crisis in the Muslim Mind*, The International Institute of Islamic Thought, Herndon, 1993, p. 28.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

prolonged backwardness in living standards and a lack of freedom in the political domain. The secular and nationalist elites who rule these countries are blamed for being corrupt and have failed the people. Muslims, therefore, turn to Islam to find a solution and answer to their predicament. In the process, some fall into violent extremism due to a misunderstanding of the religion and others are arrested and tortured for being part of the opposition force under the banner of Islam.<sup>38</sup>

Muslims all over the world also share a deep sense of frustration with the injustices experienced across Muslim societies by major powers for being the patrons and sponsors of their corrupt rulers at the expense of their freedom and development.<sup>39</sup> Various scholars have pointed out that the uneven foreign policy of the United States in the Middle East, especially vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine and the occupation of Iraq have contributed to the increase radicalization among Muslim youth.

These help to reinforce the Muslims' historical experience of being at the receiving end of brutal treatment during colonial period and war of crusade by the actors who were largely non-Muslims and make the view that all *kuffar* (disbelievers) are inherently hostile towards Islam more appealing.

Whether it is the context which influenced jihadists to propagate hate and intolerance or they are merely using them to influence others for their cause, both point out the significant role of grievances in fuelling the circumstances for deadly ideas and action.

It is important to note that jihadists may be so committed to their ideas that nothing can change their minds. But they will be less successful in gaining support from the people if there is no context for their ideas to blossom. Persecution and intolerance of Muslims which are supported by the powers that fall under the banner of national interest will provide the

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<sup>38</sup> Amin Saikal, *Islam and the West: Conflict or Cooperation?*, Palgrave, New York, 2003, pp. 129–42; John E. Mack, "Looking Beyond Terrorism: Transcending the Mind of Enmity", *Psychology of Terrorism*, edited by Chris E. Stout, Praeger, London, 2002, Vol. 1. p. 175; Disinfopedia, "Why do they hate us?", *With God on Our Side: Politics & Theology of the War on Terrorism*, edited by Aftab Ahmad Malik, Amal Press, Bristol, 2005, pp. 85–96; Yusuf Al-Qaradhwai, *Islamic Awakening Between Rejection & Extremism*, pp. 53–9, 62–3; Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global?*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2005, pp. 61–7, 80–2; Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2003, pp. 3–8, 32–62, 107–136.

<sup>39</sup> Sharif Abdullah, "The Soul of a terrorist: Reflections on Our War With the "Other", *Psychology of Terrorism*, 2003, Vol. 1, p. 139; Clark McCauley, "Psychological Issues in Understanding Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism", *Psychology of Terrorism*, Vol. 3, p. 10; B. Knowlton, "How the world sees the United States and Sept. 11", *International Herald Tribune*, 20 December 2001, pp. 1, 6; John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, "What makes a Muslim radical?", *Foreign Policy*, November, 2006, available at [www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=3637&page=4](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3637&page=4) (4 February 2008); John L. Esposito, "Out of cycle of ignorance", *The Guardian*, 7 July 2006, available at [www.guardian.co.uk/attackonlondon/comment/story/0,,1814725,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/attackonlondon/comment/story/0,,1814725,00.html) (4 February 2008).

justification to invoke the “Quranic injunction” of “an eye for an eye”, which means intolerance for intolerance.

## Conclusion

So far, the paper has presented and identified two contrasting perspectives i.e. negative and positive viewpoints on Islam and plural society. From these two perspectives, two other variations i.e. maximum and minimum are identified from each one which makes up a spectrum of views in one continuum. For easy understanding of the variations, a chart that illustrates the spectrum of views in a continuum is developed.

Applying the chart to the issue of assimilation and segregation, eight other variations of position have been identified and explained. They are illustrated and simplified in the table below.

	Negative perspective		Positive perspective	
	Max. negative	Min. negative	Min. positive	Max. positive
<b>Assimilation</b>	Hardest	Hard	Soft	Softest
<b>Segregation</b>	Hardest	Hard	Soft	Softest

Admittedly, the number of variations could possibly be more because a more refined analysis would be able to identify more shades of views within each perspective. A maximum-minimum categorization within each perspective does not truly reflect the diversity that exists in each one.

However, it is not the objective of the paper to identify all possible categories or to offer a near perfect picture of the differences. The primary objective is to provide a broad picture of the situation that reflects the existence of diversity and dynamism within Muslims. Furthermore, the constraint of space does not allow a full investigation to be done to generate more variations in the paper.

Although the paper admits that the idea that promotes extreme intolerance and justify violence to assert Islam’s authority or supremacy on the others could be churned from Islam’s primary sources and there are internal factors in Islam and Muslims that can generate such ideas, it is important to note that historically, Muslims that fall into such extremism are always on the outside fringes of the Muslim *ummah* and does not represent them.

From a theological point of view, there will always emerge among the Muslim *ummah* individuals or groups that will stand out against the misguided fringe and strive to correct or reform the community as promised by God in the Quran which says, “We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption).” (The Quran, 15:9) and the Prophet who has said, “There will always be a group from amongst my *ummah* who will manifest the truth, no harm will come to them from those who have forsaken them until God shall make manifest His will while they (the group) remain in that state.” (Narrated by Al-Bukhari).

This does not mean that Muslims should just leave the matter to fate or God. On the contrary, Muslims should strive to be among the people that are privileged to be God’s agency to protect the sanctity of His religion from deviations and intolerance.

Looking at the nature of the religion and the history, it could be said that there will always be a segment within Muslims that will fall into such intolerance. They will remain part of human and Muslim history all the time.

A more practical objective is to ensure that they remain in the outer fringes and do not dictate the agenda of the day, instead of trying to eliminate them totally. However, this could only happen if the majority of Muslims who are committed to Islam that is positive and tolerant towards diversity and plurality to stand up and speak up for their beliefs and against the intolerants. Only by standing and speaking up in an organized way, the voice of the moderate and tolerant can be louder than the opposite.

However, as mentioned before, the problem of (mis)interpretation is not due to the text alone but it is also due to the context. Therefore, in addition to promoting the voice of moderate Muslims, the context that has facilitated and are being manipulated for intolerant interpretation must be addressed also. This requires some form of collaboration between Muslims and non-Muslims on the issue. It also requires the political will of powers that be to address the root causes of the grievances within the Muslims. Grievances provide the opportunity for intolerant and extremist Muslims to seize and exploit in order to further their cause.

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