The Institute of Ismaili Studies

**" On Muslims Knowing the "Muslim" Other: Reflections on Pluralism and Islam"**
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*O humankind We [God] have created you male and female, and made you into communities and tribes, so that you may know one another. Surely the noblest amongst you in the sight of God is the most godfearing of you. God is All-knowing and All-Aware.* (Qur'an, 49:13)

**Tolerance in Islam: Pluralism and its Engagement with Diversity**

In my professional life as a scholar of Islam, I have often been asked whether Islam is truly a religion that advocates tolerance of peoples of other faiths. Does it encourage Muslims to live in peace with non-Muslims, or is it an ideology that is prone to create conflict, be it interreligious, intercultural or international? Furthermore, I have been asked to comment on the role that Muslim religious beliefs play in instigating individual Muslims to commit acts of terrorism and violence against peoples of other faiths. What I am rarely asked are questions concerning tolerance within Islam: how do Muslims handle differences among themselves regarding doctrine, ritual practice and other matters of faith.

I personally became aware of issues concerning tolerance for religious diversity within Islam when, many years ago, I left my home in Kenya and came to the United States to attend Harvard College. During my first year of undergraduate study, I enrolled in an intensive course in Arabic taught by a visiting professor from Lebanon. One day, during the second semester of the course, the professor, who was a Sunni Arab, asked me to which denomination of Islam I belonged. When I replied that I was a Shi'a Muslim, an Ismaili,[1] he looked stunned and exclaimed in Arabic, *"la hawla wa la quwwat illa billah"* ("There is no protection or strength except with God"), a remark usually made when someone is truly shocked or seeks God's protection from evil. That moment was the first time that my identity as a Muslim had been challenged. Three decades later, after having taught a variety

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[1] As Shi'a Muslims, the Ismailis believe that after the death of Prophet Muhammad, religious and political authority was inherited by his son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661 CE) and, after him, by his direct male descendants. Ali and his descendants were holders of the office of Imam, entrusted to ensure the ongoing implementation and interpretation of the divine message revealed to Prophet Muhammad. In 765 CE, on the death of the Shi'a Imam Jafar as-Sadiq, the Shi'a, as a result of a dispute over succession, split in two factions. Those who claimed that the Imamate was inherited by his son Musa al-Kazim and his descendants came, on account of their belief in twelve Imams, to be identified as Ithna 'Ashari Shi'a or Twelver Shi'a. The Ithna 'Ashari believe that the twelfth Imam will return to the world at the end of time to restore justice and ensure the triumph of good over evil. The Ismailis, so named because they upheld the *imamate* of Ismail, the other son of Imam Jafar as-Sadiq, believe that the line of imams continued among the descendants of Ismail. Over the centuries, as a result of disputes over succession to the *Imamate*, several subgroups developed among the Ismailis with each group following a different descendant. Here I use the term Ismaili to indicate specifically the Nizari Ismaili group whose present Imam or leader, Shah Karim al-Husayni, Aga Khan IV, is the forty-ninth Imam. The Nizari Ismailis are currently the only Shi'a group to have a living Imam claiming direct descent from Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib.

of courses on Islam at Harvard, I still overhear remarks by a few Muslim students that impugn my ability to teach Islam, not on the basis of my academic qualifications or publications, but simply because of the particular Muslim community to which I belong. Even a prominent and highly-respected Sunni Muslim scholar of Islamic Studies remarked publicly at an academic conference, "What does he know about real Islam? He is Ismaili." The intent of such comments is clear: they are intended to marginalise and hence de-legitimise, whatever thoughts, opinions and ideas I have about Islam because I am judged not to be a "proper" Muslim.

Viewed from the perspective of Muslim history, these attitudes are hardly surprising for, as a minority within a minority, the Ismailis, with their distinctive interpretation of what it means to be Muslim, have been marginalised and variously stereotyped as heretics and infidels. Historically, in the face of persecution from various religious and political authorities, the Ismailis have sometimes been forced, like other Shi'a groups, to resort to *taqiyya* - the concealing of one's true religious identity. *Taqiyya* was an expedient measure of self-protection adopted by the Shi'a when large numbers of adherents were killed because of their beliefs.

Thankfully, not all Muslims have been singular or narrow-minded in their view of their Muslim brothers and sisters. There are those whose interpretation of Islam is humanist in spirit and influenced by traditions of ecumenism and who have been willing to embrace Ismailis as co-religionists, even though they may be unable to understand or agree with their doctrines and ritual practices. Humans, these Muslims claim, are not the final arbiters of faith - God is. As long as an individual recites the *shahadah*, the testimony of faith, and considers himself or herself to be Muslim, he or she belongs within the Muslim *ummah*, the worldwide community of believers. Whether and how one practices one's faith is an affair between the individual and God, provided one's beliefs do not harm society.

Clearly, there are glaring inconsistencies in the manner in which Muslim communities respond to diversity. In this essay I will reflect on Muslim attitudes toward religious pluralism in two related contexts: inter-religious - that is, Muslim attitudes to non-Muslims and their religious traditions, and intra-religious - that is, attitudes toward diversity of religious beliefs amongst Muslim communities. I will focus particularly on the latter (intra-Islamic pluralism) since this is a subject that most Muslims regard as taboo. There are several reasons for the reluctance of Muslims to engage with this topic, perhaps the most significant being that many Muslims, in the contemporary context in which Muslim identities and cultures are being threatened by non-Muslim (western) hegemonies, mistakenly perceive that acknowledging and accepting a plurality of religious beliefs and practices amongst themselves is a sign of disunity and hence weakness. They therefore respond to questions concerning diversity of interpretation and practice within Islam by vehemently denying that it exists. Differences among Muslims are cultural, not religious, they proclaim; there is "only one" Islam. As Tariq Ramadan aptly points out, this conception of Islam as a uniform theological monolith, and the inability to recognise and engage with intra-Muslim religious diversity have resulted in the strange situation where Muslims, either as individuals or groups, will ignore or exclude one another and yet claim to the outside world that we are all brothers and sisters.[2] Such enigmatic attitudes have deeply

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[2] Tariq Ramadan, *Western Mulims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 106.

impacted the way in which Muslims understand the concept of pluralism.

At the outset I should clarify that by pluralism I intend not merely the acknowledgement, acceptance and tolerance of diversity, but an engagement with diversity that is based on respect for difference. Pluralism does not mean the elimination of difference. As my colleague Diana Eck points out, "pluralism is engagement with, not abdication of, differences and particularities."[3] To engage in pluralism is, therefore, to attempt to understand and appreciate how the other, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, is different. To talk about Muslim attitudes toward pluralism, whether interreligious or intra-religious, is to confront a paradox, by no means unique to Islam, of a religious tradition and its texts being used for contradictory goals: on the one hand, to promote pluralism, harmony and tolerance; on the other, to justify intolerance, persecution, war and even killing. Such contradictory attitudes, in my opinion, can be only partially explained by pursuing a purely textual approach that highlights those verses in the Qur'an that Muslims of various persuasions often use as proof-texts to legitimise their positions, be they exclusivist or pluralist. They are better understood by examining the manner in which interpretations of the Qur'an and its teachings are influenced by the contexts in which Muslims live. In other words, explanations should be sought in the lived experiences of Muslims, realising that their interpretations of religious texts, either individually or communally, are influenced by a complex web of religious, social, cultural, political, and economic factors. These factors may be specific to a local context or, as we have seen in the last two or three centuries, they may be transnational in nature, responding to the dynamics of competing global political and cultural hegemonies. A contextual approach, rather than a strictly textual approach, I submit, helps us better explain the conflicting and contradictory attitudes in Muslim societies on pluralism and related issues such as respect for difference, freedom of thought and freedom of religious belief.

## Inter-Religious Pluralism within Islam

With regard to inter-religious pluralism, a convincing case can be made for the existence of a strong pluralist ethos within the Qur'an and the *hadith* (sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad), the major scriptural sources of Muslim thought. As I have discussed in detail elsewhere[4], this ethos is evident in many ways. For example, I cite here a conception central to Muslim understandings of religious diversity: God's message is universal, but its manifestations are plural and revealed through multiple prophets.This idea provides the basic underpinning for the manner in which the Qur'an relates itself and the faith that it preaches to Judaism and Christianity, the monotheistic traditions that preceded it in the Middle East. Far from denying the validity of these predecessor traditions, the Qur'an repeatedly affirms their essential truth, acknowledging that their message comes from one and the same God, and that it (the Qur'an) is only the latest of God's revelations to affirm and confirm the revelations that preceded it:

*Say: we believe in God and what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Isma'i1, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, and in what was given to Moses, Jesus, and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between one and another among them and to Him [God] do we*

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[3] Diana Eck, *A New Religious America* (Harper Collins, 2001), p. 71.
[4] Ali Asani, "On Pluralism, Intolerance, and the Qur'an," 71 *The American Scholar* (Winter 2002), pp. 52-60.

*submit.* (Qur'an 3:84).

Other Qur'anic verses envisage a world in which people, regardless of their differences, are united by their devotion to God. Such sentiments are, for instance, echoed in the following verse in which God addresses humankind and affirms the principle of unity in diversity: "*Surely this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord; so worship Me*" (Qur'an 21:92). The emphasis on the universality of God's message is also emphasised in the Qur'an's fundamental teaching that God has revealed His message to all peoples and to all cultures; not a single people or nation has been forgotten (Qur'an 35:24). Although humans may have misinterpreted that message to suit their needs in creating conflicting traditions, all religions at their core have sprung from the same divine source and inspiration. As a result of this underlying essential unity, salvation, according to the Qur'an, is not exclusive to Muslims, but extends to anyone who is righteous and Godfearing (Qur'an 2:62).

The Qur'an also recognises the fundamental right of individuals, be they Muslim or non-Muslim, to interpret matters of faith for themselves. An often quoted verse of the Qur'an declares, "*Let there be no compulsion in religion*" (Qur'an 2:256), explicitly acknowledging that individuals cannot be forced to profess beliefs contrary to their will. Even if individuals perversely choose disbelief, they nevertheless have the right to make that choice as well. A chapter of the Qur'an entitled *The Unbelievers*, referring to those who reject the message of monotheism preached by Prophet Muhammad, stresses that belief is a matter of personal conviction and that difference in faith should not be the cause for persecution or abuse: "*Say: O you who disbelieve, I worship not that which you worship, nor will you worship that which I worship, and I will not worship that which you have worshipped, and you will not worship that which I worship, to you is your path (religion) and to me is mine.*" (Qur'an 109:1-6).

The Qur'an's endorsement of religiously and culturally plural societies and the recognition of the salvific value of other monotheistic religions greatly affected the treatment of non-Muslims in Muslim lands. Through the centuries, various Muslim societies have attempted to implement these pluralist ideals with varying degrees of success. It is also clear, however, that other Muslim societies, at certain historical times and in certain contexts, have chosen to ignore these pluralist ideals or to cast them aside. In their place, discourses of exclusivism and intolerance became prevalent. The most significant of these can be traced back to the eighth and ninth centuries when Islam became a religion of empire and attempts were made to bestow theological legitimacy to the growth of Arab imperial hegemony. Within this context, certain segments of the Muslim political and religious establishments promoted anti-pluralist - that is, exclusivist - readings and interpretations of the Qur'an, primarily to advance hegemonic goals. For this purpose, as Abdulaziz Sachedina has so ably demonstrated, several Muslim exegetes devised terminological and methodological strategies to mold the exegesis of the sacred text so as to provide a convincing prop for absolutist ends.[5]

The principal means by which the exclusivists were able to promote their view was through the

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[5] Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 29.

declaration that the many verses calling for pluralism, commanding Muslims to build bridges of understanding with non-Muslims, had been abrogated by other verses that call for fighting the infidel. The verses in question were revealed in the context of armed conflicts between a small, beleaguered Muslim community and its powerful Christian, Jewish and pagan Arab adversaries. Typical of these verses is the following: "*Then when the sacred months are drawn away, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they repent and perform the prayer and pay zakat (the alms tax), let them go their way. Surely God is forgiving and merciful.*" (Qur'an 9: 5). Another verse, revealed when certain Jewish and Christian groups betrayed the Muslim cause and joined in the military assault by the pagan Arabs against Prophet Muhammad and the Muslim community, cautioned against taking Jews and Christians as close political allies (Qur'an 5: 51). It is only by completely disregarding the original historical context of revelation of such verses and using them to engage in a large-scale abrogation of contradictory verses that the exclusivist Muslim exegetes have been able to counteract the pluralist ethos that so thoroughly pervades the Qur'an.

**Inter-Religious Diversity**

Exclusivist conceptions were central to fostering social and political solidarity among previously feuding Arab tribes. As such, this solidarity became the backbone of the early Arab Muslim empire, providing "an effective basis for aggression against those who did not share this solidarity with the community of believers."[6] It is within this context that political concepts such as *dar al-Islam* (territories under Muslim suzeranity) and *dar al-harb* (territories under non-Muslim control) became prominent, although they have no real basis in the Qur'an. On the basis of these exclusivist readings, which were developed with a view to asserting hegemony, some Muslims today have not only proclaimed the superiority of Islam over other religions, but have also declared Christians and Jews to be infidels whom Muslims should not befriend.

With regard to intra-Islamic diversity, we encounter a similar paradox reflected in the dichotomy between pluralism and exclusivism, tolerance and intolerance, that we see with inter-religious diversity. Much of the discussion thus far regarding an ethos of pluralism in the Qur'an in the context of inter-religious diversity is also relevant to our consideration of intra-Islamic diversity. Of particular significance is the fact that the Qur'an defines the term "*muslim*" by stressing its literal meaning, "one who submits to God," rather than the more commonly used understanding of the term that narrowly restricts its meaning to indicate religious identity in a sociological sense. By employing this definition, the Qur'an lays open the possibility of including in the category "*muslim*" any one who submits to the one God. In this sense, it views all who submit to God as being *muslims.* Such a broad definition is thus an affirmation that there are diverse ways of being *muslim* in a theological sense. The ecumenical spirit of the Qur'an is even reflected in many *hadith,* or sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad. Of particular relevance is the *hadith,* "Difference of opinion in my community is a blessing." In a similar vein, another *hadith* condemns intolerance among fellow Muslims: "He who calls his brother an infidel is himself an infidel."

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[6] Op. cit.

**Diversity of Interpretation in Muslim History**

Notwithstanding the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet concerning the fundamental right of individuals to interpret matters of faith, as well as their broad inclusive definitions of who is a believer or a Muslim, diversity of interpretations became an issue of major contention in early Muslim history. In the first several centuries after the death of Prophet Muhammad, there emerged a variety of theological, legal, philosophical and mystical conceptions of what it meant to be a Muslim. During the course of historical developments, attempts to define which of these conceptions represented "true Islam" became intricately connected with political conflicts concerning leadership. As a result, notions of religious and political loyalty overlapped so closely that religious dissent was often regarded as political dissent. The eventual emergence and triumph of Sunnism as a creed favored by the Abbasids meant that alternative conceptions were rejected as heretical and as constituting a threat to social order.[7] As Fazlur Rahman points out; "with all its concern for a liberal pluralism for institutions and basic individual freedoms, the Qur'an under certain conditions admits that the state when representing society is paramount."[8]

According to the Qur'an, it is the duty of those in authority to create a just social and moral order by controlling discord and eliminating corruption. Based on such verses of the text, the persecution of those whose religious beliefs could potentially disrupt the social and political order was deemed legitimate. Furthermore, since disputes amongst Muslims in the post Prophetic period were primarily over the nature of religio-political authority, it is not surprising that those in political authority would persecute those who held alternative religious viewpoints, especially if those interpretations undermined the legitimacy of a particular ruler or dynasty. As a result of this vexing intersection between the religious and the political, those in positions of religious authority in various Muslim communities have hurled charges and countercharges of heresy, infidelity and even apostasy at those who disagree with them. Since infidelity and apostasy are punishable by death in most traditions of Islamic law, these charges became effective tools with which to squelch freedom of religious belief. Historically, then, intra-Muslim intolerance was a result of a nexus between religious and political authorities, resulting in the state becoming an agent of intimidation to ensure conformity.[9] Not surprisingly, this situation has created obstacles in contemporary Muslim societies which prevent free and open dialogue among Muslims on issues of faith, leading Tariq Ramadan to comment, "Groups know one another, know how to identify one another, and work out where they are in relation to one another, but then they immediately ignore one another, exclude one another, or insult one another, without any attempt at discussion."[10]

Historically, exclusivist interpretations of the Qur'an have been used to justify dominion over other Muslims, specifically those whose interpretation of the faith and religious practices have been perceived as deviating from the norms established by exclusivists. During the seventeenth and

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[7] For a detailed discussion, *see* Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed, *Freedom in Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (Ashgate, 2004), pp. 20-34.
[8] Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Bibliotheca, 1980), p. 44.
[9] Saeed and Saeed, op. cit., pp. 28-31.
[10] Tariq Ramadan, op. cit., *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, pp. 209-210.

eighteenth centuries, several areas of the Muslim world witnessed the rise of movements which, in response to what was perceived as a general moral laxity and decline, attempted to "purify" Islam. The leaders of these movements targeted a whole range of practices and beliefs among fellow Muslims which, in their eyes, constituted evidence of religious backsliding. In particular, Sufi forms of Islam were attacked as not derived from "authentic" Islam. In certain cases, these attacks took on a military character and "*jihads*" were launched against fellow Muslims with the intention of forcibly imposing upon them those interpretations of Islam favored by the exclusivists.

The most dramatic and influential of these movements was the Wahabi movement in Arabia. Named after the reformer Abd al-Wahab, who died in 1791, this puritanical movement acquired an explosive energy after its founder allied himself with a petty Arab chieftain, Muhammad Ibn Saud. Abd al-Wahab was influenced in his thought by the writings of a controversial fourteenth-century thinker, Ibn Taiymiyyah (d. 1328 CE), whose exclusivist and literalist interpretations of the Qur'an led him to declare that the descendants of the Mongols were *kafirs* (infidels), notwithstanding their public profession of belief in Islam. To propagate their particular brand of Islam, the Wahhabis attacked fellow Muslims whose practices they considered "un-Islamic." Targeting in particular popular expressions of Sufi practice as well as Shi'i Muslims, the Wahhabis steadily expanded their power over Central and Western Arabia until they were able to effect the political unification of the peninsula into the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Once established, the Wahhabi authorities instituted a religious police force, which, among its other functions, compels Muslims to perform ritual prayer at the appropriate times of the day. This is in direct contradiction of the Qur'an's commandment, "*Let there be no compulsion in religion.*" Not surprisingly, this movement considered Jews and Christians to be infidels.

In more recent times, exclusivist discourses have been prevalent among a variety of groups in the Muslim world including the so-called Islamists, who have increasingly interpreted Islam in exclusivist ways to provide a political ideology on which to base their conception of a modern nation-state. The reasons for the rise of such groups are complex. Broadly speaking, these movements are a reaction against modernity, westernisation, economic deprivation, global domination by western powers, and support by such powers for repressive regimes in predominantly Muslim lands. The failure of borrowed ideologies, such as capitalism, communism, or socialism, to deliver economic and social justice in many Muslim countries, has created exclusivist groups seeking a "pure" and "authentic" language in which to criticise the failing modern Muslim state, a state which has marginalised or displaced traditional religious authorities in a bid to maximise political power. The search for a solution to the myriad political, social, and economic problems confronting Muslims has led these exclusivist groups to use Islam as a political ideology for the state: "Islam is the solution."

The zeal of such groups to understand Islam in a "pure" monolithic form, to engage in revisionist history, and to read religious texts in an exclusivist manner that denies any plurality of interpretations, has created a situation in which any Muslim who dares to disagree or oppose their perspective is immediately branded a *kafir*. In some cases, the invocation of Islam by the state itself to determine social and legal frameworks has provoked questions about which brand or interpretation of Islam would be used in the process and whether Islam defines the state or the state

defines Islam. Responding to these and other questions, the Munir Report of 1954, commissioned by the Government of Pakistan after a series of sectarian riots rocked the country, concluded that no two scholars of Islam could agree on a definition of Islam or on who is Muslim, with Shi'as and Sunnis declaring each other to be *kafirs*.[11]

**Theology of intra-Islamic Pluralism**

Aside from the fact that intolerance and intimidation in the name of religion violate the basic core teachings of the faith, it is increasingly clear that traditional attitudes toward intra-Muslim diversity are outdated today from both national and international perspectives. What is required is a paradigm shift in the ways in which Muslims relate to their co-religionists. At the national level, key Muslim nationstates, particularly in the Middle East, have yet to recognise that the notion of a monoethnic, monolingual, monoreligious state is an idea that has outlived its usefulness, for it fails to come to terms with the fundamental aspect of humanity: its diversity.This failure poses a serious threat to the fabric of several Muslim societies, which are increasingly being torn by sectarian and ethnic conflicts. It is only by recognising pluralism as an organising principle that these societies will be able to embrace positively the religious and ethnic diversity among their Muslim (and non-Muslim) populations.

At an international level, the technological and information revolutions and easier means of travel are increasingly bringing Muslims from different religious and cultural backgrounds into closer contact with each other. Notions of what it means to be a Muslim in a globalising context are changing rapidly. For these and other reasons, there is, therefore, a pressing need to develop a theology of intra-Islamic pluralism based on core Muslim teachings. Indeed, the development of such a theology should parallel attempts of Muslim communities to engage in inter-religious pluralism and dialogue with peoples of other faiths. Given the historical and theological wounds that have been festering for centuries and the ongoing competition for religious and political hegemony among various groups, intra-Muslim dialogue may seem an impossibly difficult task. This does not mean, however, that it should not be aggressively pursued as a goal.[12] In the words of Tariq Ramadan, "This dialogue is extremely difficult, sometimes much more difficult than interreligious dialogue itself, because discussion with one's nearest and dearest is so risky. This commitment is nevertheless essential if we want to break down internal ghettoes and sectarianism and try, within manageable limits, to respect one another more."[13]

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[11] *Report of the Court of Inquiry Constituted under Punjab Act II of 1954 to Enquire into the Punjab Disturbances of 1953* (Lahore: Government Printing Press, 1954), available at http://aaiil.org/text/books/others/misc/munirreport/munirreport.shtml.

[12] In an attempt to foster better understanding and dialogue among Muslims, King Abdullah II of Jordan convened a meeting of representatives of a variety of Muslim groups in Amman in July 2005. The meeting was organized partly in response to the strategy employed by goups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda to declare those Muslims who oppose them to be infidels and/or apostates, making them legitimate targets of assassination. The religious leaders attending the meeting issued a joint statement declaring that it was impossible and unacceptable to declare apostate or infidel any group of Muslims who believe in God, Prophet Muhammad, the pillars of faith, and who repect the pillars of Islam and do not deny any necessary article of the religion.

[13] Ramadan, op. cit.

Better literacy about Islam is crucial to the project of developing intra-Muslim pluralism. This would involve understanding and appreciating various Muslim perspectives as well as recognising the rights of individuals and groups to interpret issues of faith without coercion. The acquisition of such literacy does not entail giving up distinctive interpretations that characterise diverse faith communities, be they Sunni, Shi'i, etc., but, at a fundamental level, should emphasise teaching about faith perspectives without demonising Muslims who hold alternative viewpoints. Engendering literacy about other faith communities through the study of religion as a cultural and historical phenomenon should become an important objective of curricula in secular schools in Muslim societies, especially in subjects such as world cultures or social studies. Only by raising levels of literacy about religion in the Muslim world will Muslims become aware of the implications of Qur'anic teachings concerning "religious and cultural pluralism as a divinely ordained principle of coexistence among human societies."[14]  Indeed, genuine engagement with Qur'anic ideals of pluralism is an essential prerequisite for realising social, economic and political justice for all members of society.

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[14] Sachedina, op. cit, p. 13.