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## Pluralism: Beyond Ethnic and Sectarian Identities

By Dr. Aryn B. Sajoo

*“At the heart of a democratic ethic is a commitment to genuine dialogue ... a readiness to give and take, to listen, to bridge the empathy gaps as well as the ignorance gaps that have so often impeded human progress. It implies a pluralistic readiness to welcome diversity and to see our differences not as difficult burdens but as potential blessings.”*

**His Highness the Aga Khan  
Keynote address at the Athens Democracy Forum  
15 September 2015**

Since the events of 11 September 2001, no religious group has faced as much social harassment globally as Muslims.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, Muslims are viewed more coldly than any other faith, or even atheists.<sup>2</sup> This despite the fact that most individuals have no real idea about what Islam is, or who Muslims are, beyond images drawn from media headlines. Famously, Washington’s political *elites* interviewed after the invasion of Iraq not only failed to distinguish between Shia and Sunni, but were clueless as to whether Saudi Arabia and Iran was mainly one or the other.<sup>3</sup>

The exodus of refugees from deadly conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond, inspires as much western bigotry as generosity toward the children, women and men seeking shelter and a better life. Memories of Europe’s own massive refugee flows in the Communist era as well as World War II have conveniently faded.<sup>4</sup> Far less wealthy Jordan, Lebanon, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey now host millions from the recent conflicts, compared to a few hundred thousand in Europe that have grabbed the world’s attention. After the 2015 terror attacks in Paris, the refugees face still more prejudice on both sides of the Atlantic,<sup>5</sup> which recalls historic negative attitudes toward Jews fleeing the Nazis.

Yet many societies of the Muslim world, for all their rich traditions of diversity and generosity, have lately fallen prey to ugly sectarian division. Communities that have long been part of the larger Islamic world and its heritage — Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and various minority Muslim communities — find themselves in peril. Religious difference becomes, in this sectarian milieu, a

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<sup>1</sup> Pew, “Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High,” January 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Pew, “How Americans Feel About Religious Groups,” July 2014.

<sup>3</sup> “Can You Tell a Sunni from a Shiite?” *The New York Times*, 17 October 2006.

<sup>4</sup> “Eastern Europe’s Short Memory,” *New York Times*, 15 September 2015.

<sup>5</sup> “After Paris, Vilifying Refugees,” *New York Times* Editorial, 17 November 2015.



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reason for mistrust and persecution. The worst examples play themselves out in daily news stories, but an underlying failure of tolerance is more widespread.

When asked whether the teachings of Islam could be understood and practiced in a variety of ways, half the people across the Muslim world were inclined to disagree.<sup>6</sup> Sufi orders and the Shi'a were seen by many as simply not "Muslim," along with the Ahmadis, who claim to be Sunni. It is a small step thence to the extremism of those who embrace violence in the name of religion.

"The language of sectarianism involves elimination and purification," notes the scholar Madawi al-Rasheed, in the context of present Sunni-Shi'a tensions.<sup>7</sup> "It makes it more difficult to see a space for dialogue and political solutions or compromises," she warns.

This trend had already drawn the attention of Muslim religious and political leaders from 45 countries at the Amman Conference in July 2005. Spanning a whole panoply of Sunni and Shi'a communities, institutions (including Cairo's al-Azhar and the Islamic Fiqh Institute in Saudi Arabia), and their *madhabs*, the assembly formally put all its weight behind the plurality of the Muslim *ummah*.

Any claims about declaring fellow Muslims as apostates (*kufr*) were pointedly rejected as contrary to the text and spirit of the Qur'an. Sectarian division – the idea that difference was somehow unwelcome – was itself a violation of Islam's core values. In his letter to the gathering, His Highness the Aga Khan went further still, affirming the human dimension of inclusiveness to which Islam lays claim:

*"Let this Conference be part of a continuous process of dialogue ... so that the entire wealth of our pluralist heritage bears fruit for the Muslim world, and indeed the whole of humanity; for ours is the heritage that premeates human dignity, transcending bounds of creed, ethnicity, language, gender or nationality."*

**His Highness the Aga Khan**  
**Message to the International Islamic Conference Amman, Jordan**  
**4-6 July 2005**

The emphasis on dialogue takes us to the essence of pluralism. In place of rigid dogma or doctrine, it favors values that are sensitive to modern realities; this requires being open to diversity and

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<sup>6</sup> Pew, "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity," 2012.

<sup>7</sup> "As Conflicts Flare Up, Leaders Fan Sectarian Flames in the Middle East," *New York Times*, 17 October 2015.



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inclusion. Which is the opposite of what sectarians prefer: being exclusive, and keen to denounce others in the name of “purity.”

Never mind that this collides head-on with the Qur’anic call, “*O Mankind! We have made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another*” (49:13). It is noteworthy that the appeal is addressed not to Muslims alone but humans at large; and that “knowing one another” is impossible without dialogue. Prophet Muhammad himself drove the point home in a *hadith* widely attributed to him that differences in interpretation were a blessing for his community.

Indeed, the Prophet’s drawing up of a Charter for Medina — inclusive of the city’s Christian and Jewish communities — stands as a pioneering event in the history of constitutions. It effectively fostered a “civic umma,” bridging civil and religious affiliations. Indeed, the Charter has long served as an inspiration for pluralist governance, down to the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration (on the Rights of Religious Minorities in Muslim Majority Countries).<sup>8</sup> Adopted by over 300 political and religious leaders from across the Muslim world, the Declaration takes a firm stand against sectarianism in the name of both international human rights and Islam’s deepest commitments to valuing diversity in all its expressions. “The objectives of the Charter of Medina,” says the Declaration, “provide a suitable framework for national constitutions in countries with Muslim majorities.”

This quest for a civic *umma* stands out in all of the luminous moments in Islamic history, from Cordoba and the Fatimids to the Mughals and the Ottomans. It is a journey that is made more complex in a globalised and digitalised age where the exposure to other “nations and tribes” is a routine affair. This is why it matters how seriously we take our national constitutions, especially in times of strife — which every society goes through at one time or another.

An outstanding case of success in this regard is the achievement of Tunisia’s civil society leaders who won the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize. Amid social and political turmoil in the wake of the Arab Spring of 2011, Tunisians came to adopt a constitution that enables a diverse civil society. In turn, civic leaders “paved the way for a peaceful dialogue between the citizens, the political parties and the authorities, and helped to find consensus-based solutions to a wide range of the challenges across political and religious divides”.<sup>9</sup>

Once again, for the Nobel Prize Committee, it was dialogue — with remarkable skill and commitment to inclusion — that allowed society’s wellbeing to prevail, in contrast to the fate of countries that have failed to accommodate religious and secular diversity. Nor is this a lesson for

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<sup>8</sup> Marrakesh Conference on the Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Countries (25-27 January 2016). Accessible at <http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> “Nobel Peace Prize is Awarded to National Dialogue Quartet in Tunisia,” *New York Times*, 9 October 2015.



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the Muslim world alone. Extremism in the name of nationalism, ethnicity and religion is alive today in Europe and North America, as well as in already fragile parts of Asia and Africa.

Gaps in empathy and basic knowledge feed the anxieties — social and economic — of our time. And insecure identities are no friend of tolerance. In a shrinking world where strangers quickly become neighbours, intolerance turns neighbours into strangers. Yes, the secular ethics of human rights and the rule of law are vital safeguards. But they are clearly not enough, in any part of the world, judging by daily reports of abuse on the streets, in buses and planes, in workplaces and government services.

A pluralist ethic is not merely an ideal destination for societies and states. It is about constant striving in every quarter, from schools and corporations to faith communities and law enforcement, to bridge the empathy gaps and ignorance gaps. In the language of Islam's heritage at its finest, this striving is *jihad* along the many and intersecting pathways walked by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

*Amy B. Sajoo is Editor of the IIS' Muslim Heritage Series, in which the latest publication is The Shi'i World: Pathways in Tradition and Modernity. He lectures in International Politics and History at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada.*

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