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# ISLAM AND HUMANISTIC RELATIONS IN MULTI-RELIGIOUS SOCIETIES

# 13

Maszlee Malik



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# **Islam and Humanistic Relations in Multi-Religious Societies**

Maszlee Malik

## INTRODUCTION

Diversity is natural. Islam commands the believers to embrace diversity because it is part of [Allah's] law of nature (*sunnat Allāh*) that He created.

‘If your Lord so willed, He could have made mankind one people.’  
(Q. 11:118)

But He created them to dwell in His kingdom in varieties. God created the two genders and the different ethnic groups among mankind (Q. 30:22) so that they might know and understand each other (Q. 49:13). The Qur’ān clearly states:

“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (li ta’arafu).” (Q. 49:13)

The famous Tunisian Islamic scholar, Tahir Ibn Ashur, in his commentary on this verse, mentioned that the significance of highlighting piety or consciousness, after emphasising the pluralistic nature of humankind, was to educate mankind into the true meaning of humility and mutual recognition through the practice of knowing one another.<sup>1</sup>

One of the least recognised yet pivotal, universal values that can mitigate, if not solve, some of the world’s problems, is respecting diversity; loving it and cultivating it as a source of strength, enrichment and beauty. Particularly because it is an essential element of our human experience.

An old Arab saying, also known as the Golden Rule, and it is found, in one form or another in most traditions – goes: “*Treat others the way that you wish to be treated.*”

Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him) said:

“O humankind! Your Lord is one Lord, and you have one father. All of you are from Adam, and Adam is from dust. The noblest of you is the most God-conscious. No Arab has any superiority over a non-Arab, no non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab, no black person has any superiority over a white person,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Ashur, Tahir (no date), *al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir*, Tunis: Dar Suhnun, 10/259.

and no white person has any superiority over a black person – superiority is only through piety/consciousness (Taqwā).”<sup>2</sup>

## CO-EXISTENCE (LA CONVENCINCIA)

Islam perceives religious diversity and plurality as part of Allah’s law of nature (*sunnat Allāh*) at the behest of the Almighty. It acknowledges the plurality of religions and allows the adherents of all religions the plurality of laws to govern their affairs within the aegis of their religious beliefs and principles.<sup>3</sup>

Islamic divine text accords special status to Judaism and Christianity, categorically calling their adherents, People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*) and it identifies itself with the People of the Book as part of the “Abrahamic family” within the Semitic Tradition (*Ḥanifiyyah*), the tradition of Abraham who is recognised as the father of the three Semitic religions.

The call of Islam is not towards the homogenisation of society into one culture, identity or faith; but the observation and practice of good conduct and civility so as to ensure that diversity will nurture peace and advance the common good. The Qur’ān proclaims that differences among human beings will remain.<sup>4</sup> Hence, it is neither possible nor commanded to make everyone believe in one faith.<sup>5</sup>

Peaceful co-existence with others and mutual respect is a fundamental teaching of Islam. This is manifested through Islam’s commands to respect other faiths, to avoid interfering in matters concerning other religions,<sup>6</sup> through prohibitions against any form of compulsion and coercion in faith<sup>7</sup> and against any form of rebuking or insulting of other faiths.<sup>8</sup>

Islamic history is replete with examples of peaceful co-existence and harmonious cohesion with other religious communities. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him) found one of the greatest political documents

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<sup>2</sup> Narrated by al-Tirmidhi.

<sup>3</sup> See the Qur’ān: 8:72–5; 35:32; 4:95; 60:8–9.

<sup>4</sup> See the Qur’ān: 11:118–19.

<sup>5</sup> See the Qur’ān: 10:99.

<sup>6</sup> See the Qur’ān: 109:1–6.

<sup>7</sup> See the Qur’ān: 2:256, 272; 10:99.

<sup>8</sup> See the Qur’ān: 6:108.

in human history, the Constitution of Madina (622 AD). This treatise embraced 20 major principles including unity, diversity, excellent conduct, fighting against injustice, striving for peace, freedom of religion, and the rule of law, among others.<sup>9</sup> The concept of mutual respect and co-existence between Muslims has always been an essential formula for universal solidarity in the Islamic traditions. Moreover, much evidence from the Qur'ān and Prophetic traditions supports this explicit universality of Islamic traditions.<sup>10</sup>

Another illustrious model was the *La Convivencia* in Andalusia, during the time of Islamic rule in Spain. The spirit of mutual respect and recognition did not only enrich the Islamic civilisation, it also provided space for the Christian and Jewish intellectual and cultural traditions to prosper, progress and flourish.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, mutual tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*) towards and understanding (*tafāḥum*) of other believers and their beliefs are sacred and a *sine qua non* to ensure a harmonious and peaceful world community.

## UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD (*UKHUWWAH*)

Islam sets its own paradigm in defining the social nature of individuals and society. Unlike many human-inspired ideologies, the relationship between individuals in Islam is firmly anchored by the spirit of '*Ukhuwwah*,' which connotes and implies a much wider philosophical meaning than can be encapsulated by the term '*brotherhood*.'

To emphasise this fundamental tenet, the Qur'ān notes:

“And hold fast, all together, by the rope which God (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves; and remember, with gratitude, God’s favour upon you; for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that, by His Grace, ye became brethren; and ye were on the brink of the pit of Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus doth God make His Signs clear to you: That ye may be guided.”  
(Q. 3:103)

<sup>9</sup> Malik, Maszlee (2016). “Pelajaran Dari Sahifah Madinah,” in Zulkifli Hasan (ed.), *Rashid al-Ghannoushi, Intelektual-Reformis Politik Islam*, Petaling Jaya: ILHAM Publication: 145-50.

<sup>10</sup> Rahman, Fazlur (2009). *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, (with foreword by Ebrahim Moosa). Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press: 164-65.

<sup>11</sup> Pagden, Anthony (2008). *Worlds at War: The 2,500-Year Struggle between East & West*. New York: Oxford University Press: 153-54.

In the same spirit, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him) was reported as saying that:

“You will not enter Paradise until you have faith, and you will not have faith until you love each other. Shall I direct you to something, which if you fulfil it, you will love one another? Spread peace among yourselves.”<sup>12</sup>

## **LOVE (MAḤABBAH)**

A proper deconstruction of the aforementioned verse and tradition leads us to understand the main theme of *Ukhuwwah* in Islam, which is mutual love (*maḥabbah*) and mutual altruism (*īthar*). The Qur’ān states:

“And cooperate with one another in all that is good and pious and do not cooperate in sin and aggression.” (Q. 5:2)

It is through mutual cooperation and protection (*takaful*) that *Ukhuwwah* can be profoundly articulated, where all individuals in the community are regarded as one nation, or one body, who must mutually serve and cooperate with each other in decency and virtue, *de rigueur*, to advance justice, fairness, mercy and the higher objectives of the *Shari’ah*.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the concept of *Ukhuwwah* is not exclusive but is both inclusive and universal. It encompasses a comprehensive solidarity not only amongst Muslims, but also towards all fellow human beings, whom Islam considers as ‘brethren in humanity’.<sup>14</sup>

In supporting this notion, Dr Wahbah al-Zuhayli, a contemporary Muslim scholar from Syria, has insisted that there is no contradiction between the brotherhood relations borne out of religiosity and the universal brotherhood of mankind. Both are inter-related, and both are highly acknowledged and recommended in Islam.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Narrated by Muslim.

<sup>13</sup> Malik, Maszlee (2017). *Foundations of Islamic Governance: a Southeast Asian Perspective*. London & New York: Routledge: 165-67.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Qaradhawi, Yusuf (2008). *Khitaabunaa al-Islaamiyy fi ‘Asr al-‘Awwalimah* (Islamic Discourse in the Age of Globalization). Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq: 51.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Zuhayli, Wahbah (1998). *Al-Quran al-Karim; Bunyatuh al-Tashri’iyyah wa Khasa-isuh al-Hadariyyah. Damsyik*: Dar al-Fikr: 93.



A similar sentiment was echoed by Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah, a prominent contemporary Maliki scholar from Mauritania. He has said that despite the differences amongst members of societies, every rational mind recognises justice and every language has a word for it – a word which is recognised as having a positive and noble meaning. The same can be said for “truth,” “liberty,” “tolerance,” “integrity” and many other concepts. These are praised by all cultures and expressed positively in all languages. Similarly, the opposite of these concepts – concepts like “tyranny” and “oppression” – are regarded with derision and are universally rejected. These shared values need to be actively mainstreamed and promoted in a joint effort and universal quest to co-create a better world.<sup>16</sup> Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said:

“No one truly believes until he wants for his brother what he wants for himself.”<sup>17</sup>

The leading Hanbali jurist, Ibn Rajab (1335 – 1393), said in his commentaries on 40 hadiths of al-Nawawi that: “The brotherhood referred to in this ḥadīth is the brotherhood of humanity.”<sup>18</sup> The value of “human brotherhood” is poignantly tagged with the message of “love” in these words of the Prophet (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him).

Love is a highly pleasurable and desired emotional state as well as a code of ethical conduct. It is a shared value, since all people are pleased with it, even those who do not act according to its dictates. When love is realised and manifested by both parties, understanding and mutual respect are deepened while hostilities are reduced. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) encouraged us to proclaim our love, saying:

“If one of you loves his brother, he should let him know it.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.binbayyah.net/portal/research/148>.

<sup>17</sup> Narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali (2007). *The Compendium of Knowledge and Wisdom (Jaami' al-'Ulum wa al-Hikam)*. London: Turath Publishing: 210.

<sup>19</sup> Narrated by al-Tarmidhi in Sunan al-Tarmidhi.

Love is a shared value, since all people are pleased with it, even those who do not act according to its dictates. This is the true test for a shared value that everyone wishes to be regarded as possessing. No one wants to be described as “unjust” or “intolerant.”

## HUMAN EQUALITY

The principle of the equality of individuals was highlighted in Prophet Muhammad’s final sermon during his farewell pilgrimage:

“All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor does a black have any superiority over white except by piety/consciousness and excellence in conduct.”<sup>20</sup>

Instead of directing his message exclusively to the Muslim community, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) preceded this with a universal appeal to mankind by asserting the principle of equality. This important principle and guidance implies that he was neither self-centred nor concerned only about the Muslim community’s interest and affairs, but rather that his message was meant as “the mercy for all mankind” as stated in the Qur’ān (3:110).

Muslim history, as a matter of fact, never witnessed any social strife or hatred between the classes; unlike the condition of some other medieval civilisations where the population was divided into classes, and followed a particular social hierarchy.<sup>21</sup>

Arnold J. Toynbee (1889 – 1975) regarded the Islamic notion of human equality as “one of the outstanding achievements of Islam.” According to the scholar, “in the contemporary world there is, as it happens, a crying need for the propagation of this Islamic virtue.”<sup>22</sup>

In the same vein, Hamilton Gibb (1895 – 1971) noted that: “Islam has a further service to render to the cause of humanity. It stands, after all, nearer to the

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<sup>20</sup> Narrated by Ahmad.

<sup>21</sup> Muhammad Thani, Hafiz (2001). *The Greatest Benefactor of Mankind and Human Rights*. (Translated by Zahra Bainter). Karachi: Darul Ishaat: 95.

<sup>22</sup> Toynbee, Arnold (1948). *Civilization on Trial*. New York: Oxford University Press: 205.

real East than Europe does, and it possesses a magnificent tradition of inter-racial understanding and cooperation.” Gibb further insisted that: “No other society has such a record of success uniting in, an equality of status, of opportunity, and of endeavours, so many and so various races of mankind.”<sup>23</sup>

Based on this principle of the equality of people regardless of their race and origin, Gibb further pointed out that Islam still has the *power to reconcile apparently irreconcilable* elements of race and tradition; hence, if ever the opposition of the great societies of East and West is to be replaced by cooperation, the mediation of Islam would be an indispensable condition.<sup>24</sup>

By emphasising the divine origin of human beings, people would comprehend their equality before the Creator and their lack of superiority over others. In Islam, other religions can be respected through a deep sense of faith, on the principle that religious plurality is a necessary manifestation of people’s freedom to choose their faith as guaranteed by the Qur’ān.

## **CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD**

Allah has created all human beings with honour and dignity, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and has elevated their status above His other creations. Almighty Allah says in the Qur’ān:

“We gave honour and dignity to the children of Adam.” (Q. 17:70)

Unfortunately, the last 100 years had been one of the bloodiest epochs in human history. In the recent past, we have witnessed two world wars; with WWII alone killing at least 30 million people across the globe. At present, self-proclaimed champions of human rights and freedom are complicit in the Zionist occupation of Palestine and the wars in Yemen and Syria. Even worse, the supposed proponents of the liberal world have dropped devastating bombs on Japan, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan.

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<sup>23</sup> Gibb, Sir Hamilton A.R. (1958). *Mohammedanism*. Cambridge: Mentor Edition: 379.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

As much as we would like to be honoured and shown dignity, we have to first recognise the dignity and honour of others. There is also a pressing need for people of all faiths to know and respect the religious beliefs and cultures of others as well as the need to work together to avert more clashes and wars from erupting in this world. Deeper religious literacy, meaningful interfaith dialogues, value-based discourses and academic research and scholarships are such platforms to facilitate this “unity in diversity.” Furthermore, through the recognition of our common universal values, we will co-create solutions to the issues affecting our respective communities. Authentic understanding and mutual respect of others would help develop a sustainable religious and cultural harmony in our mutual quest to serve humanity and please our Creator.

And as vicegerents of the Divine (*Khalifah* of Allah) on earth and as inheritors of the vast treasures of peaceful initiatives of our predecessors, Muslims need to continue in their path of excellent conduct and should be exemplary in their actions and deeds vis-à-vis the adherents of other faiths.

However, there seems to be resistance and objections to interfaith dialogues from orthodox religious factions. This unnecessary fear of the other is the reason for interfaith meetings, conferences, symposiums and dialogues. There is a need to understand that interfaith is not about giving up one’s faith or compromising one’s beliefs, but it is a process of self-education about others through interactions and the exchange of views. It is about coming together on a common ground as fellow human beings. In a world full of hostility, we must instil love and achieve mutual trust and respect with one another.

Through deeper religious literacy, we can gain maturity in thought via programmes such as projects and discourses propagate shared value and address different issues in our communities. This way, we can bring together people from different faiths and ethnic backgrounds and hopefully help them to know each other better in an attempt to serve the needs of others, enjoy harmonious relations and ultimately please our common Creator.

We truly need to co-create value-based common projects, joint cultural-exchanges and interfaith processes, which will allow us to work with and through one another, to nurture peaceful societies. Throughout history, when the Muslims encountered other civilisations, they benefited from them without rejecting them, and instead played a role in injecting spiritual and moral values into them to keep these civilisations under one banner. The same can be achieved in western civilisation today, where Muslims can play a constructive role in injecting a moral spirit that can spiritually revive that civilisation and at the same time benefit from the existing positive qualities. After all, religious hegemony and intolerance in a pluralistic society will invariably result in conflict; and thus will only ruin the claim that Islam is a religion of compassion, peace, freedom and that it is a mercy to all mankind (*Raḥmatan lil ‘ālamīn*).







## Scholar's Profile



**Maszlee Malik**

Maszlee Malik is an Assistant Professor at the International Islamic University of Malaysia since 2011. His areas of interest include Islamic Studies & Islamic Jurisprudence, Islamic Political Economy, Good Governance, Islamic Political Thoughts in Middle East and Southeast Asia, and Islamic Movements and Social Capital.

He holds a Ph.D. in Governance from Durham University, and a Master of Arts in Islamic Jurisprudence from the University of Malaya. Dr Maszlee Malik is author of numerous books and essays including a book on “*Foundations of Islamic Governance: A Southeast Asian Perspective.*”

He has held fellowship positions at the ISEAS Yusuf Ishak Institute, Singapore and International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) Summer Institute for Scholars 2016, Washington DC.

Maszlee is also deeply engaged in the community level counter-radicalisation projects in Malaysia and is a frequent public speaker on media.



