

From Medina to Modernity Prophet Mohammed's Letter to Saint Catherine Monastery the Evolution of Islamic Pluralism from Early Islam to Contemporary Interfaith Relations

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Abstract

At a time when the world is in unprecedented connectivity through globalization, religious tensions are growing instead of decreasing. This article examines a key document of the Prophet Mohammed: Letters to the Monks of St. Catherine's Monastery. Using the Qur'an's famous concept of "people of the Book", the article highlights the true coexistence between different believers. Through a detailed analysis of this document, the article argues that the Prophet Mohammed functioned not only as a political leader but primarily as a prophet. He has laid solid foundations for religious tolerance, mutual respect, and civil protections for religious minorities. These early models of Mohammed's time offer important guidelines for building a peaceful and pluralistic society in the modern world.

Keywords: Islamic Pluralism, Prophet Mohammed's Letter, Interfaith Relations, Ashtiname of Mohammed, Religious Tolerance in Early Islam

Introduction

The trend is opposite. Although we have passed the stage of modernity and are living in the era of postmodernity and globalization, instead of religious coexistence reaching its highest level, on the contrary, tensions and conflicts between religious people are constantly spreading. At no point in history has the need for genuine interreligious dialogue been greater in our pursuit of lasting peace. Never before in history have societies been as close together as they are today under the shadow of globalization. This should be the basis for understanding and accepting each other as we are, not as we want them to be. Strangely, coexistence, mutual acceptance, and religious dualism have been higher in

history, while times have not been as favorable for dualism and coexistence as they are today. Of course, globalization is like a double-edged sword, and if it presents opportunities, there are challenges behind it.

Returning to the historical model of coexistence can be the engine for creating deeper coexistence, because we are ultimately condemned to the high models that initially led to genuine peace between different religions, which can bring about authentic and meaningful peace between religions in modern times. As the last Abrahamic religion, Islam has a deep and long relationship with religious diversity. When we return to the Qur'an, we hear a familiar concept: the People of the Book. That refers to the other two Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity. For some, Mohammed's interaction with Jews and Christians may be political, but it is clear that Mohammed was a prophet before he became a politician. In addition to the political dimension, the interaction with them had a deep theological dimension.

One of the historical documents that remains as a supreme example of this pluralistic ethos for Muslims and is not owned by the majority is Mohammed's letter to the Christian nun at Mount Sinai in Egypt. This document reflects Mohammed's deep commitment to their protection and freedom of worship in their areas. No historical text outside the Qur'an agrees so well with the essence of the Qur'an. This is sufficient to dispel all doubts cast upon this document. Although the Qur'an is enough to deeply feel pluralism, having a historical text outside the Qur'an, such as this document of Mohammed, makes us think deeper about Mohammed's call for peace, coexistence, plurality, and mutual acceptance.

This letter historically shows that since the beginning of Islam, Mohammed has deeply advocated pluralism so that everyone can live together in peace. This was when Mohammed was strong, as a strong man, he appreciated this plurality and demanded that they be free and worship freely. This is different from asking for plurality as a weakling, because when you ask as a weakling, you want to protect yourself, but when you ask from the peak of strength, it is to protect others. This is a profoundly prophetic attitude. Because if he had been only a politician, such a letter would not have been born. So, before he was a politician or a president, he was a prophet, he did what befits a prophet, a messenger from heaven.

The historical context

Religious Diversity in the Arabian Peninsula

Before the advent of Islam, the Arabian Peninsula had a mosaic of religious traditions, mostly polytheistic (pagan), but also Jewish and Christian components in its areas, such as Najran and Yathrib (which would later be renamed Medina). This fact influenced Mohammed's views, so the Qur'an deals extensively with the theology of Jews and Christians, affirming some of their beliefs and criticizing other things of their faith. These

social structures of the Arabian Peninsula would later become cornerstones of Islamic pluralism and tolerance, having a concept such as "people of the book" indicates that we all share the common heritage of Abraham [1]. In the seventh century, the Arabian Peninsula was associated with significant tribal, religious, social, and political relationships. Although "polytheism" generally dominated the peninsula, there were also Jewish, Christian, and Hanif believers (Hanifs are those who were monotheists but did not belong to Judaism or Christianity). In addition to being a commercial center, Mecca was also a place of religious pilgrimage because there were many gods around the Kaaba. However, the Hijaz region had considerable religious diversity. For example, several Jewish tribes lived in Medina and the surrounding areas: Banu Qurayza, Banu Nadir, and Banu Qaynuqa. Christian Arab tribes also lived on Arabia's northern and southern fringes [2].

Prophet Mohammed was born in Mecca and then migrated to Medina. He was fully aware of the diversity that existed in the region, and when he drafted the constitution of Medina, he placed the Jews as part of the Ummah [3]. Mohammed's relationship with Christians was more about dialogue and diplomacy. His letters to Christian rulers are clear evidence, such as those to the Negus of Haba and the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, living together and respecting others [4].

The Constitution of Medina as a Basic Plural Document

One of the historical documents outside the Qur'an is the Constitution of Medina, which is considered one of the most beautiful models of Islamic pluralism and tolerance in history. After Mohammed migrated to Medina, his most important work was establishing peace between the various communities of Medina, the Muslims (who included the Muslims of Mecca and the Muslims of Medina), and the Jewish tribes and the pagan Arabs. With this constitution, he made everyone, regardless of theological differences, into one people, into one Ummah (Ummatan Wahidan) by protecting each other and defending the city (The Constitution of Medina).

As a supreme social contract, this constitution is considered one of the brightest dimensions of early Islamic civilization. The document clearly states that Muslims have their religion and Jews have their own, promising protection and justice to all signatories, regardless of their different faiths and theologies, to protect Medina from external threats [3,5]. The importance of the Charter lies in the fact that it has become the cornerstone of Islamic pluralism and tolerance, so that today's Muslim era judges that the majority have ignored it.

Prophet Mohammed's letter to St. Catherine's (Ashtiname)¹

The letter dates back to the second year of the Hijra, corresponding to 623 AD (St. Catherine's Monastery). The document significantly protected Christians' churches, homes,

and lives, so they felt complete and meaningful peace. The survival of the monastery during the 14 centuries of Islamic rule is a sign of the respect given to this letter of protection (St. Catherine's Monastery). According to the tradition preserved in Sinai, Mohammed also visited his monastery (St. Catherine's Monastery). St Catherine's Monastery is one of the oldest and most famous religious, historical, and archaeological institutions globally. The monastery is located in the southern province of Sinai in the city of St. Catherine, and the name of the town comes from the name of the monastery. The letter contains many interesting passages illustrating the Prophet's vision of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians. Guarantee the protection of Christian places of worship and religious leaders.

Textual analysis for the letter

The "Letter of Peace" or "Letter of Protection" is Mohammed's letter to the Monks and Nuns of St. Catherine's Monastery, considered one of the most important documents in history. The letter as a whole gives Mohammed's assurances to the Monks and Nuns of the monastery for their protection. The letter outlines several key principles, such as; Protecting their lives, protecting their property and temples, protecting them from anyone who wants to harm them, not being forced to change their faith, not being dismissed from their jobs, not being taken away from their churches, not being forced to participate in war. They should not be prevented from going to the temple for worship. The document is profoundly against coercion. Mohammed even regarded all Christian believers as his citizens and considered the Christian community part of the social life of his civilization.

By Looking at the letter, we can say that it has three levels. That is, it is addressed to three types of audiences, all in order to reassure Christian believers about their lives, homes, and faith.

Level 1:

Message to Muslims: When you look at the message, you sincerely feel that there is a profound message in the lines that Mohammed addresses to his followers, as if the message were for Muslims before it was for the monks and nuns. The letter contains several paragraphs to warn Muslims. In the document, he tells Muslims that my followers must defend you because you are my citizens. This is a high level of civilization that considers different believers and their followers as citizens because everyone is equal at the level of citizenship. Everyone is crying out for citizenship based on justice in modern times. What the Western world now sees as one of its prides is that citizenship of all colors, voices, and religions is the basis of treatment, rights, and privileges. By saying that you are my citizens, Mohammed wants to reassure them that they are protected as Muslims and treated equally.

Despite knowing what Christian theology is about, God, Mohammed, asks Muslims not to destroy or damage their temples. To take something or objects from their temples to his

house or mosque is to disobey God and His Prophet. Mohammed would not allow anyone to vacate their places or force them to fight. Not only that, Muslims must fight for them and protect them from any threat. It is interesting that the letter does not mention "jizya" at all; that is, they must pay "jizya" in exchange for not participating in the war and protecting them. There is no interest because the message is from a prophet. The Prophet does not act for his benefit. He considers humanity and coexistence.

They should not demolish their temples or remove the items in their temples and take them to a Muslim house or mosque. The document even states that if a Christian woman marries a Muslim, the Muslim should not prevent her from going to the temple to pray. This shows Mohammed's broad views on the issue of marriage between a Muslim and a Christian. Not only that, but he tells the Muslim that you should not stop him from going to church to worship God. It also calls on Muslims to respect their churches, worship, and religious customs, and not to prevent them from renovating their temples. Nor should their form of prayer be insulted simply because it is different.

In addition to these explicit texts, there are two more explicit warning messages for Muslims: Whoever breaks one of these laws has disobeyed God and His Messenger. At the end of the letter, he tells every Muslim that no one in the Ummah can violate this covenant. That is, if a person considers himself one of the Ummah of Mohammed, he must not violate this covenant at any time and place until the Day of Resurrection (Ashtiname).

Level 2:

Message to Non-Muslims and Non-Christians: The document also contains messages for non-Muslims and non-Christians, making the task more difficult for Muslims and reassuring for Christians. How? Mohammed clearly states that if anyone harms them, my followers and I will stand up against them and defend you. "Anyone" can be anyone! The person does not have to be a Muslim; he can be a non-Muslim. Again, Mohammed considers it his duty and that of his followers to defend them. That is, whoever wants to harm them, Mohammed will vigorously oppose them. The letter says they should not be forced to change their faith. This message is for both Muslims and non-Muslims, meaning that Mohammed is addressing his words to Muslims and his followers, and making his message more general. The message even goes so far as to say that because they have my protected charter, I will confront those who want to do things to them that they do not like.

Level 3:

Direct Message to Christians: The point is that Mohammed sent a message to Muslims and non-Muslims in the first and second levels of the letter, i.e., those outside the circle of Christianity. Then, on the third level, he sent a message directly to Christians.

It should be noted that the entire letter was sent to the monks and nuns of St. Catherine's Monastery as the representatives of the Christian community in the region. By giving

messages to his followers and non-Muslims, Mohammed wants to give Christian followers the highest level of security. This is the essence of the message. He tells them that the basis of their protection comes from the fact that I consider you part of the region's civilization because you are my citizens. In addition to assuring them of their protection, he declares that they should feel completely free to worship, not worry about destroying their temples, and continue their work. Whoever does the slightest act against you that makes you uncomfortable, I will confront them. He tells them that whoever is a faithful follower of mine will respect your beliefs, they will not force you to change your beliefs, they will not fire you, they will not insult your religious traditions, they will not force you to participate in war. They should not take your belongings to their homes or the mosque. He assures them that none of the Muslims can be forced to marry a Christian woman; it must be with her consent. The Muslim should not prevent his Christian family from going to the temple to pray.

Theological interpretation

When you look at the letter and compare it with the Qur'anic texts, you will be convinced that its basis is deeply rooted in the Qur'an. The letter includes verses that emphasize justice, tolerance, and respect for religious diversity. Several verses support the spirit of Mohammed's peace treaty, showing that Mohammed addressed the church on the basis of the Qur'anic message.

Qur'an 2:256 declares, "There is no compulsion in religion," indicating that the Qur'an does not force anyone to change their beliefs, which means that the Qur'an deeply believes in religious freedom. Quran 5:48 also affirms religious pluralism, saying, "We appointed a law and a manner for each of you... Had God willed, He would have made you into one nation [in faith], but [he intended] to test you out of what He has given you." This verse clearly emphasizes that God wants religious diversity and that everyone should respect that diversity, because if God wanted to, He would make everyone one. But it doesn't, because it respects human freedom and choice. As the verse says, God puts this plurality to the test; those who accept and honor it will pass the test, and those who do not accept and honor it will not.

Furthermore, Quran 49:13 emphasizes human equality and the importance of moral behavior over identity: "O humanity! Indeed, we created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may 'get to' know one another." This Qur'anic principle of ethnic and religious differences makes people draw closer to each other, know each other, and accept each other.

These theological principles of the letter and the Qur'anic verses were not merely abstract ideals but were implemented in Mohammed's time to deal with the diversity and plurality that existed in the Arabian Peninsula. Here, Mohammed's Ashtiname manifests itself as the

historical embodiment of the moral injunctions of the Qur'an. Reuven Firestone points out that the prophetic policy toward non-Muslims was pragmatic but guided by a theological commitment to justice and peaceful coexistence (Firestone 2002).

Challenges and Misinterpretations

Despite many positive attempts to convey the Qur'an's essence of peace, tolerance, and acceptance of pluralism, the negative voice has prevailed since Mohammed's death. Throughout post-Mohammed history, by and large, Muslims have confronted Islam itself by conveying an image that the Qur'an rejects. In modern times, especially in the second half of the 20th and early 21st centuries, Islamic extremism became prominent. Especially after 9/11, Islam was seen more as a violent religion because what happened was a tragedy. Groups like ISIS, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Shabab al-Mujahideen, and the like have used a narrow and literal reading of the Qur'an for their evils, making it very clear that they have rejected the spirit of the Qur'an and Mohammed's high traditions, including the letter of Mohammed to Saint Catherine Monastery.

In modern times, as mentioned above, especially after 9/11, Islam has become a public sphere, a subject out of the hands of a religious elite [6]. After events such as 9/11 and various bombings around the world, the need to understand public Islam—Islam as engaged in public life and the "public good"—became even more urgent. The authors aim to look beyond immediate events to longer-term trends.

Public Islam refers to how Islam is invoked and practiced by a range of actors—scholars, secular intellectuals, students, workers, mothers, etc.—in public debates and civic life. It is no longer just the domain of theologians; non-elite and grassroots actors also play a significant role. The emergence of the Muslim public sphere due to modernization factors such as education, travel, and new media has enabled Muslims to actively participate in civil debates about the common good, including interfaith dynamics [6].

It should be noted that these jihadist groups were inspired by the jurisprudence texts, fatwas, and strict interpretations of some Islamic clerics in history, such as Ibn Taymiyah, whom all jihadists consider their leader. Ibn Taymiyyah's fatwas and opinions themselves are contrary to the Qur'an, that is, instead of returning to the spirit and action of the Qur'an, they return to something that is against the Qur'an. These groups portray interfaith participation as a betrayal of Islam because they sincerely believe that Islam is not for coexistence, that attempting to bring Islam and other religions closer together is blasphemy, betrayal, and serving the agenda of others.

Fortunately, contemporary scholars reject this misunderstanding, saying it does not represent faithful Islam, as the Qur'an says in verses such as 2:256 ("There is no compulsion in religion") and 49:13 "O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and

a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may 'get to' know one another. ". They open up to diversity and getting to know each other.

However, Orientalists have played a negative role in creating an ugly image of the incompatibility of Islam with modernity [7]. However, it was later criticized by scholars such as Edward Said.

Apart from history (the Constitution of Medina and Ashtiname), the Qur'an itself sincerely rejects the beliefs of radical Muslims, jihadists, and non-Muslims who portray Islam in this way. The higher models of the Qur'an align with modernity, the most prominent verse being Qur'an 2:256, "No compulsion in religion.

Reclaiming the soul of Ashtiname

There is no way, except for coexistence, outside of this way, there is violence. In modern times, the most important thing for believers and followers of any religion is to accept each other and others. Thus, we can emphasize the divine will in creating this plurality. Nowadays, more diversity is developing, and if there is no mutual acceptance, there will be more religious tension and violence, making God look ugly more than ever.

A letter like Mohammed's "Ashtiname" may be one of Mohammed's most unique legacies in harmony with the Qur'an. We can make it the cornerstone of Muslims' relationship with others (other religions) along with the Qur'an's supreme texts on pluralism, peace, and coexistence. We have never needed to accept each other more than we do now, because we are all influenced by globalization. If the negative voice is allowed to reach, it will spread quickly, and violence will increase. Therefore, raising the positive voice of Islamic coexistence is essential to reach everyone.

The role of the letter in modern interfaith initiatives

In recent decades, Mohammed's letter has been cited in interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding efforts because it is one of the most explicit texts that everyone can easily understand. Therefore, religious organizations refer to it as a legacy of high history. For example, in pluralistic countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, at interfaith conferences, Muslim scholars cite the letter as a supreme model of Islam that, in Mohammed's time, Mohammed promised to protect Christians. For example, is directly inspired by the peace treaty [8]. The Declaration of Marrakech was adopted on January 27, 2016, in Marrakech, Morocco, by nearly 300 Muslim scholars, leaders, and politicians worldwide. The Declaration of Marrakech (2016).

The Declaration was issued in response to the persecution of religious minorities, especially in Muslim-majority areas. The Declaration emphasizes Islamic principles to protect religious minorities and establish peace and coexistence. The Constitution of Medina and

Mohammed's peace treaty inspired the Declaration. Because it refers to the Charter of Medina, the Peace of Sinai is an extension of the Constitution of Medina. The Declaration calls for the renewal and implementation of this tradition in modern times. The Declaration rejects the ideology of extremists against minorities. The Declaration even calls on the world to establish peace by protecting minorities. The importance of the Declaration was that it was able to counter Islamophobia by presenting an Islamic vision of acceptance of pluralism and coexistence rooted in the spirit of the Qur'an, the Constitution of Medina, and Mohammed's peace treaty.

(The Amman Message Statement 2004), which has been endorsed by numerous Islamic scholars and institutions worldwide, also calls for interfaith and interfaith respect and condemns sectarianism and extremism. In addition, some Christian institutions, such as St. Catherine's Monastery and the Christian Ecumenical Council, have promoted awareness of the letter to build trust and cooperation between Christians and Muslims. The letter has also been displayed in interfaith museums and used in peace education programs in Bosnia, Lebanon, and Indonesia [9].

Conclusion

The study traces the roots of Islamic pluralism to the time of the Prophet Mohammed. Mohammed deeply lived based on the theology of coexistence with others. The Constitution of Medina and his letter to the monastery of St. Catherine are strong evidence of Mohammed's vision of universal citizenship, mutual protection, and religious freedom. These historical documents do not remain only as historical texts; they can also revive Islamic pluralism in modern times. As religious divisions and tensions intensify, reviving this high model of Islam will be an important step towards fostering genuine peace and preventing conflicts among different believers [10-14].

Appendix: The Letter



Source: St. Catherine Monastery Library:

<https://www.sinaimonastery.com/index.php/en/library/patent-of-mohammed>

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Foot Note

¹The word comes from both Kurdish and Persian, but it is more commonly associated with Kurdish, as other Arabic-derived words are now used for "peace" in Persian, while this word is still used in Kurdish. The term "Ashtiname" is made up of two parts: "Ashti" (آشتی), meaning peace, and "Nameh" (نامه), meaning letter or document. Historically, the tradition of naming documents—especially legal, diplomatic, or treaty-related ones—in Persian was common during certain Islamic periods, particularly later under Persian Muslim dynasties such as the Seljuks.