

Muslim Minorities

Problems Faced And Opportunities Of Muslim Minorities

In your country or another country you know, what major (a) problems and (b) opportunities face present-day Muslims as they try to live by the teachings of Islam?

Islam is a religion where Allah and His prophet (ﷺ) have already established the code of conduct for all Muslims in all circumstances. In this way, Islam has made provision for those Muslims living as minorities in different parts of the world. The following will elaborate on both the problems and opportunities faced by Muslims as they try to live by the teachings of Islam.

Problems faced by Muslims throughout the world are different based on the countries they are living in. The lines below will discuss the major problems Muslims face pertaining to the practicing of Islam. Above all, Muslims who live in Muslim countries can easily manage offering prayers during their work timings, as the offices usually allow prayer breaks. However, in most Muslim minorities countries, Muslims find it difficult to find time to offer prayers, as the offices are not understanding of the fact that there is some prayers time and it is obligatory for Muslims to say prayers. In Mauritius though in most cases Muslims have time for their prayers, those working in private firms and companies often have problems to ensure prayer times from their employers. Moreover, Islam is the largest religion alongside with Christianity and Judaism. Therefore, in Muslim minorities countries, there is a strong hold of unislamic cultural and life style. Therefore, due to religious nature of these styles, a Muslim is unable to relate with these and finds it difficult to be a part of unislamic culture. And if he or she does try to mingle with the predominant unislamic culture it comes at the cost of suppressing the Islamic beliefs and system. As such in Mauritius we have so many unislamic religious feast and culture where our youngsters as well as adults get caught in the system and we see Muslims celebrating day of assumption, Christmas, Easter holiday among others. Another example can be the image and life of Muslim changed in many countries especially the US, right after the 9/11 incident. Since then the Muslim nationals of US have never been able to feel or live the same. The main problem Muslims face in US, is the blame of being terrorists. The western media is playing a biased role in all the proceedings, and portray all Muslims as terrorists, because of which it has become difficult for Muslims to live their lives with freedom in US. However, all Muslims cannot be blamed for the actions of one group. In Mauritius, there have always been a communal system of election and the whole population know that it will never change.

Muslims in America who are open about their support of Islamic causes and critical of US policies know full well the dangers such outspokenness entails. Muslim and non-Muslim intellectuals, scholars, activists, leaders, imams and anyone who challenges the mainstream narrative is harassed, detained, summoned before grand juries, interrogated and/or deported by the US government. In Mauritius there are NIU (National Intelligence Unit) at every Muslim gathering and Friday prayers. **There are also psychological oppressions** upon the Muslim minorities. There are problems and influences which tend to threaten the faith and integrity of the students' Islamic identity and allegiance. As such, the Modernist view holds that matter which is tangible and mind which can be experienced are the only realities. Moreover, one opinion is as good as another and that religious doctrines are merely one set of opinions which are refuted by others. The religious beliefs and spiritual realities are only the fantasies of uneducated, simple people. The Science created by the human mind through the human senses represents the highest authoritative truth about man and the Universe and that ultimately man's Science will solve all man's problems. Man, far from being the servant of God, is the master of his natural environment and may exploit it as he wills. There is no authority except collective or individual greed for more and more comforts, T.V. sets, refrigerators etc and that there is no decree of destiny, only the opportunity or otherwise to get more of what one wants or thinks one needs. The only criterion of good and evil is convenience, comfort and

physical well-being. It doesn't matter what one believes or thinks, so long as one is comfortable and healthy. There is freedom of intermingling of sexes attached to consumption of alcoholic drinks, pigs, halal and haram food and all kinds of drugs found everywhere such as in late night parties. There is also the easy accessibility of easy money through gambling. Thus modern man has set himself up against God and Nature. Many colleges and universities students are faced with such ideologies unfortunately. They are faced with a dilemma and needed religious and spiritual attention.

Moreover, there has been the emergence of an **extremist** group among those saying they believe in Islam which has deepened the sorrows of Muslim minorities. It started in the early 90's with the rise of the Salafi Movement which eventually incited a reaction called "Tradition Islam". For example, we have the Al Qaeda. Prior to the rise of Salafism, it was easy dealing with difference in the convert community. But as more and more people became Muslim and were indoctrinated into Salafism, it seemed the local leadership could neither keep with the pace of conversion nor the sophistication of the Salafi teachers. There are many brainwashing programmes resulting in suicide bombing under the heading of 'Jihad'. This has and is still contributing to the problems of Muslim minorities throughout the world. Many of our youth today, after inheriting disdain for classical scholars and scholarship from their parents (and also because of the misguided teachings of some of those who are classically trained), find themselves confronted with troubling philosophical discussions in Western universities, and, especially, the ideas related to the New-Atheists. Some of them are troubled enough to doubt the authenticity of Islam and its universal truths, largely because they never were afforded the opportunity to study classical Islamic dialectics, logic, and/or dogmatic theology. In Mauritius, it is noted among some types of students the hatred they have for unislamic government and the desire for a Khalifah movement. There was also the FSM (Front Solidarité Mauricien) movement desiring to spiritualise the unislamic political system in Mauritius.

However, it must be noted that Muslims living as minorities have also specific rights and facilities. There are governments who are sensible to the situation of minorities in their countries. For example, in India, a report illustrates how programmes intended to improve school education among Muslims has focused on modernization of Madrasah even though only Muslim kids go there for education. In higher studies, the government has focused on providing assistance to minority institutions rather than expanding the overall education network to include Muslims. In states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (with high concentration of Muslims), infrastructure projects have been diverted to them. The Reserve Bank of India's efforts to extend banking and credit facilities to Muslims, a major result of the Sachar Committee report which said Muslims were out of the banking system, has also ended up benefiting non-Muslim minorities. In Mauritius, there is the equality of chance for Muslims whether it be for religious schools (Madrasah) or primary, secondary or tertiary level. In Europe, Muslim integration is one of the most controversial issues in the immigration debate, and one that gets right to the heart of public anxieties about immigration. European countries are struggling with ways to accommodate Muslim minorities while preserving national values. Getting the balance right has not been easy. Governments have taken many steps to incorporate Islam into the architecture of the modern state, such as introducing Muslim councils to help resolve conflicts over cultural practices. In Mauritius, we have the rights to establish any Muslim organisation with the intention to work for the progress of Muslims. There is no restriction as such.

Still there are steps which some governments have taken to ensure Muslim **integration** as well as **preservation** of the countries' cultures. Governments have sought to restrict or prohibit practices perceived as contradicting national or liberal democratic norms and values, especially those that condone violence or are seen as undermining gender equality. Citizenship and integration tests, as well as arrival contracts, have all been employed to signal the undesirability of certain practices. For example, Denmark requires immigrants to sign a statement on arrival committing to respect individual freedoms and gender equality. Some countries restrict religious dress in certain public professions, either to ensure neutrality in the public sphere, or for practical reasons like facilitating human interaction. These include civil servants, teachers (in approximately half of the German federal states, Oslo municipality, all of French public schools, and in the United Kingdom), the police force (Denmark, Norway, Germany, and ad hoc cases in the Netherlands), and judges and clerks (Denmark, Norway, ad hoc in the United Kingdom and Spain). The idea is to facilitate integration. It must not be judged and taken negatively. In Mauritius, all Muslims male and female have

the rights to wear whatever they want related to Islamic dress. It may be the Jilbaab, Hijab, Jubbah, 'Amaamah and others except in the police force (where a uniform is needed) and in some private schools and companies. **Concerning the relationship between mosques and states**, the official recognition of Islam has been problematic in several countries because of the religion's non-hierarchical structure, meaning Muslim organizations are not always granted the rights and benefits of other religious groups including tax benefits, the right to perform marriage and funerals with civil validity, and financial support for Muslim schools. Governments have sought to encourage the development of representative councils or umbrella bodies in order to fulfil this role. Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom all now have national councils, formed with varying levels of government support. These councils help resolve debates on religious practices like imams, prayer spaces, chaplains, mosques, education, and halal food; provide a representative hierarchy following the structure of the Christian church; and "deny oxygen" to would-be extremists by including some minority voices in public debate. Here in Mauritius we have various institutions like the 'Family Council' and the 'Halal Committee' to ensure the rights of Muslims.

Another set of policy interventions promotes integration by providing **financial** or other support for religious education and institutions. The *raison d'être* is that developing a home-grown form of Islam could guard against the influence of extremist groups or foreign governments. These imams or Islamic educators brought in from abroad might encourage mosques to act as centres to encourage integration and social and religious respect. In Mauritius, Muslims living in peace and harmony are keen to merge in the society. **Moreover**, resistance to the provision of Islamic education in mainstream classrooms is slowly being replaced by the view that it can strengthen, rather than threaten, integration. Recent reports indicate that, contrary to popular belief, there is little desire for self-segregation among Muslim parents (mixed schools are associated with higher performance). Policymakers have the option of encouraging faith schools and segregated education or providing support for Islamic education within the regular school system. In Mauritius, as from the primary schools Muslims can opt either for Urdu and Arabic as subjects and Islamic Studies at secondary schools. At tertiary level there are B.a courses for Arabic, Urdu and Islamic Studies. **Imams** imported from abroad are thought to find it more difficult to provide context-specific advice and participate in official discussions as they may lack knowledge of the language or culture of the new country. While traditionally imams did little more than lead the prayer, they are increasingly called on to perform a number of roles, from marriage counsel or to financial advisor. Imams might therefore be critical to second- and third-generation integration. There are steps to providing financial support for mosques, it is hoped, will weaken the influence of foreign governments further. Most mosques in European cities are temporary conversions of basements or warehouses, so-called backyard mosques. Governments are making efforts to help these Muslim minorities. In Mauritius Imaams have already these rights and subsidies are given to both Imaams as wages and mosques to buy any kind of transport among others.

In short, Muslims have spread to other nations and cultures of the world. However, the life out there is not the same as in Muslim countries. The Muslims have to face different issues and have to work very hard to keep their Muslim hood intact, or else they may also lose their identity in the secular culture and environment. However, there are also many opportunities. For example, halal meat is available in many public institutions; Muslim religious holidays are celebrated at the local level (for example schools give Muslim students the day off to celebrate Eid); and prayer rooms are increasingly provided in higher education facilities, hospitals, and prisons in many countries. Many of these changes occurred without trumpet blast on a local, municipal, or institutional level, and often in areas where Muslims form a critical mass.

Reactions Of Muslims Living in Muslim Minorities Countries

Islamophobia is by no means a new phenomenon. Rather, it goes back to the earliest period of Islamic history. A massive storm of anti-Muslim hatred emerged and spread across large parts of the world with the expansion of Muslim political rule, from the early eighth century onwards. It was this that, in large measure, propelled the Crusades, which played a major role in propagating and perpetuating deeply-held negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims in the West. However, there are ways how to react to this trend.

Unfortunately, Muslim scholars and activists have not given this question much serious consideration, being guided mainly by feelings of revenge and reaction, mainly at the political level. Muslim scholars from South Asia have a particularly important role to play today in countering Islamophobia, because, unlike in several countries in the Arab world, there is much greater intellectual freedom in this region. South Asian Muslim scholars must devote adequate attention to studying and understanding the psyche, worldview and ideologies of various Islamophobic forces, their methods of working and the consequences of their activities and propaganda. South Asian madrasah could have taken up this task more effectively than other Muslim institutions. For this to happen, madrasah must include such subjects in their curriculum as would enable their students to gain a proper understanding of modern social, political, economic and cultural conditions and challenges.

As such one of the ways to react is to follow the verse of the Qur'an 'Believers, stand out firmly for God, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others toward you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear God. For God is well-acquainted with all that you do'. (Qur'an 5:8). In that there are the concepts of **justice and patience**. As long as a Muslim keeps on the path of justice with a certain amount of patience, perseverance and determination he will be able to cope with all challenges. It is also said "...let not the hatred of some people in (once) shutting you out of the Sacred Mosque lead you to transgression (and hostility on your part). Help you one another in righteousness and piety, but help you not one another in sin and rancour: fear God, for God is strict in punishment." (Quran 5:2). The aspects determined here are about **violence and vengeance** which must not be adopted by Muslims. As such all concepts behind suicide bombing and terrorism are banned in Islam. No matter what has been done to you, God says, you are not allowed to commit injustice. The ends do not justify the means. There can never be a "free for all" against those who hurt us. The amazing profundity of the statements in 5:2 and 5:8 are even more greatly appreciated when one realizes when they were first revealed to the Muslims: soon after the conquest of Mecca. However, this principle also needs to be understood by the Americans. Despite what happened on September 11, it does not give the Americans the right to kill innocent people in Iraq and Afghanistan in revenge. It does not give the right to torture detainees in Iraq or Afghanistan. It must never be so. Never let the hatred of a people toward you move you to commit injustice. An "eye for an eye," is not appropriate here. Let there be mercy.

The Qur'an also tells us to dismiss the people of ignorance and not to give a lot of attention to them as such **ignoring the words of ignorant people**. It asks us to not engage with them in any conversation, except perhaps to safeguard ourselves from greater harm. Allah says 'Be tolerant, command what's right, pay no attention to foolish people' [7:199]. This is such an important matter that the Qur'an makes it one of the traits of the People of God: 'The Servants of the Lord of Mercy are those who walk humbly on Earth, and who, when the foolish address them, reply 'Peace'" [25:63]. We see the Qur'an encouraging us to engage with the people of reason and to even debate them if they have a different point of view: 'Call people to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching, and argue with them in the most courteous way' [16:125]. Another aspect is towards a **call to respect the sanctity of faith symbols**. A very interesting and very relevant verse to this discussion in the Qur'an says 'Do not revile those they call on beside God, so they, in their hostility, revile God, without knowledge' [6:108]. The direct meaning of this verse is that reviling, insulting, or cursing the idols is prohibited because indirectly we are causing our God to be reviled, insulted or cursed. No matter how much we disagree with idol-worship, we cannot mock, insult, or curse idols, idolaters, or idol-worship. This verse is also teaching us that there are always consequences to our actions. Just like we hold our religious symbols very dear to our hearts and we consider them holy or

untouchable, people of other faiths will feel the same towards their religious symbols, no matter how ridiculous those symbols may seem to us. Therefore, we should have mutual respect of religious symbols in order to live together in a civilized manner. At the least, we should, as they say, respectfully disagree. Furthermore, the Quran says, "**Do not disagree:**" do not "tanaaza`u" that is a strong word in Arabic. It is different from "Ikhtilaaf disagreement." "Tanaaza`u" is saying, do not have conflict with one another. So what must be done is to consolidate all bridges among the different Islamic parties, eliminate all differences in 'Aqeedah but work for the common people and Muslims, create a solidarity and trust as a pillar, help all Muslims whether poor or better-off, work together as one unit, try to come in partnership with Muslims businessmen, spread Islam in the best way – wisdom, don't force anyone to enter Islam, talk politely, keep the traditional Islam intact, let Islamic customs and traditions be part of one's private and public life, abide by the law of Allah for blessings, follow the Shari'ah for one own betterment, make the formation of the future generation through your kids, pass on the Islamic concepts to the offsprings, don't merge with European and western cultures thus forgetting Islamic ones, inculcate Sabr (patience) in one's heart in times of physical and psychological persecutions and among others migrate to a Muslim country in search for another friendly land to live Islam.

As such, when a muslim lives in a muslim minorities country, he must talk and he must also listen. He takes, but must also give. He respects first and then he gains respect and attains credibility and dignity. There cannot – absolutely cannot – be any discussion of minority problems with only one side present. Dialogue is the essence even of Da'wah. It needs above all moral courage of the highest Islamic order, especially in present times when religious and political polarization has reached lethal proportions.

Pact of Umar

There are several different versions of the pact that differ both in their language and stipulations.^[17]

The points:

- Prohibition against building new churches, places of worship, monasteries, monks or a new cell. (Hence it was also forbidden to build new synagogues. It is known that new synagogues were only built after the occupation of Islam, for example in Jerusalem and Ramle. A similar law, prohibiting the build of new synagogues, existed in the Byzantines, and was therefore not new for all Jews. It was new for the Christians.)
- Prohibition against rebuilding destroyed churches, by day or night, in their own neighbourhoods or those situated in the quarters of the Muslims.
- The worship places of non-Muslims must be lower in elevation than the lowest mosque in town.
- The houses of non-Muslims must not be taller in elevation than the houses of Muslims.
- Prohibition against hanging a cross on the Churches.
- Muslims should be allowed to enter Churches (for shelter) in any time, both in day and night.
- Obliging the call of prayer by a bell or a kind of Gong (Nakos) to be low in volume.
- Prohibition of Christians and Jews against raising their voices at prayer times.
- Prohibition against teaching non-Muslim children the Qur'an.
- Christians were forbidden to show their religion in public, or to be seen with Christian books or symbols in public, on the roads or in the markets of the Muslims.
- Palm Sunday and Easter parades were banned.
- Funerals should be conducted quietly.
- Prohibition against burying non-Muslim dead near Muslims.
- Prohibition against raising a pig next to a Muslims neighbour.
- Christian were forbidden to sell Muslims alcoholic beverage.

- Christians were forbidden to provide cover or shelter for spies.
- Prohibition against telling a lie about Muslims.
- Obligation to show deference toward Muslims. If a Muslim wishes to sit, non-Muslim should be rise from his seats and let the Muslim sit.
- Prohibition against preaching to Muslims in an attempt to convert them from Islam.
- Prohibition against preventing the conversion to Islam of someone who wants to convert.
- The appearance of the non-Muslims has to be different from those of the Muslims: Prohibition against wearing Qalansuwa (kind of dome that was used to wear by Bedouin), Bedouin turban (Amamah), Muslims shoes, and Sash to their waists. As to their heads, it was forbidden to comb the hair sidewise as the Muslim custom, and they were forced to cut the hair in the front of the head. Also non-Muslim shall not imitate the Arab-Muslim way of speech nor shall adopt the kunyas (Arabic byname, such as "abu Khattib").
- Obligation to identify non-Muslims as such by clipping the heads' forelocks and by always dressing in the same manner, wherever they go, with binding the zunnar (a kind of belt) around the waists. Christians to wear blue belts or turbans, Jews to wear yellow belts or turbans, Zoroastrians to wear black belts or turbans, and Samaritans to wear red belts or turbans.
- Prohibition against riding animals in the Muslim custom, and prohibition against riding with a saddle.
- Prohibition against adopting a Muslim title of honour.
- Prohibition against engraving Arabic inscriptions on signet seals.
- Prohibition against any possession of weapons.
- Non-Muslims must host a Muslim passerby for at least 3 days and feed him.
- Non-Muslims prohibited from buying a Muslim prisoner.
- Prohibition against taking slaves who have been allotted to Muslims.
- Prohibition against non-Muslims to lead, govern or employ Muslims.
- If a non-Muslim beats a Muslim, his Dhimmi protection is removed.
- In return, the ruler would provide security for the Christian believers who follow the rules of the pact.

Non-Muslims in Muslim History

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This article is devoted to a special group of Non-Muslims, namely those who are called Christians (Catholics, Protestants, others) and Jews. Such groups are considered in Islam to be People of the Book. People of the Book are looked upon by Muslims as God-fearing, God-loving, and God-conscious.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are rooted in the Abrahamic religion where Islam is the most recent religion sent by God to humankind as a complete way of life. Muslims are required to respect and honor people of the book. An Islamic state must protect non-Muslims and ensure their peace and harmony within Muslim territories.

During the Days of the Prophet

As far as the Jews are concerned

1. During the life of Prophet Muhammad, the Jews in Madina had a synagogue and an educational institute by the name of Bait-Al-Madras. He made sure it was preserved as well as all the Jews attending it were protected.

2. The Prophet of Islam made several treaties with the Jews. Following is an extract of a message that he wrote to form a treaty:

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Ever Merciful. This message is from Muhammad, Messenger of God. Verily, whoever follows us from the Jews shall have the help and the aid; and shall neither be victim of injustice, nor taken vengeance upon. The Jews of the children of Awf are safe with the Faithful. They have their religion and the Muslims theirs and themselves, except those who oppress or sin, they will forfeit themselves and their families. The Jews of Bani Al-Najjar, of Bani Al-Harith, of Bani Saaedah, of Bani Aws and of Bani Belanah are Jews like the others.

As far as the Christians are concerned

1. The Prophet honored the Christians of Najran from Yemen who visited him in his own mosque in Madina. The Christians prayed according to Christian fashion inside the mosque, and the Prophet and his followers prayed in Muslim tradition.
2. The Prophet respected the autonomy of the Christian churches. The nomination and the appointment of bishops and priests was left to the Christian community itself.
3. Prophet Muhammad promoted cooperation between Muslims and Christians in the political arena as well. The prophet selected a non-Muslim and delegated him as his ambassador to Negus, the king of Ethiopia. The name of that ambassador was 'Amr-ibn-Umaiyyah-ad-Damri.
4. During the days of the Prophet, there were two super powers, the Persians and the Romans. The Romans adopted Christianity while the Persians adopted atheist beliefs. Those two super powers were at war with each other. During that period, Muslims were a small minority in the Arabian Peninsula. They prayed to Almighty God that the Romans would win the war against the Atheistic forces. The feelings and the beliefs of the Muslims were based on the fact that the Romans were part of the People of the Book. (See Qur'an [30: 1-7](#))
5. The Prophet sent a message to the Monks of Saint Catherine in Mount Sinai. The English translation of that document is as follows:

This is a message written by Muhammad Ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, far and near, we are behind them. Verily, I defend them by myself, the servants, the helpers, and my followers, because Christians are citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them. No compulsion is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be changed from their jobs, nor their monks from their monasteries. No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses. Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them. If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, this is not to take place without her own wish. She is not to be prevented from going to her church to pray. Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their covenants. No one of the nation is to disobey this covenant till the Day of Judgement and the end of the world.

During the Days of 'Umar

1. The Second Caliph (religious leader of Muslim people) 'Umar, asked his Governor in Syria to recruit a Greek person who could put the accounts of their revenues in order. He also appointed a Christian to head his Administration.

2. 'Umar respectfully declined to pray inside the church of Resurrection in Jerusalem, but he did pray outside. He was concerned that his followers would take it over from the Christians, if he prayed inside.
3. Muslims were given the key of the Church of Basilica in Jerusalem during the days of the Caliph 'Umar. The Muslims are still taking care of it today.
4. During the time of Caliph 'Umar certain Muslims had taken a piece of land belonging to a Jew. They constructed a mosque on it. 'Umar ordered the demolition of the mosque and the restoration of the land to the Jew.
5. When Jerusalem was submitted to Caliph 'Umar, an agreement was made between 'Umar and the local Christians. The agreement goes as follows:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate! This is the security which grants to the people of Elia. He grants to all, whether sick or sound, security for their lives, their possessions, their churches and their crosses, and for all that concerns their religion. Their churches shall not be changed into dwelling places, nor destroyed, neither shall they nor their appurtenances be in anyway diminished, nor the crosses of the inhabitants nor aught of their possessions, nor shall any constraints be put upon them in the matter of their faith, nor shall any one of them be harmed.

During the Umayyads and Abbasids

1. Non-Muslims were holding the rank of Political, Ministers, Administrative positions and membership in Executive Councils. Non-Muslims were given judicial autonomy, not only for personal status, but for all affairs of their life: Civil, penal and others. During the Abbasid Caliphs, Christian Patriarchs and Jewish Hakhams (Rabbis) held highest positions in the Islamic state. They held the position of advisors in the cabinet of the Caliph himself.
2. When the Muslim army reached the valley of the Jordan and Abu Ubaydah pitched his camp at Fihl, the Christian inhabitants of the country wrote to the Arabs, saying:

O Muslims, we prefer you to the Byzantine though they are of our faith, because you keep better faith with us and are more merciful to us and refrain from doing us injustice and your rule over us is better than theirs, for they have robbed us of our goods and our homes.

The people of Emessa closed the gates of their city against the army of Heraclius and told the Muslims that they preferred Muslim government and justice to the injustice and oppression of the Greeks.

3. Mu'awiyah (661-680) employed Christians very heavily in his service, and the other members of the reigning house followed his example. Christians frequently held high posts at court.
4. During the days of 'Umar Ibn 'Abd-al-'Aziz (an Umayyad Caliph) some Muslims took a church to enlarge the Grand Mosque of Damascus (Al-Masjid Al-Umawee). Caliph 'Umar Ibn 'Abd-al-Aziz ordered the demolition of that part of the mosque and to restore the church. However, the Christians opted for a monetary settlement.
5. Non-Muslims were given the citizenship of the Muslim country in which they lived including the right to vote for the election of the Muslim state. However, they were exempted from being drafted in the Muslim army.
6. During the days of Haroon Al-Rashid, Dr. Gabriel, the personal physician of the caliph Haroon al-Rashid, was a Nestorian Christian.

Later History

Christians and Jews lived peacefully with Muslims. Non-Muslims flourished among Muslims. None were killed in the name of Islam. The mere presence of a large number of Christians and Jews in the Muslim world is a sign of the tolerance of Muslims to the non-Muslims. Jews fled from Spain during the Inquisition, and Muslims welcomed them in their lands. They protected them and helped them to establish themselves and they indeed flourished.

During the occupation of the Middle East by the crusaders, the local Christians were treated as second class citizens by their European brethren. They could not tolerate the insults and humiliation. Therefore, they helped the Muslims rid themselves of the crusaders from that area, mainly Jerusalem and Palestine. Salah Uddin (Saladdin) was able to liberate Jerusalem from the occupation of the crusaders. He was kind to the knights and their soldiers. He treated them generously, especially those who were knights. He considered them as political leaders who should be treated with honor and dignity. They appreciated his kindness, generosity, and fair treatment. Some of them later accepted Islam.

Michael the Elder, Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch, writing in the latter half of the twelfth century, approved the actions of his co-religionists. He saw the finger of God in the Arab conquest even after the Eastern churches experienced five centuries of Muslim rule.

Contemporary Treatment of Non-Muslims

Non-Muslims flourished in the Muslim world in all aspects of life even after the abolition of colonialism. Anywhere a person goes in both the Arab world and the non-Arab Muslim world, he will see Christians and Jews. They have lived freely in the Muslim community and have thrived in the fields of religion, education, economics, politics, health, industry, farming, housing, banking, festivities, and social services.

In several Muslim countries like Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Algeria or Sudan, etc. there are a large number of Christians in the highest political levels of the government.

Today there are forces that seem to be propelling a clash of civilizations, but let us build a bridge of understanding and mutual respect through the exploration of commonalities among all civilizations.

Al-Andalus: Dhimmis.

In the 8th century, Christian Hispania underwent a radical change with the demise of Visigothic rule. A new religion, Islam, accompanied by new languages (Arabic, and Berber dialects) and different cultures (e.g. different foods, clothes, buildings), implanted itself on an already rich and varied soil. The combination produced a complex social mix as different groups intermingled, intermarried, were assimilated or resisted assimilation.

The new arrivals, made up primarily of Berber soldiers under their Arab leaders, constituted a small minority of the whole population of the peninsula. The land they occupied they called al-Andalus, a geographical area that covered almost all the Iberian Peninsula in the 8th century but which by the mid-13th century had been whittled back to a slice along the south coast.

The early years of occupation were politically unstable with internal rivalries among the Moors (the name generally applied to the newcomers, irrespective of ethnic origin), and a large majority of Christians and smaller Jewish communities adjusting themselves to their presence.

One adjustment both communities were spared: changing their religion. Both Christians and Jews could convert, if they wished, but the victorious Muslims did not force either group to do so since according to

Islamic law they were *dhimmis*, i.e. they enjoyed protection because they were *Ahl al-Kitab*, “Peoples of the Book” whose faith was founded on revelation. (The “Book” was the Bible, a partial and incomplete revelation of God’s word, which was fully disclosed in the Qur’an.)

This protection afforded to Christians and Jews was a religious obligation founded on *sharia*, or traditional Islamic law, and not subject to the whims of politics, at least in theory.

Although protected, the *dhimmis* were nevertheless the lowest on the Andalusí hierarchical totem pole, which was headed by Arabs, followed by Berbers and *Muwallads* (Christian converts to Islam). In other words, they were second class citizens, although some individuals did enjoy social and even political success (see below).

Christians and Jews were free to follow their own traditions and laws in religion and related matters such as marriage and divorce. But they were prohibited from building new churches or synagogues (or repairing those already built), and public displays of faith –such as processions or bell ringing— proselytising, insulting Muhammad or openly refuting Islam were not allowed. And any disagreements between *dhimmis* and Muslims would be settled according to Islamic laws.

Many of these restrictions were evidently not strictly imposed. In the 9th century, for example, the writings of an eminent Christian cleric, Eulogius, refer to some churches built in and around Córdoba after the Muslim conquest. He also alludes to the curses of Muslims living near churches in reaction to the ringing of bells.

Neither Christian nor Jewish males could marry Muslim women, to avoid the probable conversion of the wife to her husband’s faith (children would also follow their father’s religion). Nor were Christians and Jews permitted to own Muslim slaves or exercise authority over Muslims.

Nevertheless, forbidding authority over Muslims does not appear to have been uniformly imposed, since there are documented instances of Christians and especially Jews occupying positions of substantial influence and power in the Umayyad and *Taifa*** courts as secretaries, translators, emissaries, doctors, tax collectors etc., e.g. the Christian bishop, Recesmund, or the Jew, Hasdai ibn Shaprut, both of whom exercised many offices for Abd al-Rahman III in the 10th century.

The Umayyads were a dynasty that ruled al-Andalus from Córdoba from 756-1031. The *taifas* (1030s to 1086) were small states which sprang up after the fall of Córdoba in 1031

Amongst the many Jewish *dhimmis* who rose to prominence in the *taifa* kingdoms, the most notable is Samuel ibn Naghrila (or Nagrela, 993-1055). Born in Córdoba, he fled to Granada in 1013, just as the caliphate of Córdoba was imploding.

A consummate politician, scholar and poet, Naghrila navigated his way to power during the turbulent years when Granada became an independent *taifa*. From 1038 –the year that the *taifa* of Granada was consolidated– until 1056 –the year of his death–Naghrila was the de facto chief minister of the kingdom. He was also an accomplished soldier, even commanding the Muslim army of Granada into battle.

His son, Joseph, inherited his father’s position but both, in a quick turn of fortune, died violently in a pogrom in which some 4,000 (the number varies) Jews perished. The reason? The Jews had acquired too much influence and power over Muslims, contrary to Islamic law. Previous attacks on Jewish quarters (*juderias*) took place in Córdoba in 1013 and in Zaragoza in 1039. These are telling examples of the volatile situation of the *dhimmis*, and a reminder of their inferiority and dependence on Muslim tolerance for their welfare.

Muslim tolerance of Christian and Jews was not simply a matter of recognising the relationship of Christianity and Judaism to Islam, it also obeyed practical considerations.

Non-Muslims living in Islamic lands were subject to certain taxes, e.g the *kharaj* (basically permission to cultivate their lands) and the *jizya* (a poll tax); these provided the state with an important source of revenues. For the *dhimmi*s, on the other hand, freedom from such taxes would be an incentive to adopt the new faith.

Christian converts to Islam (i.e. the *Muwallads*) included prominent nobles, whose family members, dependents, slaves etc. also followed suit. In addition, other factors such as job opportunities, especially within governmental bureaucracy, helped to favour conversion to Islam.

This applied primarily to the cities or larger towns where most of the important decisions were made. By virtue of isolation, rural areas contained a substantial number of Christians, even a majority according to the observation made by the Arab geographer, Ibn Hawqal, on a visit to al-Andalus in 948.

Although demographic statistics for early times are notoriously unreliable and numbers vary widely, it appears that the percentage of Christian *dhimmi*s living in al-Andalus was still fairly high as late as the 11th century, as much perhaps as 20%. The percentage of *dhimmi*s was reduced radically during the rule of the fundamentalist Almoravids (1086-1145) and the even more zealous Almohads (1146-1212). Persecution, especially by the Almohads, resulted in a mass exodus of *dhimmi*s to Christian lands, many of whom settled in Toledo.