

# Islam, Democracy and Civil Society\*

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What is the relationship between Islam, democracy, and civil society? This is the question which supplies the topic of this essay. Its purpose, more particularly, is to explore the place of Islam in the modern world—a world which contemporary writers increasingly try to understand by invoking the notions of democracy and civil society. But the occasion for this exploration has a more precise origin still. The issue of the place of Islam in the modern world is raised, more often than not, by writers and commentators for whom Islam is, above all, a danger. In geo-political terms, it is a danger to the West; in world-historical terms, it is a danger to modernity; and in philosophical terms it is a danger to democracy. For many, then, Islam stands in a relationship of tension with—if not complete antagonism to—democracy and modernity. It is a religion, and a philosophy, which is a throwback to the middle ages, and an obstacle to human progress.<sup>1</sup> It is, in the end, incompatible with any kind of liberal political order.

The concern of this essay is to argue that Islam is not the threat it is taken to be. But to understand why, it is necessary to acquire a surer grasp of the nature of democracy, of the

relationship between democracy and civil society, and of the place of religion in the modern world. Only an understanding of these matters will allow us to appreciate the moral worth of Islam, and to see why it might be a source of strength rather than a danger.

None of this is to suggest, however, that there are no problems associated with the working of Islam or, indeed, any religion in the modern world. A related task of this paper, therefore, is to reflect on these difficulties, and to try to understand to what extent they stem from the nature of faith, or of religion, or certain religious faiths; and to what extent they have their roots in the nature of modern society, and liberal democratic society in particular.

## Civil society

The exploration of these questions is best begun with an investigation into the nature of civil society. This term is now very much in vogue, though interpretations of its meaning vary considerably. A part of the reason for this is that the adjective, “civil”, adds a content to the term which is anything but evident from the meaning of the word. What kind of a society is a “civil” society, and what makes it different from society? One answer is, quite sim-

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ply, nothing. Civil society is, straightforwardly, society; and there is much to commend in this answer, since it is, broadly, right.

Yet this in itself will not advance matters very far since what remains unclear is what, precisely, is a society. So it is with this question that we must begin. A part of the answer is to say that a society is a form of association made up of people who belong to different communities or associations which are geographically contiguous. The boundaries of a society are not always easy to specify, since the contiguity of societies makes it hard to say why one society has been left and another entered. Nonetheless, distinctions or boundaries can, to some extent, be drawn. Since all societies are governed by law, the move from one legal jurisdiction is, to some extent, a move from one society to another. This understanding has to be qualified, however, by the recognition that law is not always confined by geographical boundaries. For one thing, people moving from one region to another may still find themselves subject to laws whose long arms reach even into other countries. Tourists, businessmen, and 'visiting scholars' remain subject to the laws of their home countries-especially to their tax laws. In the Middle Ages, the merchant law established codes of conduct and mechanisms of dispute resolution which bound traders who wandered across Europe-almost wherever they might be. And for another thing, an important dimension of law deals precisely with the fact that people cross boundaries into different legal jurisdictions all the time; much of law is inter-jurisdictional.

Yet this fact itself may help to get us a little closer to an account of what is a society. For a society surely exists when there is some established set of customs or conventions or legal arrangements specifying how the laws apply to persons whether they stay put or move from one jurisdiction to another within

the greater realm. On this understanding, there was not (as much of) a society among the different highland peoples of New Guinea in the nineteenth century since they lived in legal isolation from one another, even if they were aware of one another's existence. There was, however, a society in Medieval Spain, in which Jews, Muslims, and Christians co-existed under elaborate legal arrangements specifying the rights and obligations individuals had within their own religious communities, and as outsiders within the others.

It may be unwise to seek any greater precision than this in accounting for what is a society. For the moment at least, then, I will take a society to be a region of contiguous jurisdictions related by law. Societies can be distinguished from one another by jurisdictional separateness. This in itself may be a matter of degree, since some borders or boundaries are more porous than others. One particularly clear way in which societies may be distinguished is by their *political* separation. Thus we might talk of America and Mexico, or France and Germany as different societies. Yet the distinction cannot be drawn equally sharply, since France and Germany belong to the European Union whose laws permitting the free movement of people across borders have lessened the significance of the political borders in distinguishing the two societies. The United States and Mexico are, perhaps, more clearly distinguishable as separate societies-although the North America Free Trade Agreement may, eventually, have a profound impact on the nature of this separateness.

This account of the notion of a society is not an especially comprehensive one. In particular, it says nothing about the cultural dimension of society. This, clearly, would add some important complications to the picture. For one thing, many political borders cut through regions in which peoples immediately on either side of the (new) boundaries have

more in common with their neighbours than with their countrymen. The Kashmiris may feel more in common with each other than with their fellow Indians or with their fellow Pakistanis. And along the much-shifted borders of France and Germany live peoples who once saw themselves not as members of French or German society but as peoples of particular local regions. For the moment, however, I will ignore this complication to the description of society since it does not affect the argument to be presented here.

Yet something important is being said when the adjective "civil" is invoked to describe or qualify "society". According to Leszek Kolakowski, "civil" society is a whole mass of conflictive individual and group aspirations, empirical daily life with all its conflicts and struggles, the realm of private desires and private endeavours.<sup>2</sup> It is thus a complex association of individuals, joined together in relations shaped by personal interest, economic interdependence, and legal and customary rules. Within such an association would be found persons who associate with one another for friendship, or to pursue common goals, or to exchange goods and ideas. One would find, churches, clubs, universities, businesses, and various bodies and practices which make up the institution of law. More importantly still, excluded from this realm are certain kinds of political relations: those which make up that entity called the state.

Civil society means society as distinguished from the state. This is not to say that the two are always separate in fact; the distinction is a conceptual distinction more than it is an empirical one. But it is important nonetheless. And since the state is a relative modern phenomenon, whose emergence may be traced back no earlier than sixteenth century Europe, the term civil society identifies a distinctively modern form of society.

The notion of civil society also embodies another idea which is of singular importance: the idea of freedom. For civil society is a realm of freedom; but a freedom of a certain kind. Though this conception of freedom is not easily articulated, it is perhaps most readily grasped by appreciating what it is that Karl Marx, and Marxism in general, found so unsatisfactory about it.

Karl Marx was fundamentally a Rousseauian in social philosophy—one who reacted against the *Philosophy of Right* of Hegel to become a critic of civil society. Civil society ("bürgerliche Gesellschaft") in Marx's conception was bourgeois society-market society; and the relations which dominated it were relations of self-interest and economic calculation. In this society, he argued, the one thing which could never be found was human freedom. Indeed, this form of society was nothing if not destructive of that freedom. In turning all human relations into mere money relations it would never allow men to attain the autonomy in which real freedom would consist. Civil society-capitalism—would sustain only heteronomy in a world of class conflict.

What one would find in such a society, Marx argued, was simply the satisfaction of particular, private interests—at the expense of other particular interests. But, unlike Hegel, Marx rejected as any sort of a solution an attempt at the reconciliation of interests. Hegel thought that the state would turn out to embody the general interest, reconciling the particular interests found in the family and civil society. For Marx, however, only the abolition of particularity was an acceptable solution. The state, he argued, would turn out to be nothing more than the agent of particular interests masquerading as the embodiment of the general interest. Politics in such circumstances is merely a conflict among particular concerns. The political rights or freedoms

sought by those who would reform the state could not, in the end, bring freedom because "mere" political emancipation-the making of one's political attributes independent of the features of one's civil life (wealth, birth, religion) -was an illusory emancipation: "the state can free itself from a restriction without man being really free from this restriction".<sup>3</sup> Not only was political emancipation illusory, but it brought about a fundamental division in human life:

*"Where the political state has attained its free development, man-not only in thought, in consciousness, but in reality, in life-leads a twofold life, a heavenly and an earthly life: life in the political community, in which he considers himself a communal being, and life in civil society, in which he acts as a private individual, regards other men as a means,, degrades himself into a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers."*<sup>4</sup>

Civil society was thus an expression of man's separation from his community and from his real self: an expression of his alienation. The only bond which holds men together in civil society, Marx argued, "is natural necessity, need and private interest, the preservation of their property and their egoistic selves."<sup>5</sup>

Yet this view, at once, overestimates the possibility of human freedom, and underestimates (and underappreciates) the freedom found in civil society. Indeed it misunderstands civil society altogether. While Marx was right to see civil society as the realm of particularity, he was quite wrong to think this could ever be abolished, or to imagine that the conflictless utopia of postcivil society was anything but a grotesque illusion. Any plausible notion of freedom must offer an account of how conflict and difference can be accommodated -for they surely cannot be overcome.

The freedom embodied in civil society is

the freedom that allows human beings to live together in spite of their differences and in spite of the conflicts which arise from their varying interests, temperament, and beliefs. And this understanding of freedom is what makes civil society a notably modern idea, for at its core is a recognition that in human society, nowadays, people worship different god, and that this fact has to be accommodated by legal and political institutions if humans are to stand any chance of flourishing.

This last point also reveals another important feature of civil society-one whose salience is unappreciated (if recognized at all) by Marx's analysis. Civil society is peopled not by isolated or separate individuals but by associations or communities. Civil society is market society; but it is not *just* market society. The associations within it include not only businesses but also, more importantly, associations to which people have attachments rooted less in their economic concerns than in their emotional attachments and moral commitments and so, in their identities. The most important associations or communities, here, are religious ones.

These associations are important because it is through them that people pursue the goals that give *meaning* to their lives. Indeed, it is through them that they seek understanding of what has value and of how they should seek it. It is through such associations that people seek understanding of their place in the world. For thinkers such as Marx and his followers, such attachments, particularly when they had a religious character, were an excrescence, revealing the absence of real human freedom in the world of particularities that was precommunist society. Human beings needed liberation from such attachments. The irony is that the philosophy which decried man's alienation and isolation in civil society failed completely to appreciate that it was precisely these particular attachments in civil society that people were

made human; it was here that they were "civilised.

### Democracy

Yet human beings are not only social creatures; they are also political ones. In Aristotle's world-the world of the city-states of ancient Greece-the social and the political order were one and the same. Community was political community; and diversity was not to be found, or welcomed, within the polis.<sup>(6)</sup> In the modern world, however, civil society is a realm of many associations, and one in which different gods are worshipped in different ways. The political problem under these circumstances is to work out how this is possible. It is no longer a problem of how to preserve unity; for such unity does not exist. It is a problem of how to make possible-and preserve-freedom: the freedom to live, and worship, differently.

What political institutions, then; are appropriate for such a condition? While it is tempting to reply at once, democratic institutions, this answer is not self-evidently the right one. For one thing, not all circumstances may be conducive to democracy, since democracy is also a practice which has to be learned and may be a tradition which is unfamiliar or foreign to some peoples. But, more importantly, there are many kinds of models of democracy: and anyone advocating democracy must specify the type.

All this is to say that explaining what kinds of political institutions are suitable for a modern society-for civil society-will involve a more complex response. To begin this response it is necessary to turn again to the question of civil society, and to ask what it is about civil society that is the proper object of political concern. If civil society is a realm of many communities or associations, each pursuing its understanding of the good life (or, in the case

of some, in search of such understanding), what matters most is the preservation of the freedom each needs to get on with the business of life. Yet the problem is that co-existence is no easy matter, since differences here will not simply be matters of taste but will raise questions about what is right, and how one should live. What is to be done?

Broadly speaking, two kinds of solutions have generally been proposed. One has been to say that the question of how one should live should be settled (at least to the extent of specifying what is *not* permissible) and the answer then imposed (gently, if possible) on all. Another has suggested that any solution to the problem of coexistence would seek no more than a *modus vivendi*, which did not attempt to solve the problem of how one should (or (should not) live, but looked to provide a framework of meta-norms.<sup>7</sup> by which different ways could co-exist. The problem with the first solution is that it does not take seriously the fact that people disagree and will resist attempts to impose beliefs or practices upon them. This solution requires the use of power-the oppressive use of state power, to be precise.<sup>8</sup>

The second answer, however, is very conscious of the fact that disagreement is inevitable-and, possibly, ineradicable and wary of the use of state power to enforce was will not be accepted. This is the answer which is appropriate for modern, civil society.<sup>9</sup> What is needed are political institutions which will tolerate the diversity of communities, associations, and traditions which are to be found in civil society. This answer is a political philosophy most commonly labelled liberalism.

Yet so far all that has been said specifies only the moral principle which should underpin the political institutions which govern civil society. Nothing has been said about what kinds of institutions these should be. Liberals

generally are concerned to ensure that the major institutions which deal with differences among people -law and government-do not unduly favour any particular way of life. However, even if this point is accepted in principle, the problem is that, once institutions are in place, those who operate them can often manipulate them to their advantage. For this reason, it is wise to devise or put in place institutions which make it difficult for power to be concentrated. A good political order is therefore one in which power does not exist unopposed.

The ways in which power might be kept checked are many. In medieval Europe kings were bound in complex systems of reciprocal obligations to feudal lords, who in turn owed duties of their own to the people who lived on their lands. In the sultanates of pre-colonial Malaya, the activities of the Rajas were constrained by the understandings of the duties of ruler to subject woven through Malay political culture.<sup>10</sup> And in England, monarchical rule became more and more carefully circumscribed as Parliament arose, and grew to dominance, out of the late middle ages.

In the modern world, one very important political tradition whose point is to institutionalise the separation of powers is the tradition of democracy. Modern democracy has grown out of the political traditions which were transformed over the past three centuries by the emergence of industrial commercial society in Europe. Theoretical expression was given to this development most powerfully by the American thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though particular mention has to be made of the exceptional contribution of Tocqueville in his own analysis of American society. What most needs remarking on, here, is that the understanding of democracy which came to light in this time did not see democracy as majoritarianism, or as embodying the will of the people (though this

thought did enter into some conceptions of democratic government). Democracy was conceived as a system of government in which there was, above all, freedom to oppose. Democratic governments were not free to do as they pleased but were open to challenge. A democracy was a regime, and a regime suited, most importantly, to an open society in which power was checked by other powers, and also by the capacity of nongovernmental institutions to examine and criticize the instruments of rule, and the rulers themselves. In a phrase, democracy, in its modern incarnation, presupposed freedom under law, It presupposed civil society.

### Religion

The question it is now open for us to consider is, what is the place of religion in such a society? This is an important question in part because the traditions of liberalism and democracy described thus far are features of a modernity which has distinctly secular character. Liberal democracy, the child of European civil society, looks to be secular creed which can have no place for religion-unless it be a place of confinement and subordination.

Yet this is not the case. Indeed, it cannot be the case; even though the modern world is, in some important ways, thoroughly secularised. We need to understand how the world has indeed become more secular; but we need also to appreciate why, and how, religion has an important place in modern civil society.

The secular nature of modernity is most in evidence in the character of public discourse, not only in international society but within the public arenas of most societies. This reflects not only the dominance of science in discussions of the natural world, but also its domination in the world of human society. The languages of economics, sociology, and management have no need of any appeal to provi-

dence or divine intervention to account for the workings of human society, or to justify public action. Charles Larmore has suggested that this secularization is this the consequence of the entrenchment of the monotheistic traditions of Judeo-Christianity, which conceives of God as a single, transcendent entity. A transcendent God, he argues, has no place in explanations of the order of nature or the course of history. "Once we have resolved to let God be God, we can no longer use God for our own cognitive ends."<sup>11</sup> God is not dead; but we don't seem to need him-or want him-for most of what we do.

The secularization of the world in this sense is not only evident but also, in many ways, advantageous (though not strictly necessary, as I will explain presently). In a world in which different gods are worshipped, but in which adherents of different faiths interact in a global arena, anything but a secular public realm could be a disaster. Social intercourse with those who differ from us in profound ways requires that we prescind from our deepest commitments. Otherwise, the most likely outcome is conflict.

Yet none of this means that religion has no place in modern society-or that that can only be a matter of private individual commitment. For one thing, it ought to be noted that, even within the secularizing tendency of modernity, and the disenchantment of the world which has seen the emergence of Weber's legal-rational mode of domination, the sacred has a powerful grip on human sensibilities. In part this is reflected in the persistence of faith, and the advance of religious organizations. But it is more powerfully evident in the human capacity to turn persons and objects into sacred entities: to hallow what was once devoid of meaning. So millions mourned not only the death of an Iranian cleric, and the passing of a Catholic nun, but also the demise of a fathless princess.

Religion will have a powerful place for as long as this sensibility is there, for there will be a demand for means of giving it expression. And while some will decry this fact as evidence of the persistence of the irrational in human activity, that will make no difference.

This last observation, however, brings us to a more important point. Reason alone is not going to be the guide for human beings in all things-however much some might think that it ought to be.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it cannot be; for unaided reason cannot teach us anything substantive about value or morality-about how to live. This, in spite of the best efforts of some of the great philosophers of the Enlightenment, and their modern successors, to generate a rationalist ethics. But this leaves us with the problem of how to pursue moral questions-how to think morally-if reason is not enough. This is a problem which confronts modernity, and which has to be faced. Any plausible response has to reject two preferred solutions. The first is in the suggestion that we look to *nature* to discover what it is that can properly be the object of value, and can form the foundation of a universally acceptable understanding of good conduct. The problem with this solution is that it is the fact that naturalism generates disagreement rather than consensus. The second is the empty promise offered by postmodernism, which, as Larmore points out, "ends up confusing the rejection of philosophical rationalism with the abandonment of reason itself."<sup>13</sup>

If reason alone is not enough, and the extremes of naturalism and postmodernism offer no solution, upon what resources can we draw to address our fundamental concerns in matters of value? One answer worth considering is that we turn to tradition.<sup>14</sup> This is, in fact, what we do depend upon. We do not try to generate moral judgements or solutions out of nothing, but begin with starting points given by our own contexts-by our traditions.

These traditions embody our (various and diverse) understandings of what has aesthetic and moral worth; of what is worth aspiring to and what is taboo; of what is sacred and what is profane. And it is here that the place of religion is to be found.

All of us live within, and are guided by, particular traditions. These vary from culture to culture, from community to community, though there is often some overlap, our traditions tell us what is right, and what has value; and even when we disagree with their injunctions we start from those injunctions themselves. What has also to be appreciated, however, is the extent to which religion has shaped and continues to shape the traditions which dominate modern society. Religion has, in fact, performed two important functions.

First, it has been a source of substantive judgements on matters of value. Religious teaching is, for many, the source of understanding of what is worthy, and what is right. The religious imagination has been of critical importance in our efforts to understand and appreciate what is good. As economists might put it, religion generates moral capital.

Second, religion, in this way, has played an important role in constructing the understandings which have socialised individuals. Once again, we can see this if we reflect on Marx's misunderstandings in his analysis of "The Jewish Question". For him, religion was alienating, for it kept human beings from becoming truly human; but the conception of the human in Marx's thought is only an abstraction devoid of substantive content. And content is particular, not universal. Religions everywhere are human creations which have responded to the circumstances and needs of particular peoples. Even when they have attempted to universalise human experience, they have responded to the particular experiences of the communities they served.

If these two points are correct, then religion has an important place in civil society. This is not because it shapes the character of civil society directly, but because within the communities which comprise it is the religious imagination to which people will turn to answer the most important questions that confront them.

This brings us immediately, however, to a more pressing political question: what is, and should be, the political place of religion in civil society, and democratic civil society in particular. More precisely, what place should be accorded, in all of this, to Islam.

### Islam

There are two views about the place of religion in modern society which ought to be rejected. Both come out of the European Enlightenment. The first suggests that religion ought to be repudiated as irrational. Even if religious persecution is not to be condoned, religion should be scorned and its demise hastened. The second suggests that religion should be recognized as something important to some people, and therefore tolerated within tightly defined limits. This is one kind of liberal view which asserts that religious faith and practice is acceptable provided it is not inconsistent with more fundamentally important commitments a good society should have to upholding individual autonomy. Religious communities should be required to conform to these values, and permitted to practice within the bounds that these values demarcate.<sup>15</sup>

The first view should be rejected partly because it fails to recognize the centrality of religious faith and experience to so much of human society. But it is also of doubtful value because it says nothing about what might be put in its place. The cognitive and the socialising roles played by religion are not considered.



The second view, however, is more difficult to deal with. It does not seek to eliminate religion but to liberalize it. What is wrong with this? To be sure, adherents of particular religious faiths may not wish it; but that in itself is not an argument, since those who wish to liberalise illiberal practices think it would be a good thing, whether or not it is welcomed. The problem, however, is that this inclination is inconsistent with a proper understanding of the nature of civil society.

Civil society, as it has been described here, is a realm of diversity and difference. It is marked less by unity than by contestation and disagreement-albeit a form of contestation which is peaceful. It is, in many ways, a notably modern idea; for it is a feature of a world in which people not only worship different Gods but also do so in remarkable propinquity. What matters for the preservation (and flourishing) of such a realm is that it not be brought under control. Not even under liberal control. Civil society has to remain a realm of mutual toleration in which no particular tradition assumes the authority to shape the others. And this means that religion-even religion which does not accept this principle-has to be free.

It is at this point, however, that objections, arise, and in particular objections which invoke the spectre of Islam. If religion is not kept in check it will devour civil society. And Islam, more than any other, the argument goes, is the likely predator. What needs to be considered now, then, is why this concern should be repudiated, particularly with respect to Islam.

It should be conceded at the outset, however, that religion can be a powerful and dangerous force in society. One of the most important reasons why this is so is that religion, by its nature, seeks and attracts followers. Those who are capable of mobilizing people in large

numbers have great power in their hands. For this reason, rulers have generally sought to ally themselves with, or control, the religious institutions of their societies. Equally, religious leaders have often been tempted to use the power conferred by their authority to extend their influence into politics-sometimes even to take political power.

But while religion can become a political force, two things ought to be noted before any response to this fact is considered. The first is that this is no worse than any other group possessing an ideology coming to power. The danger is posed by the concentration, or usurpation, of power, and by the inclination of its possessors to use it. The second is that it is important to consider what might be the alternative to allowing religion to emerge as a political force. If the alternative is to concentrate political authority in the hands of a power great enough to keep all, including religion, in awe, the cure might be worse than the potential disease.

Indeed, in some respects, a society with strong religious institutions is to be preferred if what this means is that the power of the state is thereby checked. While it is right to be wary of the power religious authority might exert tyrannically if allowed, it bears noting that the greatest tyrannies in this century were exerted by the godless states of communism, and by Germany under the influence Nazi doctrines of religious hatred. And it is worth remembering that religion provided not only a source of sanctuary in many of these societies, but also the source of resistance (the Polish Catholic church in the 1980s, for example).

In general, it may be a good thing if there exists a tension within society between church (or mosque) and state -provided that neither can clearly take the upper hand, or manipulate the other to its own ends. The greater the dispersal of power the better. This is, fundamen-

tally, what the theory of pluralist democracy advocates: institutional arrangements in which the existence of a diversity of powers or authorities operates to constrain any one power from assuming a position of such pre-eminence that tyranny becomes a possibility.

Yet does this also hold for Islam, or is it a religion whose doctrines or character are such that it cannot coexist with any other power, and which is therefore suppressed if it gathers any kind of strength which might translate into political activity? Some have argued that the nature of Islam's traditions make it unlikely to tolerate such a political order. After all, the argument goes, Islam does not recognize any separation between mosque and state, or the notion of a secular authority. Could such a religious tradition be anything but a threat to a democratic order? And could it possibly embrace democratic traditions if it were in a position of dominance?

In fact, Islam is not the problem it is often presented to be, even, though it is true that there have been Muslim tyrants-as many, perhaps, as there have been Christian, or Hindu, or secular ones. Islam is not at odds with democracy or with civil society, or modernity. The key to understanding this is appreciating that Islam recognizes that a religion cannot embrace the whole of society for as long as there are unbelievers. It has therefore, from the outset, concerned itself with the question of the treatment of those who dissent from its teachings.

The earliest Muslim community or *ummah* had its origins in the seventh century as a persecuted minority in Mecca. As is well-known, Muhammed and his followers eventually left Mecca for Yathrib, or what is today Medina, in order to establish a community of the faithful. However, when the success of Muhammed's mission saw the expansion of the Islamic community, it was itself forced to

address the question of how to deal with the diverse people, and what forms of diversity to accept in its midst. Its response was to develop a political tradition which was remarkable for its tolerance of non-Muslim communities.

Islam today, particularly in the west, conjures up images of fanaticism and intolerance. Yet much of its history is at odds with this impression. In the eighth and ninth centuries the Byzantine empire crumbled under the force of Islamic expansion, and Muslim armies eventually overran the Persian empire before also taking the regions of Syria, Iraq, North Africa, southern Europe and Spain. These areas, many of which were already subjugated to foreign rulers (particularly in Byzantine and Persian territories), were re-subjugated to Islamic ones. Yet Islamic vision, for the most part, proved more reasonable and tolerant, and more willing to grant its subject populations a measure of local autonomy-with lower rates of taxation. To Jews and Christians it accorded greater toleration than they had been accorded hitherto. Indeed, the local Christian churches had even aided the invading Muslim armies to escape the persecution for "heresy" they had endured at the hands of the "foreign" Christian orthodoxy.<sup>16</sup> The Muslim rulers left existing governmental institutions intact, and left religious communities free to govern their own internal affairs according to their own faiths. To be sure, these rulers sought to eliminate idolatry and paganism, and regarded Islam as the one true religion. But the Islamic ideal demanded that others be invited-persuaded-to convert, not forced. If they refused, they were to be left in peace. This was most notably so in Jerusalem, which had been captured by Muslim armies in 638. Under Muslim rule not only were Christian churches left unharmed, but Jews, long banned from the city by Christian rulers, were allowed to return-ushering in several centuries of peaceful coexistence, brought to an end only

by the Crusades.

The point of noting all this, however, is not to insist that Islam's history is stainless, or that those of its rivals are bloody. Like any tradition with a history spanning centuries, it has had its periods of stagnation as well as its periods of flowering. And those traditions have varied from the harshly austere, to the poetic mysticism of Sufism. But the point here is simply to make clear that there is no inconsistency between Islam and traditions of toleration and peaceful coexistence. Within Islam's traditions, as various scholars have argued, we find not only the practice of toleration but also the concepts which give it theoretical expression: concepts of opposition and disagreement, consensus and consultation, and freedom of thought and expression.

Like that of any doctrine, Islam's humanity and capacity for toleration depends on questions of interpretation. In the Qu'ran the injunction to struggle to defend Islam (jihad) is capable of many interpretations-but not all consistent with the use of armed force to persecute non-believers. In the same way, the biblical injunction to "compel them (non-Christians) to come in" to the Christian fold (Luke, XIV, 23) was capable of being interpreted by St Augustine as sanctioning righteous persecution even though Pierre Bayle would maintain that "compel" could only mean "persuade".

Given its nature and traditions, then, there is nothing in Islam that should give us cause for concern if our interest is in the flourishing of a democratic civil society marked by diversity. This is not to say that Islamic political movements have not, or will never, pose any danger. For any political movement can be dangerous. But it is to say that Islam as a creed is not the problem, and may even hold within it some of the resources that supply a solution. Most important among these resources is the

tradition of toleration; but not less significant may be the fact that, in the end, it is also distrustful of nationalism.

If all this is true, the real question which ought to be addressed is not so much the problem of reconciling Islam with modern democracy and civil society as the problem of what model of democracy is most suited to modernity. If the considerations presented in this paper are sound, what should give us most concern is the emergence of models of democratic governance which seeks to extend the power of democratic authority into supranational institutions, ordered in hierarchical fashion.<sup>17</sup> If democratic institutions are to work to preserve the diverse order of civil society, they will have to look away from models of centralization towards those traditions which are ready to embrace norms of toleration. In this regard, however, the threat comes not from Islam, even though it may at times come from those to misuse its name.

#### NOTES

1. For examples of articles wary of Islam, see the list offered by John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.viii. (Esposito's book, it should be made clear, is sympathetic to Islam.)

2. "The Myth of Human Self-Identity: Unity of Civil and Political Society in Socialist Thought", in C. Kukathas, D. Lovell, and W. Maey (eds.), *The Transition from Socialism: State and Civil Society in the USSR* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1991, pp.41-58, at pp. 42-3,

3. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question", in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), vol.iii, pp.146-74, at p.152.

4. *Ibid.*, p.154.

5. *Ibid.*, p.164.

6. On this see Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Fear of*

*Diversity: The birth of Political Sence in Ancient Greek Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)

7. For an interesting argument couched explicitly in terms of "meta-norms" see Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, *Liberalism Defended: The Challenge of Post-Modernity* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 1997)

8. The phrase is used in John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p..

9. Much more needs to be said in justification of this claim than can be offered here. For a cogent, though controversial, defence of a variant of this position see Chrales Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.121-74.

10. On this see A. C. Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the eve of colonial rule* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982)

11. Larmore, *op.cit.*, p.41.

12. See, for example, George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Againts God* (Los Angeles: Prometheus Books, 1973).

13. *Op.cit.*, pp. 55-6. The thinker Larmore has in mind here is Jean-Fraçois Lyotard. From a healthy distrust of simplifying myths, argues Larmore, Lyotard infers that moral thinking must be combative and rhetorical rather than reasoned. But this is a non sequitur which "fails to escape the terms of the rationalistic idea of reason it attacks".

14. Once again, it is a thought which comes from Larmore, *op.cit.*, pp. 55-9, though I am adapting it for my own purposes.

15. For a powerful exposition of this view see Deborah Fitzmaurice, "Autonomy as a good", *Journal of Political Philosophy* 1 (1), 1993, pp.1-15.

16. On this see Esposito, *The Islamic Threat*, p. 39.

17. See for example the arguments offered by David Held, *Models of Democracy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 1996)

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