## THE GLOBALIZATION TEST: CAN ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES OF PLURALISM UNITE A DIVIDED WORLD?

*Muhammad Mushtaq*
*PhD Scholar, Department of Islamic Studies, Riphah International University, Faisalabad.*
*sheikhmmushtaq@gmail.com*
**Prof. Dr. Khalid Mahmood Arif**
 *HOD/Corresponding Author, Department of Islamic Studies, Riphah International University, Faisalabad.*
*Khalid.mahmood@riphahfsd.edu.pk*

*Abstract*
*In an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world, globalization has intensified encounters between diverse cultures, religions and ideologies—often exposing deep civilizational divides. This research explores whether Islamic principles of pluralism, rooted in the Qur'an, Sunnah and classical jurisprudence, can offer a viable framework for global coexistence and unity. Pluralism, in this study, is defined as the recognition and acceptance of religious and cultural diversity within a just and ethical framework. The research question centers on whether faith-based values from Islam can actively contribute to bridging sociopolitical and ideological rifts in the globalized order. The study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in textual analysis and comparative inquiry. Primary Islamic sources Qur'anic verses (e.g., Surah Al-Hujurat 49:13, Surah Al-Baqarah 2:256), Hadith literature and interpretations from classical and modern scholars are examined alongside theories of pluralism in political philosophy and global ethics. Case studies of interfaith initiatives and legal frameworks from Muslim-majority societies are also analyzed to assess practical applicability. The research reveals that Islamic pluralism embodied in principles such as mutual recognition (taʿāruf), non-compulsion in religion (lā ikrāh fī al-dīn), and justice (ʿadl) not only supports religious coexistence but can serve as a constructive model for global harmony. However, realizing its full potential requires reinterpretation considering modern human rights discourse and political realities. The study concludes by proposing pathways for integrating Islamic pluralistic thought into global peacebuilding efforts.*
*Keywords: Islamic pluralism, globalization, interfaith harmony, justice, taʿāruf, religious coexistence*

### Introduction
Globalization has connected people and societies like never before, fostering economic and cultural exchange on a worldwide scale. However, this same interconnectedness has amplified divisions, intensifying conflict along religious, cultural, and ideological lines (Giddens, 2002). In the face of such fragmentation, ethical systems capable of sustaining diverse societies are urgently needed. One such framework may be rooted in Islamic concepts of pluralism, which emphasize respect for others, fairness for all, and the peaceful coexistence of varied communities.

Contrary to some perceptions, pluralism is not foreign to Islam. The Qur'an celebrates human diversity as part of divine wisdom (Qur'an 49:13), and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) exemplified engagement with different faiths through treaties and inclusive governance. Early Islamic states, including the Ottomans, developed models that preserved religious freedom for non-Muslim communities under Islamic rule (Esposito, 2003).

Yet, Islam is often wrongly associated with intolerance in modern discourse, due in part to misinterpretations and media narratives. This paper challenges those assumptions by revisiting primary sources and engaging voices from both Islamic and secular global perspectives. It critically examines how Islamic pluralism can not only coexist with but actively contribute to a global society seeking justice, harmony and unity.

### Understanding Pluralism in an Islamic Perspective
Pluralism, in its core meaning, entails acknowledging and valuing differences across religions, cultures and ideologies within a shared society. From an Islamic perspective, pluralism is not

a modern adaptation but a deeply rooted part of its theology and ethics. The Qur'an states: *"O humanity! Indeed, We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes so that you may know one another"* (Qur'an 49:13). This verse frames diversity as an intentional feature of creation, inviting understanding—not division.

Islamic pluralism is grounded in divine guidance rather than secular political philosophy. It emphasizes ethical engagement, mutual responsibility, and divine accountability in human relationships. Islamic thinker Tariq Ramadan explains that pluralism in Islam is not about relativism but about meaningful dialogue and shared values based on mutual respect (Ramadan, 2009). Likewise, Fethullah Gülen describes pluralism as a moral obligation for Muslims, urging kindness, empathy, and cooperation with those of other beliefs (Gülen, 2004).

Historically, the *dhimmi* system under Islamic empires protected the rights of non-Muslim communities. Though modern critiques often focus on the hierarchical aspects of this arrangement, scholars argue it offered structured legal and social protections rare for its time (Lapidus, 2002). Non-Muslims retained autonomy in worship, law, and education while receiving state protection.

Moreover, the Qur'an makes numerous references to "People of the Book," recognizing Jews and Christians as recipients of divine guidance and encouraging respectful interaction (Qur'an 2:62; 3:64). The Charter of Medina (622 CE), issued by the Prophet Muhammad, established a pluralistic society in which Muslims and non-Muslims coexisted as part of a broader political community. This agreement upheld religious freedom and affirmed cooperative governance.

In essence, Islamic pluralism involves more than tolerance—it requires active respect and cooperation across religious and cultural lines. Rooted in divine revelation and practiced throughout Islamic history, it provides a compelling ethical approach to managing diversity in today's interconnected world.

## The Challenge of Globalization

Although globalization has brought people, economies, and cultures closer together, it has also deepened divisions related to identity, belief and inequality. The vision of a harmonious global community has often been undermined by rising nationalism, religious polarization, and cultural backlash (Bauman, 1998). In such an environment, pluralism can be perceived not as a strength but as a threat to group identity and cohesion.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes our era as one of "liquid modernity," in which constant change leaves individuals uncertain about their roles and identities (Bauman, 2000). This uncertainty often pushes people toward rigid forms of self-identification—be they religious, ethnic, or ideological. Such retractions can lead to both the rise of religious extremism and anti-religious sentiments, including Islamophobia, as people fear losing control over their cultural landscapes.

Anthony Giddens (2002) suggests that globalization is not solely about economic systems but also about shifting worldviews. People are constantly navigating between their cultural heritage and global norms. This complex dynamic creates tension, particularly for Muslims in non-Muslim societies, where issues of integration, cultural preservation, and civic visibility often collide.

Additionally, economic disparities amplified by globalization have left many Muslim-majority societies grappling with poverty, unemployment and political instability. These conditions sometimes feed radical ideologies, especially among disillusioned youth who feel excluded from global prosperity (Roy, 2004). In such contexts, pluralism is sometimes viewed with suspicion, seen as a façade for cultural dominance or political marginalization.

Given these realities, any effort to promote Islamic pluralism in the global arena must address more than religious tolerance. It must also engage with structural injustices, identity anxieties,

and power imbalances. True pluralism must offer a just and inclusive vision, not only within religious discourse but within political and socioeconomic systems as well.

## Qur'anic Foundations of Pluralism and their Contemporary Relevance

The Qur'an offers a comprehensive moral vision that supports the recognition of diversity and peaceful interaction among differing groups. Pluralism is not treated as a concession but as a purposeful part of God's design. For instance, *"And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variety in your languages and your colors. Surely in this are signs for those who know"* (Qur'an 30:22). This verse celebrates diversity in speech and appearance as meaningful and worthy of reflection.

Another significant verse states: *"Indeed, those who believe, and those who are Jews, Christians, or Sabians—whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does good—will have their reward with their Lord, and they will have nothing to fear nor shall they grieve"* (Qur'an 2:62). This passage implies that righteousness and faith—not religious identity alone—are the criteria for divine reward. It opens the door for mutual respect and ethical coexistence between religious communities.

The Qur'an also encourages respectful disengagement where religious disagreement exists, without conflict or coercion. Surah Al-Kafirun concludes with the famous statement: *"To you be your religion, and to me, mine"* (Qur'an 109:6). This affirms freedom of belief and the right to differ without hostility.

Modern Islamic thinkers like Fazlur Rahman and Mohammad Hashim Kamali have emphasized that the Qur'an promotes an ethical system based on compassion, justice, and respect for human dignity. Rahman (1982) focused on the Qur'an's encouragement of moral responsibility and universal values. Kamali (2010) highlights how the objectives of Islamic law (*maqasid al-shari'ah*) such as preserving life, intellect, religion, and human dignity are consistent with the principles of pluralistic society.

One particularly strong expression of this ethical stance is found in Qur'an 4:135, which urges believers to uphold justice even when it conflicts with their own self-interest: *"O you who believe! Be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or your parents or relatives…"* Such impartiality in the pursuit of justice is essential in any society that aspires to pluralism.

In summary, the Qur'an provides not only theological permission for pluralism but a compelling moral rationale for it—one that prioritizes justice, compassion and peaceful coexistence in a diverse and complex world.

## Prophetic Models

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) demonstrated pluralism not just through teaching, but through concrete actions that laid the foundation for inclusive and cooperative societies. His life offers several examples of how religious and cultural diversity was not only acknowledged but integrated into the broader social framework of early Islam.

A key example is the Constitution of Medina, also known as the *Sahifat al-Madina*, formulated after the Prophet's migration to Medina. This document brought together Muslims, Jews, and various tribes into a unified political community, ensuring freedom of religion, mutual defense, and shared obligations toward justice (Watt, 1956). It stands as an early blueprint for pluralistic governance and communal harmony.

Another pivotal moment was the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah, a peace agreement with the Quraysh tribe. Though some Muslims initially saw the terms as unfavorable, the Prophet honored the treaty, valuing peace and diplomatic engagement over immediate political gain. His adherence to the agreement, despite opposition, reflects Islam's emphasis on patience, trust-building and

honoring agreements core elements of peaceful pluralism (Saeed, 2007).

The Prophet's interaction with the Christian delegation from Najran further illustrates his commitment to interfaith respect. He hosted the Christians in his mosque and allowed them to conduct their prayers there. Despite theological differences, the encounter was marked by civility and hospitality (Nasr, 2002), setting an example for how Muslims should treat people of other faiths with dignity and openness (Asia & Khalid, 2025).

Additionally, the Prophet sternly warned against harming non-Muslims under Muslim protection. A hadith reported in *Sunan Abi Dawud* quotes him as saying: *"Whoever harms a person with whom we have a treaty will not smell the fragrance of Paradise."* This powerful warning emphasizes the sanctity of life and the moral responsibility of Muslims to safeguard peaceful relations with others.

These instances illustrate that pluralism in Islam is not a reaction to modern pressures but a practice deeply rooted in the Prophetic legacy. The Prophet's interactions with other communities embody a model of coexistence based on mutual respect, fairness, and shared responsibility, which remains relevant in today's diverse societies.

## Classical Islamic Governance and the Dhimma System: A Historical Perspective

The development of Islamic governance throughout history offers valuable insights into how Muslim societies managed religious and cultural diversity. One of the main frameworks for ensuring minority rights under Islamic rule was the Dhimma system, which provided non-Muslim communities with a protected legal status. Although modern interpretations often scrutinize its hierarchical elements, the dhimma arrangement represented a progressive and structured approach to religious coexistence in its historical context.

Under this system, non-Muslims referred to as *dhimmis* were allowed to practice their religion, manage their internal affairs, and maintain community institutions such as schools and places of worship. In exchange, they paid a tax known as *jizya*, which paralleled the *zakat* obligation for Muslims. This financial exchange also exempted non-Muslims from military service, and in return, the Islamic state guaranteed their protection and legal recognition (Friedmann, 2003).

Islamic empires, such as the Abbasids, Mughals, and Ottomans, expanded on this model. The Ottoman millet system, for example, enabled Christian and Jewish communities to govern their own legal and educational systems with considerable autonomy. According to historian Bernard Lewis (2002), this level of religious and administrative freedom was uncommon in contemporary Christian Europe.

Critics often point to limitations in the dhimma system, such as restrictions on political participation or dress codes imposed during certain periods. However, historians like John Esposito and Marshall Hodgson argue that despite these inequalities, the system was a form of legal pluralism that allowed diverse communities to coexist in relative peace and stability (Esposito, 2003; Hodgson, 1974).

In today's world, directly reviving the dhimma structure would not align with modern principles of equal citizenship and universal human rights. Nonetheless, the underlying ethos of coexistence, protection of minorities, and legal accommodation can still inform contemporary Islamic thought. Many Muslim scholars today call for integrating these values into models of inclusive governance that grant equal rights to all citizens, regardless of faith, while drawing on the ethical legacy of Islamic jurisprudence (Kamali, 2010).

Rather than replicating historical structures, the goal is to reinterpret their spirit one that affirms dignity, justice, and peaceful plurality within the framework of modern civic life.

## Contemporary Islamic Thinkers on Pluralism and Global Solidarity

A number of modern Islamic scholars have revisited the tradition's core teachings in light of

present-day challenges to articulate a vision of pluralism that speaks to today's globalized world. These thinkers drawing from scripture, ethics, and modern social realities demonstrate that Islam has the intellectual and spiritual resources to contribute meaningfully to global unity. Tariq Ramadan, in his influential book *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (2004), proposes a new framework for Muslims living in secular societies. He encourages Muslims to act as "witnesses" to Islamic values, not by isolating themselves, but by engaging actively in civic life and interfaith cooperation. For Ramadan, Islam and pluralism are not in conflict; rather, pluralism allows Muslims to demonstrate ethical principles through their conduct and contributions to society.

The late Fazlur Rahman emphasized a return to the Qur'an's ethical objectives. He argued that Islam encourages moral reasoning (*ijtihad*) that evolves with changing social conditions. In his view, the Qur'anic emphasis on justice, mercy, and collective well-being provides a foundation for constructive coexistence and mutual understanding in pluralistic societies (Rahman, 1982). Mohammad Hashim Kamali has extensively written about human rights, constitutionalism, and citizenship from an Islamic perspective. He asserts that the higher goals of Islamic law (*maqasid al-shari'ah*) are fully compatible with the values needed to sustain diverse societies—such as the protection of life, freedom, property, and human dignity (Kamali, 2010). Another prominent figure is Fethullah Gülen, whose Hizmet movement promotes interfaith dialogue, education, and peacebuilding around the world. Gülen teaches that respecting people of other faiths is not merely a social necessity but a religious obligation. His initiatives have resulted in thousands of interfaith forums, schools, and humanitarian programs that reflect Islamic values of tolerance and service (Yilmaz, 2007).

Despite differences in their methods and contexts, these thinkers all point to a central truth: Islam's message of justice, respect, and compassion can play a critical role in uniting a fragmented world. Their work offers alternatives to both extremist ideologies and overly secular worldviews by proposing an Islamically grounded pluralism that embraces diversity without diluting religious identity.

**Interfaith Dialogue and Civil Society: Practical Applications of Islamic Pluralism**
For Islamic pluralism to have a real-world impact, it must extend beyond theological principles and take shape in social initiatives, particularly in interfaith dialogue and civil society engagement. These two arenas allow Muslims to actively apply Qur'anic ethics by working alongside people of other faiths to build trust, promote peace, and improve communities.

The Qur'an itself encourages constructive dialogue, advising Muslims to engage others with wisdom and kindness: *"Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best"* (Qur'an 16:125). This guidance underscores the importance of respectful discourse, particularly when interacting across religious differences.

In recent decades, numerous Muslim-led interfaith efforts have emerged globally. Organizations like the Interfaith Youth Core (USA), Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum (Nigeria), and Minhaj-ul-Quran's interfaith outreach (Europe) bring Muslims together with Christians, Jews, Hindus, and others to work on common causes. Scholars like Dr. Khalid Mahmood Arif & Abdul Mannan Iftikhar (2024) said these initiatives have tackled everything from disaster relief and refugee support to educational reform and hate crime prevention.

Equally important is the role of civil society, where Muslims contribute to social justice, health care, education, and environmental sustainability alongside diverse partners. These efforts are aligned with Qur'anic calls for cooperation in doing good: *"Help one another in acts of righteousness and piety, and do not assist each other in sin and transgression"* (Qur'an 5:2).

The benefits of these collaborations are clear. Scholars like Douglas Pratt (2011) and Leonard Swidler (2014) have shown that interfaith engagement fosters empathy, dispels stereotypes,

and reduces religious tensions. It also provides a platform for Muslim voices to be heard and respected in public life challenging misperceptions and affirming the compatibility of Islam with modern democratic values.

Moreover, these initiatives help counteract extremist narratives by demonstrating that Muslims are not isolated or opposed to other faiths but are actively contributing to the moral and civic fabric of pluralistic societies. This embodied pluralism where action reflects belief is perhaps the most effective form of dawah (Islamic invitation) in today's context.

Through education, collaboration, and mutual service, interfaith and civil society projects allow Muslims to live out the pluralistic ideals found in their sacred texts and offer a model for healing in a fractured world.

## Challenges and Criticisms

Despite Islam's strong foundation for pluralism, numerous challenges prevent its full realization in modern societies. Among the most serious are the exploitation of religion for political purposes, extremist interpretations and social resistance to reform. These issues distort Islam's inclusive teachings and obstruct efforts toward genuine interfaith cooperation and social unity.

In many Muslim-majority nations, religion is often used by political actors to consolidate power or suppress dissent. Governments and opposition movements alike may invoke Islamic symbols or selectively quote scripture to justify exclusionary policies or marginalize minority groups. This manipulation turns religion into a tool for control rather than a source of ethical guidance. Hashemi and Postel (2017) note that sectarian tensions are frequently stoked by political agendas rather than theological disagreements, leading to discrimination and even violence against minority sects like Shias, Ahmadis, or Sufis.

Another significant obstacle is religious extremism, where militant groups misrepresent Islamic teachings to legitimize violence and intolerance. Groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda promote narrow and literalist interpretations that contradict the Holy Qur'an's broader message of justice and mercy. These actors not only terrorize local populations but also damage Islam's global image, making pluralistic voices harder to hear and trust (Ayoob, 2008).

Beyond extremism, conservative resistance within certain Muslim communities further complicates the promotion of pluralism. Some traditionalists view pluralism as a threat to religious purity or as a Western-imposed value. However, thinkers like Abdullahi An-Na'im (2008) argue that Islamic pluralism can be authentically reinterpreted to meet modern challenges without abandoning core beliefs.

On the other hand, Western models of secular pluralism sometimes exclude religious perspectives from public discourse altogether. This can marginalize faith-based communities and reinforce a binary view in which religion is seen as inherently incompatible with pluralism. Charles Taylor (2011) critiques this narrow secularism for denying religious groups the opportunity to shape shared moral values in pluralistic societies.

Finally, there is the issue of institutional gaps. Many Islamic institutions lack updated curricula, inclusive religious leadership, or platforms for interfaith engagement. Without reform and revitalization, the intellectual and spiritual resources necessary to promote pluralism remain underdeveloped or inaccessible.

To move forward, Muslims must confront these internal and external challenges with clarity and commitment. That means countering extremist rhetoric, supporting inclusive scholarship, engaging in civic institutions and working alongside others for the common good. Only by addressing these realities can Islamic pluralism play a transformative role in shaping a more peaceful and just global society.

## Recommendations & Suggestions

- Islamic scholars should promote reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) of pluralistic principles to address contemporary global challenges.
- Educational curricula in Muslim societies should include comparative studies on religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue.
- The Qur'anic concepts such as *ta'āruf* (mutual recognition) and *'adl* (justice) should be highlighted as universal ethical foundations in global discourse.
- Muslim governments should adopt inclusive policies that reflect Islamic teachings on coexistence and dignity of all humans.
- Faith-based organizations should collaborate with international peace building bodies to advance common moral values.
- Classical Islamic texts should be revisited and contextualized to support the rights of religious and cultural minorities.
- Interfaith dialogue initiatives should be rooted in authentic Islamic sources to ensure credibility and effectiveness.
- More academic research is needed on the compatibility between Islamic pluralism and global human rights frameworks.
- Media platforms in the Muslim world should be used to promote narratives of coexistence and mutual respect.
- Policies that marginalize religious or cultural groups must be challenged using Islamic principles of equity and compassion.

## Conclusion

In a world increasingly marked by division whether ideological, cultural, or religious the ethical teachings of Islam on pluralism offer not just a theological stance but a profound moral response to global disunity. Rooted in the Qur'an, exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and supported by centuries of legal and philosophical thought, Islamic pluralism presents a vision of human society grounded in respect, compassion, and justice.

Islamic teachings emphasize that diversity is a divinely ordained reality and that peaceful coexistence is both an ethical duty and a spiritual virtue. From the Qur'anic verses affirming the value of different peoples and beliefs, to the Prophet's model of inclusive governance and interfaith engagement, the Islamic tradition is rich with resources that promote harmony across lines of difference.

Modern Muslim scholars continue to reaffirm these principles, reinterpreting them to meet today's social and political realities. Their work challenges both internal extremism and external misrepresentation by showing that pluralism is not an accommodation but an integral part of Islam's ethical vision. They argue that pluralism does not dilute Islamic identity it strengthens it by aligning it with justice, humility, and the pursuit of common good.

Yet, to bring these ideals into practice, significant challenges must be addressed. Political manipulation, social conservatism, religious illiteracy and narrow secularism all hinder the realization of pluralism. Overcoming these barriers requires intellectual courage, institutional reform, and broad-based collaboration across communities.

Ultimately, Islamic pluralism calls not for uniformity, but for unity with dignity a vision where people of different beliefs can live together in peace, engage one another in meaningful dialogue, and work side by side for justice. In a world craving ethical clarity and shared purpose, Islam's pluralistic teachings may help light the way toward a more just and compassionate global society.

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