

Compatible? Incompatible? A Theoretical Analysis of Islam and Democracy

Written by J. Paul Barker

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The question of the compatibility of Islam and democracy has persisted for generations. Recent developments in technology, transportation and communication have served to intensify the interaction between the “democratic” countries of the West and the traditionally Islamic societies of the Middle East and North Africa. The political, religious and social developments of various cultures are now only as distant as the television or internet. The recent events of the Middle East, facilitated by these technological advances, have only heightened the talk about the role of democracy in the region. The outcome of these revolutions remains unclear and will provide the most recent test case for the installation of democracy in majority Muslim countries. While the validity of his entire thesis remains open for debate, Samuel Huntington was right when he said of the post-Cold War era, “in the politics of civilizations, the peoples and governments of non-Western civilizations no longer remain [sic] the objects of history as targets of Western colonialism but join the West as movers and shapers of history” (Huntington 1993: 23). While the Western powers, the United States foremost among them, still hold a large amount of influence in global affairs the center of influence is shifting.

As the world becomes more “flat,” to use Thomas Friedman’s terminology (2007), the compatibility of competing systems of thought becomes a more frequent topic of debate. At the forefront of this debate is the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Due to the fluid and variegated interpretations of both of these ideologies, the conversation is immense. To attempt to make sense of this topic the scope of this article will be to examine both of these systems in order to elucidate both core values as well as potential abuses and then to put forward potential scenarios in light of these realities. In the end it will emerge that there are points of commonality that allow for Islam and democracy to coexist in harmony and there are also abuses that produce sharp conflict.

Democracy

The use of the word “democracy” brings to mind a myriad of images. The roots of this system of government are in the city-states of ancient Greece. In contemporary usage it can refer to the unruly shouting matches of a town hall meeting or to the complex representational political structures of many Western states. What exactly is meant by “democracy?” What are its fundamental components? What are its abuses? In order to assess whether Islam is compatible with democracy it is essential to clarify what exactly this term denotes.

Democracy: In Principle

By simple definition, democracy is a system of government by the people rather than a single individual or elite group. It can be defined as government by the populous; a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their freely elected agents. This investment of the supreme power in the people must have on it certain checks lest it simply degenerate into anarchy and a power struggle within the

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populous itself. In most modern states democracy is synonymous with a republican form of government wherein the people have the power to freely elect representatives to act in their best interest. They elect representatives to rule for them and in doing so give up a certain amount of the power vested in them. In a democracy this is done willingly, and thus central to democracy is the idea of free elections. However, this alone is not synonymous with a healthy democracy. "Free elections" do not necessarily equate a democracy. There are other more basic democratic principles. As Roger Trigg, in his insightful work *Religion in Public Life* (2007: 130), says, "a democratic country is one in which government is answerable to the people, and can be dismissed by them in an election." While the people have given up some rights, they still retain the ultimate power over elected officials. Thus Trigg concludes: "A pre-condition of exercising that democracy is an individual freedom according to which all citizens are free to form judgments about what is important, and to live life accordingly. A state in which citizens are told what to think, or conditioned through lack of information to accept certain things as true, is controlling its citizens rather than being controlled by them."

The preservation and exercise of individual freedom is necessary for the proper functioning of a democracy. This fundamental principle has far-reaching consequences in the shaping of a democracy. A democracy is a rule by the people collectively, but it must be free individuals that produce this collective body. The preservation of individual freedom leads to other necessary principles of democracy.

The exercise of individual freedom in a society produces certain cultural dynamics that have become hallmarks of democratic societies. Bassam Tibi repeatedly emphasizes two of these cultural dynamics that are present in a truly democratic society. He says, "my assumptions herein are that pluralism and power-sharing are basic features of democracy. [...] It is my opinion that a process of democratization that is restricted to the procedure of voting is not a real democratization process" (2009: 139). These two core elements of pluralism and power-sharing come up repeatedly throughout Tibi's work. Pluralism is the logical result of the exercise of individual freedom. When people are allowed to think and act freely within a society the result is a plurality of ideas, thoughts, and voices within the public square. A democracy celebrates a diversity of ideas within a single body. Tibi's second core value is power-sharing. In a vigorous democracy the ruling powers are not held within the grasp of a narrow segment of the population but are shared throughout the whole of the body. Thus the plurality of voices, the freedoms of the individual, are represented not just within the society but also within the exercise of the ruling powers. These values are central to true democracy. Thus in the investigation of the compatibility of Islam and democracy it must be considered if Islam is compatible with these core principles. It also should be discussed how these principles are put into practice within living democracies.

Democracy: In Practice

Among the many values prized in democratic societies the most central are individual freedom, plurality, and power-sharing. When these values are put into practice they have the potential to produce a fair and just form of human government. Especially throughout the past three centuries, many of the happiest, most productive, and advanced societies have been those where these core values were prized and most consistently exercised. These values have been exercised most freely in those countries of the West, but have also been recognized and sought by the international community. As just one example of this the United Nations in 1948 put forward its "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." In the exercise of democratic ideas this declaration called for its members to "implement human rights that gave priority to the protection of the individual over other national goals" (Houeyda, 2004: 230). To implement a policy such as this is logical only in a society where the power is with the individual rather than with the political leadership. Yet, the idea of human rights was, and is, embraced by the member states of the United Nations. In due course it will be examined how this reality interacts with Islam.

A second aspect of the practice of democratic values is that when carried to an extreme these values create a logically unsustainable position. A primary example of this is seen in pluralism. The idea of a plurality of voices and ideas within the society is fundamental to a healthy democracy. Yet, the pursuit of pluralism cannot be the final goal of a democracy. When this becomes the final objective it creates a culture wherein it is impossible to hold any belief because it is incumbent on the individual to hold all beliefs. When tolerance becomes prized above all other values and any semblance of truth is removed from the public sphere the society begins to lose any authentic voices

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because all the voices speak the same ideas. No idea is allowed to be freely expressed because it may not represent every idea. In essence it becomes enforced liberalism. As Roger Trigg says “enforced liberalism will be as objectionable to some, as dogmatic intolerance is to liberals” (2007: 139). This debate over how far “plurality” should extend before it reaches “pluralism” is presently raging in Western Europe and the United States. The stand that a democratic society takes on this issue will have significant ramifications on the way in which it relates to Islam and any other system of belief.

Another abuse of democratic principles is when a society falls into relativism. In the name of tolerance or pluralism many democratic societies have declared that absolute truths are non-existent. To assert that something is universally true is the ultimate act of intolerance and exclusion. In order to avoid this there is no longer any place for absolutes within the public square. In the end this ultimately removes any meaning from any formalized system of belief. Indeed for the monotheistic religions of the world, namely Islam, Christianity, or Judaism, if they say nothing absolutely then they say nothing at all. Or stated another way, “religious liberty may be a noble creed, but there is little point in preaching it, if there is nothing left to believe in” (Trigg, 2007: 139). This battle concerning truth – and truth claims – within modern democracies has not been resolved but will bear serious consequences on the issues of the free expression of religion in coming years. It is not difficult to imagine a preacher being imprisoned for “hate speech” because he reads passages from the Bible that speak against homosexuality or a high school athlete being penalized because he prays during the celebration of a football game.^[1] What is the place of personal beliefs within a democracy? In the name of allowing everyone to believe what they choose it may be that democracies in fact make it impossible for individuals to believe anything.

Within democracy is there any place left for belief in what is true or has the pursuit of individual freedom and plurality degenerated into pluralism and relativism? In principle there is a harmony between the core values of democracy and the freedom to exercise ones religious beliefs, but in practice many modern democracies see a sharp contention between religion and democracy.

Islam

Islam was founded in the 7th century in the Arabian Peninsula and has now grown to be the world largest organized religion. Nearly one-fifth of the world’s population is Muslim.^[2] Islam itself is far from monolithic. The most prominent division is between the majority Sunni and the minority Shi’a, but there are many more fragmentations beyond just this division. Before considering any of the fragmentations within Islam it should first be considered what are the core fundamental principles of Islam.

Islam: In Principle

To clearly describe the core values of Islam is a daunting task. In no way will this seek to be an exhaustive survey of the principles of Islam. Thus in a brief summary of these principles one might begin by looking to the five “pillars of Islam.” These refer to five obligations for all Muslims. The first is the shahadah^[3] or creed. This is the confession that “there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet.” Included in this are two crucial concepts for an understanding of Islam. First, the unity and singularity of God is at the core of Islamic doctrine. The second concept revealed in this is the importance of the prophet Muhammad for Muslims. His role in the shaping of Islamic doctrine and culture cannot be overemphasized, even now more than 1300 years following his death. The second of the five pillars is the salat or prayers that are to be said five times a day. The third pillar is zakat or almsgiving. There is variation in the way this is exercised, but the traditional giving is 2.5% of an individual’s income. The fourth pillar is sawm or fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. The final pillar is the hajj or pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. These five pillars are typically taken to be universal to all Muslims in spite of the serious fragmentation between groups.

A second way to consider the principles of Islam is by the meaning of the word Islam itself. Islam means “submission” to God. Thus a Muslim is “one who submits.” This is reflective of the orientation of a Muslim. He views his life as submitted to God and then attempts to live in response to that. The source of authority for a Muslim is found first of all in the Quran, then in the collected sayings and records of the life of the prophet Muhammad, and also

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in the collective opinion of the community of Muslims. As one who is submitted to God Muslims then live according to the dictates God has given for them. In Sura 2.177 righteousness for the Muslim is described as including both belief in God, his book, and his prophets, as well as the actions of the Muslim, especially as it relates to his fellow man. This is described as the willful giving away of goods for others, an emphasis on proper treatment of the poor and orphaned, and integrity of life. From the Quran come principles for the way that Muslims are to live. In other words, out of the theology of Islam springs actions that affect the way that Muslims relate to each other and to the world as a whole.

In principle Islam is a religion that reveals to Muslims who God is – a theology.^[4] As a result of this theology there is a system of practice for Muslims as this is put into application. This system has central elements such as the five pillars. It also calls for Muslims to be defined by righteousness as explained by the Quran. But what do these principles look like in action?

Islam: In Practice

When Islam, like any system of belief or ideology, is put into practice there are various applications and interpretations. Besides distinctions based on theological/historical divisions, namely the Sunni and Shi'a division, Islam is presently facing a major division in practice. There is a debate over how the principles of Islam are to be applied. Is Islam a holistic system of belief? Does it apply to all areas of life? If it does apply to all areas of life is it through specific dictates or is it in principle? The way that these questions are answered is indicative to what Islam will look like in practice.

In his incisive article Bassam Tibi draws the division in the terms of Islam and Islamism. He speaks of Islam as a faith, culture, and source of ethics, while Islamism is “a mobilizing religious ideology, represented by a transnational movement that not only engages in a new form of irregular warfare but also, in other contexts, cynically plays and manipulates the game of democracy” (2009: 136-37). He draws a distinction among Islamists between “institutional” and “jihadists” but this distinction is in means and not in terms of goals. Both share a common international political vision for a global Islamization (Tibi, 2009: 155). Thus there are really two separate discussions that take place. One is whether Islam on a principle or theological level is incompatible with democracy. The other is whether there is an incompatibility when applied to the present situation of particular Muslim groups in particular democracies or to the emergence of democracy in particular Muslim societies (Minkenberg, 2007).

The first area concerns Islam as a system of belief, cultural practices, and ethics. As was seen in the section above, in principle Islam can produce people who are grounded in their ethics through the belief in God. Because of this belief in God, this can produce “righteous” lives, namely a willingness to give for others, a concern for the less fortunate, integrity of life, and many other praiseworthy characteristics. Through the application of Islam in this principle sense there is application to every area of life and yet compatibility with a multitude of political systems, including democracy.

In the second application, if Islam is viewed as a “holistic vision” for society that dictates not only what the individual should look like, but also what the culture itself, including the political structure, should be then there is historically a greatly increased likelihood for conflict and restriction of civil liberties.^[5] This would be true for Islamists who have a global vision for a sharia-based Islamization. Even if these objectives are sought through seemingly democratic means, as Tibi's institutionalized Islamists do, this does not reflect a democratic society. Trigg considers this same discussion of religions with a mandate for how all of life should be ordered. He says, “their concern for truth, and a consequent willingness to impose it on others takes precedence [over individual freedoms].” This is certainly not exclusive only to Islam, rather Trigg goes on, “the Roman Catholic Church has historically been accused of not respecting religious liberty, but in the contemporary world, it is often Islam which challenges ‘Western’ ideas of freedom and human rights” (2007: 134) For there to be genuine democracy and religious freedom it cannot be imposed from the top down. There must be within the culture the freedom for individuals to come to their own conclusions concerning personal belief – and even the right to change that belief – without the fear of government intervention (Trigg, 2007: 134-36). For Islamists this does not seem consonant with their view for globalized Islamization.

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Conclusion

In order to accurately assess an issue the principles being discussed must be defined. It also must be determined whether the discussion is descriptive or prescriptive of the issue. In essence, is this article attempting to describe the current reality or is the analysis of what might or ought be? This article has attempted to approach the issue of the compatibility of Islam and democracy from both approaches. It has looked at what democracy can or ought to be when its core principles are rightly applied. It also has considered Islam when applied as a system of faith and source of ethics. But it also must be recognized that there are abuses of both of these issues. Democracy taken to the extreme leads to pluralism and relativism. Islam taken to an extreme leads to enforced religion and oppression of those who hold differing views. In the end this is a complex discussion with a number of variables that have to be taken into account.

At the conclusion of this analysis four scenarios have emerged for the relationship between Islam and democracy. Of these four scenarios three of them are incompatible and inevitably result in conflict. The first is a society where the democratic values of plurality and individual freedom have been taken so far that they lead to pluralism, where nothing can be believed because everything must be believed, and relativism, where nothing can be true because then something is false. In a society like this even a Muslim who views Islam simply as the theological and ethical grounding would be excluded because he has a belief in a God that is not embraced by others in the society. This is the reality that some Christian and Islamic groups are presently facing in Western societies. In the name of defending individual freedoms the free exercise of those freedoms are prohibited. This would be particularly damaging to the individual citizen who is forbidden to exercise his individual freedoms.

The second scenario would be the same sort of democratic society when it comes into contact with an Islamist ideology that is attempting to bring about a globalized Islamization. In the first part the society would be accepting of this ideology because it is another voice to add to the pluralism. However, when it becomes evident that the Islamist ideology is not ready to bend to the relativist and pluralist agenda conflict of one sort or another is bound to ensue. This conflict seems to be forthcoming in the countries of Western Europe that have a burgeoning Islamic community and a firm commitment to pluralism and relativism. Either the society will accept the ideology or there will be a cultural clash as these two differing agendas battle in the public sphere.

The third scenario is when a democratic society that provides for the exercise of individual freedoms interacts with an Islamist agenda that attempts to curtail those rights. In this scenario there will be a clash when the democracy is forced to impose limits on the exercise of one individual's rights because their intent is to eliminate the rights of other individuals. "The dilemma is how to reject relativism, and yet not fall into the authoritarian approach which makes democratic freedom impossible" (Trigg, 2007: 140). This is a difficult case in countries where democracy is already established. It is conversely a factor making it difficult for strong democracies to emerge in Muslim majority nations. So in these scenarios there is an incompatibility between Islam and democracy.

There is a final scenario where Islam and democracy are compatible. When the principle form of both are rightly exercised there is a place for Muslim individuals within a healthy democracy, and also a place for democracy within a healthy Muslim community. The exercise of individual freedoms allows for Muslims to live according to their system of belief. They then become beneficial citizens within the democracy who because of their faith in God treat their fellow citizens with respect, care for the unfortunate and integrity of life.

The place of religion within a democracy is a complex question but it ought to be true that there is a place for the exercise not only of the majority religion of the citizens, but also the reality of religious freedom for the minority (Minkenberg, 2007: 897). When both are properly exercised there is compatibility between Islam and democracy. These two ideologies may work in concert to create healthy and flourishing cultures.

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¹ Within the United States, Canada and Western Europe a number of political cases are currently being argued about issues such as these. There are also numerous news stories that could be referenced to show how the issue of religion in public life is an issue of fierce debate.

² It was officially declared by the Vatican in 2008 that Islam and its estimated 1.3 billion adherents now, for the first time, outnumbers the Catholic church. The Vatican makes an accurate distinction between itself, the Orthodox church, and other branches of Christianity as being separate entities. "Muslims More Numerous than Catholics: Vatican." Reuters. March 30, 2008. Accessed December 26, 2010. <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKL3068682420080330>.

³ Transliteration from Arabic to English often results in spelling variants. This paper will use the popular Anglicized version of the Arabic words.

This paper does not attempt to serve as an apologetic or critique of the theology of Islam but rather is concerned with how this theology interacts and impacts the lives of the adherents. See Minkenberg's interaction with recent studies in Southern and Eastern Europe. His analysis was that religions with a holistic vision for society, such as Catholicism and Islam, traditionally led to restrictions of civil liberties, especially for minority groups. Ibid., 889.

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