# A Foundation for Islamic Tolerance: Reflections on the Concept of the Universality of Religions in Fatimid Thought, Policy and Practice[1]

## Introduction

The Fatimids established a Shi'I Isma'ili Muslim Caliphate in North Africa in the 9th century which came to rule over most of North Africa, Egypt and parts of Central Asia. Over two centuries, their rule was defined by and large as peaceful, inclusive and tolerant. Much ink has been put to paper, by authors of Fatimid history, on the largely tolerant and benevolent attitude of the Fatimids towards non-Fatimid and non-Shii Muslim communities as well as and especially towards the *Ahl al-Kitab*, the Jewish and Christian communities living under their rule in Egypt in the 10th and 11th centuries[2].

These studies have been based largely on Sunni, Mamluk sources, most notably al-Maqrizi, who base their chronicles on sources contemporary to the Fatimids such as Ibn al-Tuwayr and al-Musabbihi, also a Sunni official in 11th century Cairo.

The protected status of the *Ahl ul-Kitab* was by no means a phenomenon exclusive to the Fatimid dynasty. This tolerance was rooted in the Quran, and the sunna and practice of the prophet, as is well known. It was afforded by almost all Muslim dynasties, including the Umayyads, the Abbasids and others to varying degrees and in varying forms, in lieu of the payment of the *jizya* tax. This was also true of Egypt in the pre and post-Fatimid eras, under the Ikhshidids and the Ayyubids/Mamluks respectively. However, as has been observed by scholars, with rare exceptions, the freedom and status enjoyed by the Christian and Muslim communities under the Fatimids was unparalleled.

The more common explanation is that the Fatimids, being a minority themselves in a predominantly Sunni country with a significant Coptic population, adopted policies tolerant towards the Sunni population as well as the non-Muslims. The sources themselves are silent on the issue of motive. However, these scholars fail to recognise that the Fatimids pursued this policy even at the height of their political and military power.

In my paper today, I argue that further to the reasons mentioned above, it was indeed a very specific religious outlook and ideology of the Fatimids on the universality of

[1] As part of the Panel on "Contribution of religion in the development of conciliatory and peaceful relationships.". This document is an abridged version of the talk delivered at the University Dhaka in October 2014.

[2] Much of the writings on the Philosophy and Policy of the Fatimids relies on a paper delivered by Dr. Abdeali Qutbuddin at the American Oriental Society Conference in 2008.

religions that was responsible for their policies and practices in this context. This point is illustrated particularly well by examining a section from the *A'lām al-Nubuwwa* of Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, the 10th century Fatimid philosopher, who famously refuted the physician and philosopher Abu Bakr al-Rāzī. In the context of this text, I look at Fatimid policy and some examples of practice during their rule of Egypt. I conclude by reflecting on the relevance of this philosophy of the universality of religions in our world today.

## Philosophy

Abu Bakr al-Rāzī alleges that all the religions of the book derive their legitimacy from emulating and following their predecessors and imams. This is the case in Islam as well as Judaism, Christianity, Magianism and others. Each of these religions also established temporal domains for themselves, including Islam. Abu Bakr al-Rāzī argues that people adhere to a particular religion primarily because of worldly compulsions. He contends that because it is primarily a consequence of worldly compulsions, each religion is valid or *ḥaqq* in its own territory and invalid, *bāṭil* in another. In other words because of this temporal reliance and competing claims, all religions are invalid.

Abu Hatim al-Razi's reply is along the following lines:
He says that in their roots all of these religious communities are valid, without doubt, for they emanate from the traditions of prophets who received revelations from God. Each prophet pointed to the prophet to come after him, and testified to the validity and truth of those who came before him.

He further states that this is why the prophet Muhammad showed leniency toward the *ahl al-kitab* as opposed to other Arabs. For them he revived the traditions of Ibrahim in Islam, which included the Hajj, circumcision, and others, some of which the Arabs were following as remnants of Abrahamic traditions. However, they had lost the essence and values of the Abrahamic traditions which were preserved in Judaism and Christianity and which were common to all prophetic traditions.

Abu Hatim contends that these were the Unity of God, and His worship, and traditions and divine laws (*shari'ah*), based on the Books that they received from God. It was the power of this revelation that remained and became a guarding talisman for these communities who did hold on to those divine laws. This talisman established itself in their hearts and flourished there, for they were the seeds sowed by the prophets. It was this power of revelation which protected the traditions in spite of the various deviations carried out by people who did not follow the true successors of these prophets but followed their temptations for the material world. This is why God sends prophets in all times and ages, so that they may clear the traditions of innovations, such as those practiced by the idol-worshipping Arabs, give good counsel to their people, distinguish for them the truth from the invalid, and the right path from waywardness. God tests his creatures by requiring obedience for His prophets.

The weak, he says, follow the innovators, for they do not know the universal esoteric meaning alluded to in the words of their prophets, which is known by the true successors of these prophets. It is these hidden truths within the diverse traditions of the prophets which are universal across time and space, and therefore the allegations of Abu Bakr, about the religions contradicting each other, are invalid.

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Law, therefore according to Abu Hatim and others, is a necessity and must be enforced, otherwise chaos and anarchy ensues, thus God sent the prophets with a law which they enforced; laws that aimed to ensure among other things a basic standard of human ethics and values. Since the followers of earlier prophetic religions already possessed divine laws, which had the power of revelation within them, they were not forced to change in anyway. They were encouraged to adopt the religion of Islam in their hearts, which cannot be forced, as the Quran says, there is no compulsion in religion.
This ideology fit perfectly into the Fatimid missionary practice, which was built on the components of persuasion rather than force, as is illustrated through the autobiography of al-Mu'ayyad and numerous other historical references the Fatimid mission and its missionaries.

## Policy

These philosophical and theological ideas, I argue, were then transmuted to policy in the Fatimid state. To illustrate this I briefly look at the *Amān* document issued by al-Qa'id Johar, the Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Mu'zz's celebrated general, to the people of Egypt when he took the city in 969, as reported by Maqrizi, the Sunni Mamluk historian. Jawhar camped at Tarruja on the western edge of the Nile Delta, received a high level delegation from Fustat, to whom he issued the letter, first verbally, and later in writing. It notes the amnesty requested by the delegation, and assures the people that Muizz has noble intentions for them. It urges the people to submit to the will of the Imam-Caliph. It says that Muizz has sent his armies for the glory and protection of the people of Egypt from their previous despotic rulers, as also the people of the entire East. The following he says are the objectives of the takeover of Egypt by al-Muizz and promises made towards that: 1. to provide protection to its people, to wage war against the Byzantines 2. to secure the Hajj routes, 3. to reform the Egyptian Mints to the standard of Al-Mansurs coinage and thus bring economic prosperity, 4. Not to confiscate any inheritance, 5. to abolish the uncanonical taxes and levies, 6. to restore the mosques at the expense of the treasury, 7. for the non-Muslims he would guarantee their protected status, 8. and for the Muslims adherence to the Sunna of the Prophet.

> The letter says, " And I take it upon me to fulfil what I have committed myself to give you – the *ahd* or pact of God and His inviolable covenant, together with His *dhimma* or protection, and that of his Prophets and Messengers; the protection of

> the Imams our lords, the Commanders of the Faithful, god bless their souls, and that of our lord and master the Commander of the Faithful, al-Muizz li Din Allah, the blessings of God be upon him. And you in turn shall act openly in accordance with his *dhimma*, coming out and submitting to me." (Brett, Coptic church in Fatimid empire, pp.38-9)[3].

The wording here alludes to the Prophet Muhammad's treaty with the Christians of Najran, where they were offered protection. Also the use of the terms protection of God, his prophets and messengers, Imams and then Imam al-Muizz conjures up the continuum that Fatimid theology perceives in the true religion, the *tasalsul*, which in some way reflects the Fatimid view of the universality of religions.

Brett argues that the use of the term *dhimma* in the way it is here, gives a sense of the protection being extended similarly to both Muslims and non-Muslims. "the emphasis", he says, "is upon the solidarity of a community which lives in the *dhimma* of God[4]."
Let us now briefly evaluate how this philosophy manifested itself in practice in Fatimid Egypt.

## Practice

The Copts continued to constitute a significant section of Egyptian society prior to the first wave of Islamisation in the 9th century prior to the arrival of the Fatimids. This process was halted until the second wave in post-Fatimid Mamluk times after which the Copts became a small minority of the population.

As has been widely noted, one of the consequences of the Crusades was the hardening of Muslim attitudes towards Christians in Muslim-ruled territories. However, this is not the case in Fatimid Egypt, where the population continued to enjoy the protection and status it always had. In the Ikhshidid period Christians in Fustat were attacked when the Byzantines defeated Muslim armies in Syria. Such incidents did not happen under the Fatimids, even when they were defeated by the Byzantines, or even, as observed, in the time of the Crusades.

Egypt, in pre-Fatimid as well as Fatimid and post-Fatimid Egypt had a steady stream of Coptic bureaucrats who were experts in agrarian taxation, a skill absolutely essential for any Egyptian administration; this expertise, and the positions that went with it, were many a times passed on from father to son. In the Mamluk period the employment of non-Muslim officials was a source of tension between the regime, the religious circles and the general populace. The executive power wielded by these officials over Muslims

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3 "ولكم علي الوفاء بما التزمته ، وأعطيتكم إياه عهد الله ، وغليظ ميثاقه وذمته ، وذمة أنبيائه ورسله، وذمة الأئمة مواليا أمراء المومنين قدس الله أرواحهم ، وذمة مولانا وسيدنا أمير المومنين المعز لدين الله صلوات الله عليه"
(ittiaz, shayyal, v.1, p.152.)

4 Brett, Coptic church in Fatimid empire, p.40.

was perceived as supremacy of Judaism or Christianity over Islam. None of this tension existed in the Fatimid period. Christians and Jews were massively employed in the Fatimid state, on all levels of the administration. Uniquely, there are some who rose to the highest administrative posts. Among the Christians these included Isa ibn Nestorius, the Melkite vizier of the second Fatimid Imam-caliph of Egypt al-Aziz. Al-Aziz also had a Melkite Christian wife. He appointed the two brothers of his Christian wife as Patriarchs, of the capital and of Jerusalem. Among the Jews, Abu Sa'd al-Tustari held the extremely influential post of head of the Office of the Imam-Caliph al-Mustansir's mother. These were unprecedented cases, in pre-Fatimid Egypt non-Muslims were barred from holding the post of vizier, and no parallel examples of the employment of non-Muslim viziers is known among Muslim regimes contemporary to the Fatimids.

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Notably, apart from the people of other religions, the Fatimids also allowed their subjects who were affiliated to the four schools of Sunni Islam to be judged according to the teachings of their *madhhab* as far as personal law was concerned. To this end, there were Qadi-s or jurists appointed for each school, particularly the majority Maliki and Hanafi schools.

Based on an overview of Fatimid philosophy and good practice, let us reflect on some of the timeless principles that we would be well advised to consider.

## Reflections

For the Fatimids, their view of the universality of religions, in addition to strategic considerations, was an integral component of their benevolent policy towards both their Muslim and non-Muslim subjects.

The Muslim polity today is very different than it was in the 10th century; there are different dynamics of statehood, culture, and social norms. Although certain Islamic states consider themselves to have an "Islamic" foundation, there is also a large population of Muslims who live in secular states as a majority or minority . It is in this context that Muslims' interaction with other religions, including other Muslim denominations (e.g. Shia and Sunni), needs to be considered.

In spite of the religious and socio-political climate in the Fatimid era (when the religious identity of the state as well as society were defining factors) the tolerance and relative freedoms given to non-Muslims were quite remarkable. These freedoms were based primarily on religious principles. Conversely, in the twentieth and 21st century, Muslims have been given freedoms not for their own sake, but based on freedom of, or freedom from, religion in general. Such religious freedoms have become the ever-growing desire of the post-Enlightenment society which is ever more liberalized and secularized. Surely, these societies are better than radical and despotic societies and the freedom of

religion enjoyed within them praiseworthy. However, these freedoms are a by-product of a socio-political movement, which is also under much threat. The consequences of rampant anti-Semitism in 20th century were ever-too obvious. Anti-Muslim sentiment seems to be following a similar road in 21st century.

In this post-enlightenment environment when many abuse others in the name of religion, there is still no need to apologize for our religious identity. Religious freedoms based on a pluralistic system are virtuous in that they ensure the rights of minorities to practice their faith freely. But pluralism, as I understand it, and as the Fatimids defined it, is not indifference or an acceptance that all beliefs are necessarily valid and therefore it is simply a matter of cultural difference or a matter of fate as to which religion one follows. Pluralism is a firm belief – with confidence – in one's faith and identity, with the recognition and respect of the unified origin and the shared values of others. This understanding and recognition – not simply pragmatism – is the key to tolerance and interactive peaceful and fruitful co-existence.

Such an understanding and recognition leads to a move from the term tolerance to respect. Tolerance insinuates an innate dislike for the other, and has its underpinnings in the pragmatic sufferance that is dictated by necessity. Respect on the other hand, demonstrates that confidence in one's own belief system and identity, but at the same time an acknowledgment of the divine origins of all faiths and the recognition of our shared human values. These values are universal to all religions preached by Prophets: honesty, integrity, sincerity and love for mankind. The 51st Fatimid-Tayyibi Dai who espouses the Fatimid philosophy of the Universality of Religions, expresses the source of his respect for other religions in a verse in one of his Qasidas:

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| *There is no religion but within it there are some words from the people of Truth from ages past.* | مَا مِلَّةٌ إلا وفيها كلمة<br>من أهل حق من قديم الأدهر |

In today's world, there are many elements and groups which use religious principles to justify the persecution and even the waging of an ungodly war. These groups are very vocal in advertising the religious justification of their belligerency to anyone who even slightly deviates from their system of belief. In this context it is vital that those of us who, contrary to that, find within our religious principles the roadmap for peaceful and respectful coexistence, unapologetically make known our principles through our words and our actions.

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