The culture of coexistence and pluralism. The Islamic view, Oman's experience and prospects for a way out of the impasse

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The expressions *al 'aish al mushtarak* (coexistence/living together) and *ta'addudiyyah* (pluralism) are newcomers to the Arab/Islamic cultural, social and political scene. When Lebanese Christian intellectuals and politicians first began using them during their country's internal conflict in the early 1970s, they were referring to the fact that the Lebanese belonged to two main religions—Christianity and Islam—and that those two faiths represented two different cultures and civilizations; each of these had its own defining characteristics which influenced its ways of thinking and living, as well as its cultural and social life, including its political culture.

It was their recognition of these distinctive features that led them to call for the creation of a kind of federalism similar to the system that exists in countries like Switzerland. In fact, although what they were calling for might have seemed unduly radical, its causes were rooted in the "extreme homogeneity" which was a dominant trait of Arab nationalism and had led to the union between Egypt and Syria (1958-61) as well as to later unification projects. This "homogeneity"—so to speak—was warmly welcomed by the vast majority of Arab public opinion during the period between the 1950s and 1970s. At the same time, however, these "integrationist" practices, which were aimed at establishing pan-Arab unity with an Islamic flavour, aroused the fears of Arab Christians as well as some other nationalities and ethnic groups in the eastern Arab world (and later at the western end of the Arab world too).

In this climate, Arab nationalist and leftist intellectuals countered the concept of *al 'aish al mushtarak* with the notion of *al 'aish al wahid* (one single uniform way of life), on the grounds that we are one nation with a single culture, whatever our religious or ethnic differences might be.

As it turned out, this confrontation that arose in several Arab states was unfair to both *al 'aish al mushtarak* and *al 'aish al wahid*, since both sides—the "integrationists" as well as the "separatists"—interpreted the two concepts to suit their own preconceived ideas. Some Arab Christians rejected the notion of *al 'aish al wahid* because they associated it with forced integration, *dhimmi* (non-Muslim subject) status and subjection to the majority and its culture,

while the nationalists (and later the Islamists) believed that the idea of separate identities was part of a deliberate plot to cause schisms in the fabric of national unity and promote hatred towards Arabdom and Islam. This was despite the fact that Christian civilization was progressive and endorsed the culture of democracy and human rights.

Although the era of left-right political disputes is now in the past, the question of distinct identity *versus* total homogeneity is still very much alive and in recent years we have come across it in several Arab and Islamic states. This is due largely to two factors: an inability to deal with differences and disagreements in the new social culture, and a failure to establish political systems capable of reconciling "state mentality" with "regime mentality", which lies at the root of the European concept of *al 'aish al mushtarak*—a concept which the ideologues have turned on its head with the result that it creates conflicts rather than resolving them.

In the 1980s we learnt that the notion of *al 'aish al mushtarak*—or pluralism—first appeared after the Second World War in the form we understand it today and that its main protagonist was the Dutch thinker Lijphart.

Lijphart observed how European countries—particularly states such as Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium—handled the problems of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and political differences. He concluded that ethno-linguistic—and sometimes political—distinctions could not be overcome merely by exercising "majority democracy" and protecting the rights of minorities. Instead, what was need-

ed was a strong sense of identity in a "citizenship" context, reinforced by broad-based, inclusive systems which ensured that *al 'aish al wahid* also made provision for pluralism and a kind of partnership between the individual and the community.

Lijphart, Moran and several other intellectuals believe that the individualism that has become so much a part of the European character over the past two centuries and more has had a negative impact on the "identity" and "culture" mentalities of both sides—the integrationist majorities as well as the separatist minorities.

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Now let us first look briefly at the Arab and Islamic attitudes to *al 'aish al mushtarak* and coming to terms with differences. This should enable us to assess their successes and failures during the modern era and decide how we should approach the future.

In its references to pluralism and difference, the Holy Qur'an sees them as natural elements of the world and societies we live in. We are all familiar with the *ayats* (verses) which mention diversity and "pairing" in nature, as well as differences in languages, colours, races and communities, including the fact that even non-human creatures are organised in different communities. In particular, we are all familiar with *Surat al Hujurat*, 13:

> O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of Allah is the most God-fearing of you. Allah is All-knowing, All-aware.

The Holy Qur'an states that differences in kind and social composition—which tend to extend beyond mere differences and lead to conflicts—ought in fact to lead to "knowing one another" and mutual understanding. We should also note here that the Qur'an lays down a condition, or conditions, for this, which are summed up in the expression *taqwa*, or "God-fearingness"—a term which implies eschewing greed, ambition, pride and disrespect for others. In several *ayats* the Qur'an also adds a further clarification, or world-view, when it points out that mankind were originally a single nation or community. Then they fell into disputes among themselves and they are still continuing to do so.

Of course, these disputing parties cannot all be right, but the best course of action is reconciliation, "knowing one another", forgiveness and good deeds, not just between nations or communities within nations, but between individuals. Here we see that the Qur'an makes a distinction between two categories where resolving or managing differences is concerned: firstly, individuals and social cultures, where it calls for reconciliation, forgiveness, kindness, open-mindedness and the avoidance of attacks upon a person's honour, religion or household; and secondly, states or political authorities, where disputes should be tackled through the application of justice:

> If two parties of the Believers fight, put things right between them; then, if one of them transgresses against the other, fight the transgressor [party] until it reverts to Allah's commandment. If it reverts, set things right between them equitably, and be just. Surely Allah loves the just. (*Surat al Hujurat*, 9.)

Justice and equity should be the basis upon which states and judicial systems deal with differences, while reconciliation, forgiveness, tolerance and the public interest should be the principles for dealing with matters related to social culture, individuals and groups of individuals.

Can the state or political system combine the two— i.e. justice and equity on the one side and reconciliation, forgiveness, tolerance and the public interest on the other? Yes. A successful political system is capable of doing so, just as individuals are. In fact, individuals and the political system can work together to that end: "The recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto [in degree]; but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah" (*Surat al Shura*, 40).

Differences, then, can arise from diversity where peoples, tribes, races and languages are concerned. However, differences of this kind should not lead to disputes and schisms—neither within a single entity nor between nations. "*Ta'arof*"—or "knowing one another"—which implies mutual recognition and respect for differences, is the proper way to resolve disputes should they occur.

It is relatively easy to settle disputes when a culture of "*ta'arof*" is widely accepted by societies. However, the other kind of difference is the sort which occurs when there are conflicts of interest between individuals or communities. In such cases, if they are ignored and left to fester they can result in catastrophes; hence it is vital to try to resolve them though the application of justice and equity. All parties will be willing to accept a just so-

lution if the culture of "*ta'arof*" is the dominant one. Such a culture lies behind the principle of *qisas* (requital) and inspires the *wali al amr* (person in authority) to resort to justice, good deeds, forgiveness, reconciliation and the public interest.

It was this Qur'anic vision of the world of mankind and its problems that established the historical basis and cultural background for what we call *fiqh al 'aish*—the rules that govern our daily lives and show us how we should come to terms with differences and conflicts. The old traditional *fiqh al 'aish* was of course strongly influenced by the culture of good-neighbourliness, mercy, looking after one another and upholding the welfare of the community, and this had an impact (both positive and negative) upon political and judicial practice and *fiqh* (doctrine/jurisprudence) systems, whether those concerned were Muslims or followers of other faiths.

On the other hand, political differences were governed by another set of *fiqh*, judicial and political rules.

The rules governing relations between followers of different faiths were determined by the *ahl al dhimmah* (non-Muslim subjects) system. At the same time, however, where daily life was concerned they were often relaxed in practice. In Oman we have still remembered of Imam al-Salt b. Malik (r.851-886) the declaration to his people when they conquered Socotra Island, which based in the human right and coexistence between Muslim and Christian in one land and also how protecting other people who in different believes. Indeed it was a good experience in pluralism and for the Omanis since they converted the Is-

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lam. Later on Some Islamic scholar expressed the view that the mixing between Muslims and Christians that he observed in Damascus in the 13th century was in breach of the rules in that it showed far too great a tendency towards rapprochement and *al 'ish al mushtarak*; accordingly, it ought to be resisted.

As far as dealing with political differences was concerned, in the books of the *fuqaha'* (scholars of doctrine/jurisprudence) this subject is covered in the chapters devoted to *Ahkam al Bughat*, or *Rulings for Wrongdoers*—that is to say, people who make political demands. Under that system there were no judicial or political procedures for dealing with a political opposition, whether peaceful or armed; however, questions related to justice and "participation" were clear to all parties, whether they were opponents of the system or compliant with it, and in general they were aware of their rights and obligations.

How should we judge the old system, other than in the light of its acceptance of religious or political differences? It did indeed represent pluralism (or *al 'aish al mushtarak*) as a system governed by conventions, rules and laws, and guided by concepts such as justice, open-mindedness and a readiness to accept the religious and political "other". Historically, it—i.e. the old system—had its faults (at least, to some extent) in two areas: firstly, in dealing with religious and cultural differences, and secondly, in its approach to political conflicts. Even so, while it did not involve forced homogeneity or inclusiveness and there was a degree of discrimination, it survived for over 1,200 years;

this is reflected in the fact that Christians and Jews continued to live alongside Muslims, and were allowed to retain their own cultures and languages, and even their own subordinate states and political systems, which were distinct from the general traditions and practices of the countries under Islamic rule.

The First World War led to the collapse of the world's three remaining empires—Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman—which were already in competition with the nation-state in Europe. Then the modern nation-state began to emerge in the Arab and Islamic worlds from the ruins of those empires—particularly the Ottoman Empire.

An empire is by its very nature a pluralistic entity with its own traditions, mechanisms and conventions for coping with differences. National entities, on the other hand, are "homogeneous entities" and we all know the enormous problems Europe has had to face in the era of the nation-state; one example of these is Balkanisation—or partition—caused by national and ethnic identity crises. This is also why the rise of modern nationalisms in our own region has brought great suffering in its wake, particularly since US President Woodrow Wilson's declaration of the principle of "the right of self-determination" for different ethnicities, nations and religions.

After abandoning the Caliphate in 1924, Turkey established a national, secular, homogeneous state. An "Egyptian national entity" appeared on the scene and adopted a constitutional system, though it was also strongly homogeneous. Meanwhile, the Saudi state was established in the

Arabian Peninsula as a highly homogeneous Islam-orient-
ed state, and the former empire of Oman arose as a model
of an "open-minded" nation-state which sought to combine
tradition with modernity. From imamate and monarchy
our own path has taken us towards a modern centralised
state—a state based on citizenship. It is not homogeneous,
when considered from the point of view of either national-
ism or religion. This is due in part to the racial pluralism
of Omani society; it is true that its majority component is
Arab and Islamic, but for centuries its citizens have includ-
ed Arabs and non-Arabs as well as Muslims and non-Mus-
lims. For over a century we have had non-Islamic religious
communities and traditionally they have not suffered from
religious or ethnic discrimination. There are also several
Islamic sects and schools in the Sultanate who have lived
together since the days when Oman was an empire, their
harmonious relationship reinforced by their followers' sta-
tus as citizens and by a climate of social and cultural toler-
ance. With regard to the unrest that occurred as a result of
Britain's imperial retreat, the Cold War and various social
problems, during His Majesty the Sultan's reign the state's
strong citizenship-based policies and steady growth have
enabled it to withstand any possibility that turmoil might
occur as a result of ethnic, religious or regional differenc-
es. The principles of citizenship, freedom, the rule of law
and the state's strong development policies have produced
a cohesive, tolerant and open-minded society committed
to safeguarding the country's unity and stability, not only
during the time of unrest in the 1970s, but also in these re-

cent years that have come to be known as the Arab Spring (2011-2014)—or "Arab Autumn", in view of the events that have taken place in large parts of the Arab region.

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I think it is natural for a person to be extremely proud when his nation can rightly claim success in a highly uncertain world and a highly unstable region. This is why I have no hesitation in saying that Oman's experience of *al ʿaish al mushtarak* and pluralism is virtually unique in the region, and that this is just as true of the past as it is of the present day. I have mentioned that our nation-state has not adopted highly integrationist policies with regard to either religion or nationality. In 1966 the Royal Decree (no. 101/96) was issued, known as the State Basic Law of the Sultanate of Oman, in which the Oman system of common existence was determined on the basis of the system's three pillars: justice, reason and ethics. These were particularly defined in items 10, 12, 28 and 35, serving as an update for the development to set up the state institutions in keeping with the comprehensive international update of the concept of citizenship, equality and tolerance. Moreover, a glimpse into our Arab history will also reveal other examples of the "moderate" Islamic model of religious and national pluralism in Sicily and Andalusia, as well as in the Omani Empire, which extended along the Indian Ocean coasts of Africa and Asia.

I should also like to point out that an Islamic culture based upon the Holy Qur'an's view of the world (and the Muslim peoples' own historical experiences in the fields or religion

and culture) offers possibilities and potential for openness, renewal and compatibility with the modern age and the modern world. This is reflected in the works of the Muslim reformers in the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as in the writings of leading Omani *fuqaha'* such as Nur al Din Abullah b. Humayd al Salimi, Egyptians like Sheikh Mohammed 'Abduh, and in North Africa Moroccans, Tunisians and Algerians like Abdel Hamid Ben Badis, Al Tahir Ben 'Ashour, and 'Allal al Fassi. These men and their numerous pupils worked on *fiqh al 'aish*, within the Arab and Islamic world as well as further afield, and their large numbers of followers represented the majority of the Muslim public and continue to do so. I am making this point because the extremism and violence we see in many parts of the Arab and Islamic world has led many observers to conclude that Islamic or religious reform has failed, since "these extremist youth" do not accept the "other" and inflict violence upon those who disagree with their sectarian or religious views.

It is true that there are some extremist trends in Islamic thought. We characterise them under the umbrella heading of "neo-Salafism". In many cases they resemble the new "Born-Agains" we come across in Evangelical circles, as well as in Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism. However, if we wish to understand them properly we also need to consider other factors which I should like to call "failure to cope with differences" or "reaction to social, intellectual, cultural and political pluralism". Such situations are the responsibility of the societies, states and cultural elites of the countries affected.

Even religious or national extremism can be managed successfully in forward-looking, societies which have the ability to live their lives in a way that is in tune with the modern world. However, events in the Arab world in recent years have shown a significant degree of "fragility" in dealing with national problems and issues that are of concern to the younger members of society. Consequently, certain young extremists have taken it upon themselves to fill the cultural, religious and political vacuum—a situation similar to that which occurred in Latin America in the past in the countries in which military dictatorships found themselves confronting left-wing radicals. However, just as Latin America has succeeded in overcoming those dictatorships and radical militias, so too are the aware elites and strong-willed citizens of the Arab world capable of confronting the challenges and opening up new horizons—an option infinitely preferable to lamenting their plight or asking the Americans to save their countries and societies from fundamentalism.

The way out of the crisis is through a strong, open-minded, pluralistic and democratic nation-state. There can be no doubt that the problems of today will point us in that direction, because there is no alternative. This has been proved by Oman's successful development programme and its experience in coping with differences and creating a new and progressive environment for the younger generation and all the other classes of society.

The concept of *al 'aish al mushtarak* and pluralism and the culture of citizenship are major elements of the global ethos of today. It is a concept that we seriously need to in-

corporate into our religious and cultural life, not just because it will help us to create a diverse, modern culture and society today, but also because it is part of our history as Arabs and Muslims.