

Fatimids: A Legacy of Pluralism

Research Project

## Introduction

Never before in the history of mankind, has the world been bereft with disputes, communal violence, warfare and civil unrest as it is now. From Brussels attacks to Orlando shooting, terrorism has firmed itself in our land. Meanwhile, Palestine, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan also continue to struggle with the havoc of terrorism. News channels are flooding with images of Syrian kids pleading for peace and citizens holding placards pleading for justice against corrupt governments. Though humanity is coming together yet we are entangled in the knots of mutual distrust and intolerance, racial and ethnic disharmony and ideological and religious differences. From the beginning of time and in every part of our world, people of different races, religions and cultures have lived side by side still people are not alike. No two human beings, no matter how closely related they maybe are exactly the same. Everyone is different, rather diverse. Diversity has been a constant feature of human existence. The notion of diversity in our world is nothing new. Neither is the human consciousness of this phenomenon something new. However, as we see it today, this notion has been made the basis for conflict rather than harmony in many cases. Diversity and pluralism have become the buzz words of 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the advent of modern technologies like the Internet combined with the processes of globalization and escalating migrations, these words have been employed so frequently that they tend to become a cliché. Some consider pluralism and diversity to be synonyms. Others tend to link it with terms like relativism, inclusiveness, tolerance, multiculturalism and many more. However, in the stream of current thought one is compelled to question that do we really understand the phenomenon of pluralism? Is it same as the concept of diversity or is it different? What is the standing of pluralism amidst all these terms and are they interchangeable in theory as well as in practice?

The archives of history contain many occasions where communities and religious groups have not only tolerated each other but have based their mutual relationships on respect and shared aims. And over the course of history, this subject has continued to attract immense scholarly attention. Many scholars, philosophers and theorists have tried to explain this mutual and peaceful co-existence and answer afore mentioned questions through frameworks as diverse as the “Melting pot”, “Ethnic stew”, “Salad Bowl”, “The mosaic” and so on.

### Research Purpose & Methodology

This paper attempts to explore the evolution of the concept of pluralism and its functioning through a religious perspective by examining the 11<sup>th</sup> century medieval Muslim regime of The Fatimids. The following pages will present examination of history and sources of Fatimids to reform our present understanding of pluralism and provide us a context to assess and determine different propositions relating to pluralism. Moreover, this study of Fatimid rule as an exemplar of commitment to pluralism would be further contextualized to understand contemporary world issues by pondering on some of the factors that support or impede pluralism.

### Literature Review

Before delving into the contours of Fatimid history, it is important to understand what is pluralism? A vast range of meanings have been attached to pluralism resulting in a wide variety of applications. Different people have ascribed different meanings to pluralism. Historically speaking, the concept of pluralism was first introduced in the period of Enlightenment by philosophers Christian Wolff and Emmanuel Kant. However, pluralism as a way of thinking dates back as old as human civilization itself expressed since the time of Ancient Greeks. No matter how subtle it was, the many Greek philosophers like Democritus and Aristotle viewed life as an interaction of diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural

groups and acknowledged a “plurality of worlds”. Despite the early discourse on pluralism, the existence of different opinions, religions and values was generally believed to be a danger for the state and therefore it was held that there was only one right way to do things.

According to Hassan (2012), pluralism became popular between the eighteen and nineteen century time period with the development of political concepts and global trade in Europe. People started to realize that the existence of variety in opinions and values is healthy for a society to last rather than a society where everyone has to share a single belief. But it was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that people tried to develop systematic theories of pluralism. Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, Michael Waltzer, John Gray, Stuart Hampshire, John Hick and Diana Eck are some of the writers whose scholarship on different elements of pluralism will be utilized in this paper to aid our understanding of the mechanism of pluralism and its application in the current complex web of human interaction.

Studied under numerous academic disciplines, pluralism has its primary roots in European philosophy. According to Craig, pluralism is a “broad term applicable to any doctrine which maintains that there are ultimately many things or many kinds of thing.” Firstly, pluralism is not the same as diversity. Rather, it is a positive response to that diversity. Diversity being derived from the old French “diversité”, in the simplest form means the quality of being diverse or different. Human race is inherently diverse in aspects like ethnicity, lifestyles, interests, likes, ideas, traditions, values and beliefs. Then, pluralism in its basic sense is not only the acceptance but the state of engagement with this social, religious and cultural diversity. Like diversity, pluralism can be understood etymologically from the root word “Plural”, an accustomed English adjective, which means “containing more than one kind of thing” derived via Latin “pluralis” meaning “more”. This brings us to the second point that pluralism accepts diversity but diversity does not guarantee pluralism. In other terms, diversity is a natural preset concept. On the other hand, pluralism requires conscious efforts

to be fostered because differences can produce negative as well as positive outcomes.

Pluralism rejects conflict and division as a necessary outcome of diversity; instead it is characterized with an attitude of openness and receptiveness towards those whom we consider different from ourselves.

Literature reveals that the term pluralism has been linked with a wide variety of positions due to its all-encompassing nature. Accordingly, pluralism has been widely understood in the sense of tolerance especially by the masses, relating to their level of knowledge and comprehension. Diana Eck, the founder of The Pluralism Project at the Harvard University (2001) has tried to highlight certain peculiarities of pluralism that distinguish it from its common replica terms. She states that pluralism does not just simply mean to tolerate others but rather it is an active commitment to arrive at an understanding of the differences that exist. Pluralism surpasses tolerance so as to transform differences into assets for human welfare. For instance, an individual can tolerate or even just observe the diversity in his neighborhood without investing any conscious efforts or dialogue towards that diversity. Thus, even in a world of high-speed connectivity, we continue to live in a state of ignorance if we only tend to tolerate others. As His Highness the Aga Khan said in his speech at the 88<sup>th</sup> Stephen Ogden Lecture at the Brown University that, “Greater connectivity does not necessarily mean greater connection.” (10 March, 2014).

Likewise, recent emigration movements, especially with reference to the context of the America, gave birth to the concept of multiculturalism which is closely related to the concept of pluralism as it talks about a state of co-existence of various cultures within a single community or society. Yet, pluralism stands apart here too in the sense that multiculturalism as evidenced by its frameworks (melting pot, ethnic stew, salad bowl and the mosaic) tends to cloud the cultural distinctiveness of the participants due to the amalgamation and assimilation features of the respective frameworks. Whereas pluralism stresses to acquire a fine balance

between maintaining cultural identities along with contributing to collective human development and world peace (Boutilier, 2012). Regardless of the element of freedom of choices offered by pluralism, it does not imply an “anything goes” attitude, which has a tendency to mix all opinions and values into one- a form of moral relativism often equated with pluralism by critics. But pluralism is not relativism. It is a social agreement which says, people with differing views have a right to have them heard and explored. For example, marriage is a communion of not only two individuals but their families, with views that resemble and those that differ too. But neither is dismissed for holding on to their reasons. Instead each recognizes the validity of other even trying to accommodate it with their values in order to enrich that relation (Hirji, 2010).

Pluralism is also widely related, but not the same as inclusiveness, which could be readily understood by the common English saying “the more the merrier”. This means that inclusiveness is the measure of accommodating as much diversity of people in a group as possible. On the contrary, pluralism does not only seek to include more people in a group, but also to find ways to empower people to bridge their variances within that group (Hussain 2009, as cited in Sajoo, 2009).

Pluralism, in the above passages has been discussed extensively but with a general position. In the upcoming passages, the specific aspect of religious pluralism will be explored from an Islamic perspective.

Islam has, from the beginning, explicitly endorsed the diversity of God’s creation. The Islamic tradition has always valued and accepted diversity as a way of life. Islam was revealed in a land of people who were largely tribal and polytheistic revealing the inherent cultural and religious diversity. The Islam as we see today could not have developed this way if it had not actively engaged with the polytheists, and then the surrounding Christians, Jews

and Zoroastrians too. The idea of diversity and pluralism is explicitly mentioned at various places in the Quran. Although, we do not find a precise equivalent expression for pluralism in the Quran or Hadith yet, the concept derives itself from the very scripture. The Quran speaks about creation and meaningfully draws upon its relation with difference in the following verse: “O humanity! Truly, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might know each other” (49:13). This passage clearly encourages people to transcend their differences and learn from each other. Likewise, in verse 11:118 Quran attests to the fact that the creation of humanity into distinct groupings comes from God and is therefore, a value to be cherished. Indeed, it seems that message of Islam is actually the message of pluralism as also portrayed throughout the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) too. What could be a better illustration of this reflection of pluralism than the Charter of Medina Which Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had produced? It brought together the different religious and ethnic communities of the then Medina, conferring upon each of them equal rights and responsibilities (Kamali, 2009).

#### Contextualization and Analysis of Data on Fatimids

It was largely because of the pluralistic approach to religious and cultural diversity embodied in the Quran and the Sunnah that generations of Muslim scholars and philosophers from the 9th to the 14th centuries opened their minds to the vast corpus of knowledge found in the contemporary religious and cultural civilizations, be it Hindu and Confucian or Greek and Roman. A positive attitude towards ‘the other’ was undoubtedly a major factor in the emergence of Islamic civilization as the source of learning and the harbinger of the modern scientific inquiry. Indeed, it is due to the adoption of this pluralistic viewpoint that this time frame became the most creative and enlightened period of Islamic history producing great civilizations of all times like the Abbasids centered in Baghdad, the great Convivencia of

Umayyads in Spain and zenith of cultural and intellectual efflorescence at the Fatimid Cairo. The idea of diversity and pluralism was widely discussed within varied milieus, including the religious, intellectual, socio-cultural and legal-political during this era. In other words, Islam had already recognized the elements posited by pluralism in various spheres of human life by then and these civilizations are actually the practical demonstration of numerous principles of the pluralism presented by earlier mentioned recent Western scholarship (Kramer, 2013).

His Highness the Aga Khan also shares a similar observation while discussing the instrumental role of the Fatimid civilization in the long history of pluralism at the 10<sup>th</sup> La-Fontaine Baldwin Lecture that “But even as Europe fragmented after the fall of Rome, another success story emerged in Egypt. I have a special interest in this story; it concerns my ancestors, the Fatimid Caliphs, who founded the city of Cairo 1000 years ago. They were themselves Shia in an overwhelmingly dominant Sunni culture, and for nearly two centuries they led a strong pluralistic society, welcoming a variety of Islamic interpretations as well as people of Christian, Jewish and other backgrounds (2010).” Over the course of their rule Fatimids adopted such a model of governance that facilitated the growth of a same kind of religious and cultural pluralism which is not only desired but highly researched upon in the scholarly circles of our present world. But the real question over here is how they made this possible? Regardless of emerging from a hundred and fifty years’ period of concealment, Fatimids embarked on a journey based on the ideals of inclusiveness and just governance for all of its residents which in turn enabled political stability, economic growth, intellectual progress and artistic splendor for the two centuries of their reign and gave them the reputation corresponding to that of the Abbasids and Umayyads in Muslim history.

Let us now review how the conceptual framework for governance of state combined with religious input facilitated the Fatimids in the quest of attaining pluralism. Like many other



dynasties, Fatimids also came across some challenges to establishing their rule. The most essential challenge of all, however, was how a Shi'i dynasty can exercise their political legitimacy over a majority Sunni populace? Fatimids rose to power in North Africa in 296/909, a land inhabited by people of diverse ethnic backgrounds and religious affiliations. Arabs and the native Berbers formed the two largest groups of North African demography. Majority of them were Maliki Sunnis with a small distinct grouping of Shi'a and Kharjites. Christian and Jewish communities were also present. This socially and religiously stratified terrain required Fatimid rulers to develop a pragmatic model of governance that ensure peaceful co-existence by means of active engagement of the significant communities in the administrative affairs of the state. Fatimids also had to face continuous threats to their sovereignty due to the ideological antagonism of their contemporaries; the Abbasids. Hamdani's study (2006) analyses the response of the nascent Fatimid state to the challenge of establishing their authority over this majority non-Ismaili population. Following in the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad PBUH, Fatimid imam-caliphs too made inclusion, social justice and equity hallmark of their leadership not only in North Africa but also in Egypt. The consolidation of the nascent Fatimid state reveals exceptional efforts and steps taken by the Fatimid Imam-caliphs. Imamate was central to the Fatimid Empire, which challenged both the political supremacy and the religious authority of the Sunni Abbasid caliphate. This claim to Imamate, however, was derived from a Universalist notion of supreme spiritual and temporal authority by being divinely designated as successors to Prophet Muhammad PBUH. Regardless of this doctrinal underpinning, Fatimids have rarely chronicled as being exclusivist in their governance. Rather, the portrayal of Fatimid emperors as the Imam-caliphs espoused the traditional role carried by the Prophet and the four rightly guided caliphs but lost in the then mainstream Muslim caliphate of the Abbasids and Umayyads respectively (Jiwa, 2009, as cited in Sajoo, 2009). These positive developments that took place in the

Fatimid rule are largely due to the working of the intricate *Da'wa* network, the act of proselytizing. It is interesting to note that *Da'wa* is commonly thought to be concerned with teaching of religious matters only yet Daftary (2000) has elaborated it as a religio-political phenomenon, deeply rooted in the socially, politically, economically and even intellectually disordered context of Islamic world at that time. The inclusive nature of Fatimid rule is evident by the involvement of subjects from varying ethnic and religious backgrounds in the management of state affairs. For instance, Jiwa (2015) informs that Ibn-al-Qadim, a senior administrator, from the previous Sunni Aghlabid reign was made the finance minister of the Fatimid state, responsible for taxation and the postal service too. Subsequently, the third imam-caliph al-Mansur took a great leap in the reformation of Fatimid model of governance by openly recognizing and reconciling with the existing Sunni madhabs. Al-Mansur, demonstrated this paradigm shift by appointing a Maliki administrator over Qayrawan instead of an Ismaili or another Shia. Similarly, Sunni judges were appointed to towns with majority Sunnis. These actions of Fatimid make the phenomenon of pluralism visible by distinguishing it from plain tolerance.

During the reign of the fourth Fatimid imam-caliph, al-Mu'iz li Din Allah the North African Fatimid state transformed into a Mediterranean Empire due to the addition of Egypt in the Fatimid block, followed by the subsequent expansion into Palestine and Syria. When the Fatimids entered Egypt, the situation was even more complex in terms of diversity than that in North Africa. The 10-century Egypt was inhabited by Muslim Arabs, Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Berbers and Sudanese ethnicities alongside with a sizeable portion of Christians and Jews too. It was under the Fatimid caliphate, that Egypt first became a worldwide sensation and the centre of medieval Mediterranean Empire in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Fatimid Cairo became its organizational hub and flourished as an international metropolis. Al-Muiz's active role in the strategic planning and of the Egyptian campaign and his selection of slave

turned veteran general Jawhar al-Siqilli also shows his profound commitment towards meaningful inclusiveness (Jiwa, 2015). Upon, entering Egypt, Jawhar proclaimed *Aman*, an official document guaranteeing the safety and security of the Egyptian populace.

Interestingly, history provides us a rare opportunity to study distinct yet neutral perspective from which to understand and examine the Egyptian phase of Fatimid historiography. Al-Maqrizi, a 15<sup>th</sup> century, Sunni Mamluk historian, gives a neutral account of the *Aman* document in his work the “*Itti’az al-Hunafa’ bi-akhbar al-a’imma al-Fatimiyyin al-Khulafa’*” (Lessons for the Seekers of Truth on the History of the Fatimid Imams and Caliphs). The *Aman* document was proclaimed for the Egyptian public on the eve of its conquest. Just like Prophet Muhammad’s Charter of Medina, the *Aman* document too promised safety and security for all of its citizens regardless of their cast, creed, color or religion. Besides restoring security, the *Aman* also highlights the responsibilities of the Muslim ruler in improving the overall quality of life of the citizens under his rule. Consequently, the *Aman* entailed social and economic reforms for the Egyptian subjects like repairing of roads and waving off taxes. According to Jiwa (2009), another salient feature of the *Aman* is its emphasis not only on the protection of religious communities but also on the provision of religious freedom to those communities by declaring:

“You shall continue in your *madhabs* (school). You shall be permitted to perform your obligations according to religious scholarships, and to gather for it in your congregational and other mosques, and to remain steadfast in the beliefs of the worthy ancestors from the Companions of the Prophet, may God be pleased with them, the jurists of the cities who have pronounced judgments according to their *madhabs* and *fatwa* (formal legal opinions).

The call to prayer and its performance, the fasting in the month of Ramadan, the breaking of the fast and the celebration of its nights, the [payment of] the alms tax, [the performance of the] pilgrimage and the undertaking of jihad will be maintained according to the command of God and His Book and in accordance with the instruction of His Prophet...in His *Sunna*, and the *dhimmi*s will be treated according to previous custom.”

The reference to the Dhimmi over here reflects the open attitude of Fatimids towards their non-Muslim subjects, particularly the Christians and Jews respectively. It is important to note that the Fatimid imam-caliphs maintained a neutral policy towards the *ahl al-dhimma* (the people of the covenant of protection). Al-Mui'z has been spotted in history to have permitted renovation of churches. In the same way, the fifth Fatimid imam-caliph, al-Aziz made Yaqub b. Killis, a former Jew, the first Fatimid *vizier*. Furthermore, he also appointed a Christian scribe, Isa b. Nestorius to the senior administrative post of *wasita*. However, these acts could not be surmised as unchecked liberalism or relativism, because when Isa misused his authority, he was immediately dismissed from his post. Last but not the least, Fatimid imams are well known for encouraging the pluralism of intellectual expression as evident by the magnificent traditions of learning reflected via institutions like Dar-al-Ilm and al-Azhar University. On one hand, we have the eastern Iranian Dai's like Al-Sijistani and Nasir Khusraw engaged in formulating unique cosmological doctrines infused with the primordial Greek works of Plato. Side by side, we have Arab intellectuals like Qadi Numan, who have pioneered extraordinary work “Daim-ul-Islam” on legitimization of the Ismailis (Halm, 1997).

Relevance in Contemporary Times and Conclusion

The Fatimid pluralistic model of governance was not without challenges. Nonetheless, they sustained this model with effectiveness over a period of two hundred years by exercising flexibility, openness and learning from their past experiences. This brings us back to our initial debate that why are we falling prey to ugly sectarian divisions? The depiction of the case of Fatimids in this paper clearly states that pluralism is not a name for agreeing to anything but actually is a process of communicating and dialogue. We also learned that pluralism is not an accident of history but is a product of conscious decisions and public investments characterized by factors such as good governance, strong civic institutions and sound public policy. Pluralism is also well supported when citizens, reflecting upon their multiple identities, make sound choices and decisions which in turn reciprocates a sense of shared experience and mutual obligation. In addition, education is the critical foundation for pluralism. Without education, we cannot imagine a pluralistic ethos because it is education that shapes individual perceptions and life choices in fundamental ways. It is only through education that we can inculcate respect for differences and diversity as also evidenced in the legacy of Fatimids.

To conclude we live in a pluralistic world with regards to many things. This is all the more evident today with globalization and greater mobility of people across the globe. History bears witness that societies which recognized pluralism as a fundamental value in human development continued to prosper. Whereas those groups that tend to eradicate the social and cultural differences inherent in human nature remained entangled in destructive conflicts. But pluralistic societies are not accidental. They are product of enlightened education just as illustrated by the Fatimids patronage for learning and knowledge. In other terms, commitment to pluralism is commitment to education, to awareness of human diversities. From the account of Fatimid history, it becomes very clear that pluralism is a work in progress. It is a concept requiring continuous nourishment in the personal, professional and institutional

domains of our lives in order to secure world peace and progress in our humanitarian development.

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