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## A CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MODERN ISLAMIC EXEGETICS FOR THE THEORY OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

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The problem of religious freedom which, respectively, related to the complex issues of the freedom of consciousness, tolerance, speech and some others, constitutes one of the most crucial quests in the contemporary social studies. Since the “freedom” as a moral value became to serve as one of the makers of Western civilization *a priori* (i.e. even if we do not exactly know what freedom is we know that we need it), its various dimensions pretend to be the only true criteria of the real humanistic culture. Growing from the time of Renaissance, the idea of religious freedom came to us through a very complicated

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political, social and cultural changes; in the West its inner sense evolved in the context of relation between the state and the church, the state and minorities, challenges of political radicalism (Nazism, Communism) and, nowadays, integration of the immigrants into what is called as “traditional European culture”.

Despite the huge amount of classical and recent studies on the religious freedom, still the problem of the features of its origin exists. Few scholars have sought to explain the rise of – or, more precisely – the change and fluctuations in – religious liberty in any theoretically systematic way, as Anthony Gill points out. As a result, the question about the origins of religious liberty was not seen as much of question at all<sup>1</sup>. However, two scientific approaches are corresponding all the mentioned tries. One, which applies for the intellectual roots of the idea of the equality of religions (i.e. in the philosophy of Enlightenment), refers to the tolerance as the result of growth in scientific progress and related social changes like the secularization and so on<sup>2</sup>. The second, which identify itself as the political one, claiming for the role of the political interest, which come from both the side of religious actors and secular rulers<sup>3</sup>.

However, the new fundamental problems arise when we are talking about the religious liberty from the non-Western or, what is more important, “non-Christian” and “non-secular” perspective. Anat Scolnicov rightly notices, that more than a subject of other human rights, such as “torture” or “slavery”, “religion” is a concept defined by the culture to which it belongs. This concept loses much of its meaning outside its cultural context. Therefore, more than other human rights, freedom of religion can be interpreted differently by different cultures<sup>4</sup>. The problem is more complicated if someone takes into account the position of Wilfred Smith, argued in his well-known

“The Meaning and End of Religion”: “Religion as a systematic entity, as it emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is a concept of polemics and apologetics”<sup>5</sup>. So, interpreted in this way, religious freedom can be understood only as the one of the Western ideas, which seems to be project onto the other parts of the world by the means of colonialism and, in our days, globalization. But perhaps most important, globalization has created all kinds of identity dilemmas in which religion plays a complicated part. It makes rather more difficult questions: is religion about belief? Is it about a way of life? Or is it a marker of identity? Or what combination of the three?<sup>6</sup>

Despite the obvious dependence of the concept of the freedom of religion (and, consequently, the idea of religious tolerance) from the Western thought, this doesn't mean that other cultures/civilizations are not possess the similar ideas, widely discussed in various research books. Due to the goal of our study – which is the observation of this problem in the contemporary Islamic exegetics – we will try to show, how the autochthonous culture reacts on the “Western” kind of tolerance, answering to the modern challenges from its own tradition. This will help us to define the real nature of the theory of “Islamic” religious tolerance, promoted not only by various Muslim groups around the world, but inclined to the politics of the governments of Muslim countries as well. Taking into consideration the difficulties with the term “Islamic”, our exploration will be restricted to the most traditional part of Islamic religious traditions – the Qur'anic exegetics, which, however, was the object of many changes during the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of 21<sup>th</sup> centuries. Comparing the modern Western understanding of the freedom of religion with the statements of contemporary exegetes, our study will show the inner evolution of *tafsir* and its evaluation of the new issues of public and private law.

Notwithstanding the fact that modern trends of Islamic thought are well studied, a contemporary exegetics – in contrast to the traditional one – needs further research. J. Pink rightly notes, that field of contemporary Quranic commentaries has by large been neglected by scholars. Several individual commentaries have received a certain amount of attention, while comparative studies or surveys that are at least remotely up-to-date are scarce<sup>7</sup>. By the “modern Islamic exegetics” we mean all the efforts in Islamic understanding of the Qur’an, which can be traced to the revival of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since the appearance of the “modernism” in Islam was the result of the familiarity with the West (and some authors like Albert Hourani determine it with a reference to French invasion into Egypt<sup>8</sup> in 1798), the exegetic tradition became to reformulate itself in a terms of new social circumstances. Taking into consideration the fact that modern Islamic exegetics represented by more than five generations of scholars, we may trace a significant steps of development in this tradition. For instance, J. Pink takes a June war of 1967 as a starting point for the “nowadays Islamic exegetics”<sup>9</sup>. This, however, can only partly be justified, because, for instance, “The Simplified Tafsir” (*at-Tafsir al-Muyassar*), first published in Saudi Arabia at 2003, is more conservative and restricted to tradition (*at-tafsir bi l-mathur*), than exegesis of Mustafa al-Maragi, appeared in 1947. Moreover, the ideas of both Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Ridha, stated in the “The Beacon” (*Tafsir al-Manar*), which was publishing from the 1900 to 1927, influenced a number of other commentaries (even those famous like the tafsirs of al-Maragi and ibn Badis), which may be named as “al-Manar school”<sup>10</sup>. The impact of their exegetical ideas (some significant parts of which, according to the traditional classifications, can be determined as *tafsir bi r-ray*, i.e. “individual commentary”) is

important even today, in the work of the later generations of scholars.

Ashgar Ali notes, that with the advent of democracies, awareness of Islamic world about democratic rights, human rights, and women's rights has been growing fast. However, although there was a great deal of secular theorizing on the issue, there was a lack of Islamic theorizing, and still less of activism<sup>11</sup>. In a widespread literalist reading of Islam, there is a little room to negotiate human rights, as clear injunctions contravene the normative framework of the international human rights regime<sup>12</sup>. On the other side, as Saeed points out, there is nothing certain in the certainly claimed by the literalist readers of the text<sup>13</sup>.

Using the methodologies, provided by J. Pink, H. Ennaifer, H. Buss<sup>14</sup>, J. McAuliffe<sup>15</sup> and other authors, in this study we will take some of the Qur'anic texts as a starting points to see, to which extent its modern interpretations include an answer to a problem of religious tolerance as a value. However, in the mentioned works only relation to Christians was noted, without systematic analysis how the religious tolerance origins from the viewpoint of Islam. Referring to the previous outline of the problem of religious freedom, we should point on the three patterns of tolerance, which can be found in Islamic culture. That is, the level of individual choice to believe (*ikhtiyar*), the level of relations between the groups of believers (*mu'ammalat*), and, finally, status of believers of other religions and disbelievers in Islamic community (traditionally *zimmi*). Since not every modern tafsir is systematic as the medieval one, we choose the following ayas, related by exegetes to the problem of religious tolerance: "There is no compulsion in religion: rectitude has become distinct from error" (Qur'an, 2:256)<sup>16</sup>, "O you who have faith! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends: they are friends of each other" (Qur'an,

5:51), “And say: [This is] the truth from your Lord. Let anyone who wishes believe it, and let anyone who wishes disbelieve it” (Qur’an, 18:29). Especially, we are conscious that the issue of religious tolerance in tafsir cannot be restricted to the commentaries on these ayats. Nonetheless, the most important trends are present here to great extent.

It seems that the first of the commentaries, that devotes much for the question of relation between Islam and other religions (and, consequently, status of these religions), is *Al-Manar* of Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849 – 1905) and his student, Rashid Ridha (1865 – 1935). In the beginning of interpretation of the classical explanation of the reason of revelation (*sabab an-nuzul*) is mentioned, which shows how the Prophet Muhammad banned the forced conversion of children into Islam<sup>17</sup>. Beside these traditional statements, Rashid Ridha argues for the peaceful spread of Islam against the unnamed “enemies”, who insist that it was spread by the sword. Even more, the author states, that the time of 2:256 revelation is a Medinah period of Islam, when Muslim community was suffered from the aggression of Meccan polytheists and some Jewish tribes. However, writes he, even in these turbulent times Islam called for the grace and absence of any forced conversion. Rashid Ridha mentions the words of his teacher Muhammad ‘Abduh, who understood the spread of some religion by force as a kind of politics which, in this case, has nothing to do with a real faith (*iman*). So, in contrast to other religions (the authors of *al-Manar* take Christianity as an example), Islam by no means uses a force.

The same principle of peace is included in *al-Manar* commentary under the explanation of 5:51, recognizing *wilaya* (“friendship” in Ali Quli Qarai translation) with non-Muslims as a “mutual help” (*tanasur*)

and “alliance” (*muhelifah*). Rashid Ridha explains, that *wilaya* is forbidden because of its real goals and not the differences in belief between Muslims and followers of other religions. Its real reason is hostility towards the followers of Islam. As a result, the real friendship and good relations with the followers of Judaism and Christianity are not banned here, in contrast to the classical explanations of az-Zamakhshari and al-Baydhawi. He uses as the argument the permission of marriage with Christian or Jewish women (Qur’an, 5:3) and, respectively, ayat on relation between spouses: “He ordained affection and mercy between you” (Qur’an, 30:21). So, concludes Rashid Rida, obviously 5:51 is revealed against the hypocrites among Muslims, who wished to destroy the order of Islam, and not the Jews and Christians as they are<sup>18</sup>.

The same explanations, borrowed from *al-Manar* and shortened, was proposed by Mustafa al-Maragi (1881 – 1945). Referring to the traditions from the tafsir of at-Tabari, al-Maragi tries to show, that even this highly authoritative tafsir explains *wilaya* from 5:51 as a “mutual help” and “alliance” between the hypocrites and Jewish tribes of Medina<sup>19</sup>. As for the 2:256, “there is no compulsion in religion” means only the ban of the forced conversion to Islam. Moreover, he adds to the ideas of his forerunners an important statement. Muslims, al-Maragi writes, recognize “No compulsion in religion” as the principle (*asas*) of their belief and the pillar (*rukn*) of its politics. So, nobody should be forced to embrace Islam, as nobody should be forced to leave it. Interestingly, he speaks about “the best kind of polemics” as the result of “freedom of call” (*hurriya ad-dawwa*), which Muslims should defend even by the means of jihad. We may conclude that for al-Maragi religious freedom is a freedom to invite people to Islam, without force conversion but, from the other side,

without any barriers from unbelievers<sup>20</sup>.

The next of important commentaries is the *Zahrat at-Tafsir* by Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abu Zahra (1898 – 1974). An expert in Sharia, he began to write his own commentary since the 1950s<sup>21</sup>. This exegete sees the mentioned verse from Surah “al-Baqarah” (2:256) from the two vistas.

The first is that from the epistemology. Abu Zahra writes, that *iman* and, relatively, acceptance of some religion is “the intellectual perception” (*al-idrak al-fikri*). As a result, it should be a voluntary action, based on a completely free choice. The author takes “compulsion” in the most literal way: for him, no religiosity is possible by any means of force.

The second is that from the perspective of Islamic call (*dawah*). Its starting point is a “wisdom” and “good advice”, mentioned in other verse of the Qur’an (16:125).

In general, Abu Zahra insists that only knowledge is a way to *iman*. Thus, the explanation of “what is correct” does not include any force. To my mind, there are some traces of Asha’ri theology, where rationality plays a role of some basis for the religion.

Abu Zahra gives detailed explanations of 5:51<sup>22</sup>. He tells us, that in relation to Muslims non-Muslims divided into the three groups: a group which live in peace wish Muslims, a group which is hostile expressively, and a group, which hide its hate to Islam. There is no barrier in relation with the first group; however, any help for the second and third groups is an injustice (*zulm*) to other Muslims. In contrast to his forerunners, Abu Zahra does not mention here the issue of *jizyah*; this author tried to define possible relations with non-Muslims from the positions of modernity.

The next tafsir from the Egyptian school is the work of

Muhammad ibn al-Khatib (1900 – 1981), first published in 1964. Explaining 2:256 in his “The most clear commentary” (*Awdhah at-tafsir*), ibn al-Khatib writes that this ayat is a point for the “freedom of religion” (*hurriyah al-‘ittiqad*), so the “religiosity” must be like a kind of scientific research. For this exegete, verse 18:29 gives for humanity a chance to choose<sup>23</sup>.

The same position is stated in the tafsir of famous Egyptian scholar Muhammad bin Mutawwali ash-Sha’arawi (1911 – 1998) who writes about freedom to choose between the faith and arrogance. However, on the opinion of this scholar, ayat 2:256 cannot be used to avoid some prescriptions of Islam: if someone, by the free will, embraces Islam, he should follow all the prescriptions of faith, wish him to do it or not<sup>24</sup>. In the same way as Rashid Ridha and al-Maragi, ash-Sha’arawi uses this verse against those who argues for the spread of Islam by sword<sup>25</sup>.

The similar ideas can be found in tafsir of Tunisian scholar Muhammad ibn ‘Ashur (1879 – 1973), who was influenced much by Muhammad Abduh. He sets a close link between 2:256 and previous *ayat al-kursi* (2:255), arguing, that truth became obvious and does not need any kind of force to accept it<sup>26</sup>.

By “religion” in 2:256 definitely Islam is meant, which should be accepted only by free choice. Ibn ‘Ashur supposes that “no compulsion in religion” was revealed after the victory over Makkah. This ayat cannot be “abrogated” by other and, as a result, both Jews and Christians must be left on their believe and pay a *jizyah*<sup>27</sup>. Obviously, ibn ‘Ashur was less devoted to modernity in his tafsir than some of his contemporaries.

Interesting commentaries on the problem of religious tolerance are included in widespread tafsir of Sayyid Qutb (1906 – 1966), who is

recognized as one of the forerunners of what is called as “Islamism”. He clearly notes that “freedom of religion” (*hurriyah al-ittiqad*) is a first of the basic rights of every human. Qutb writes that those, who reject this right, reject the idea of humanity as it is<sup>28</sup>. However, “freedom of religion” should be also a freedom for Islamic call and a safety from the temptations and offensives. For him, any other kind of freedom is not a real freedom at all. Mentioning the topic of relations with Jews and Christians, Sayyid Qutb writes, that in reality Islam does not pressure them to left their beliefs (because of God’s order in 2:256). But even the good relations (*mu’ammala*) with the followers of Judaism and Christianity does not signify even partial recognition of their faith<sup>29</sup>. Being influenced by the reformist views of Muhammad ‘Abduh and his students, Sayyid Qutb tries to reformulate his ideas on the contexts of his own views of what is “true Islam” and, respectively, “true religion” as it is.

The same background is present in the books of Said Hawwa (1935 – 1989), a Muslim activist from Syria, who proposed the new way of reform, called him *al-ihya ar-rabbaniya* (“God-given revival”)<sup>30</sup>. He divides between the fight with unbelievers, declared in the Qur’an, and the compulsion to Islam. Despite the declaration of fight against unbelievers, only Arabic polytheists are pressured to embrace Islam. In general, force to Islam is not from Islam at all, concludes Hawwa<sup>31</sup>. It seems to be that this exegete tries to preserve medieval interpretations of these verses as they are. However, like the previous commentators, he refuses to signify this ayat as the one of abrogated ones (*mansukha*).

The next Syrian exegete, Wahba az-Zuhayli (born 1932) in his “The Middle Commentary” is clearer in his views on religious tolerance. He argues against the idea of “orient lists” that Islam was

spread by sword and states, that all the wars Muslim hold were defensive. There are no barriers for the peaceful coexistence between Islam and other religions (*at-ta'aish ad-dini as-salami*)<sup>32</sup>.

One of the most precious commentaries, written to answer both the traditional and modern issues, is “The Criteria” (*Al-Mizan*) by *allama* Sayyid Muhammad at-Tabataba’i (1892 – 1981), a prolific Shia philosopher and exegete. In his contemplation on the 2:256, at-Tabataba’i proposes an explanation from the viewpoint of Islamic philosophy. Taking into consideration the problem of “internal” (*batin*) and “external” (*zahir*), which is classical for Muslim thought, the author of *al-Mizan* arguments against “compulsion” (*ikrah*) in religion are as follows. Since the faith (*iman*) is the only internal thing, any force can be applied only to the external part of human being, i.e. some deeds of body. *Allamah* proves, that, since the second part of ayat is reality and cannot be cancelled (i.e. “rectitude has become distinct from error”), the first part of 2:256 cannot be nullified as well. After the victory of *tawhid*, the Jews and the Christians may practice their religion freely. The same is true about the issue of *wilayah*, which interpreted by at-Tabataba’i in its primary qur’anic context, i.e. question of apostasy in Islam<sup>33</sup>.

The next important tradition of tafsir, which continue its development today, is a Saudi school, usually associated with Salafi approach, reviled by the followers of Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703 – 1791). To great extent devoted to the traditional Sunni exegetics, scholars of this school try to solve the issues of modernity from the classical viewpoint, declared as an accurate reception of Qur’an and Sunnah. Muhammad Amin Ash-Shanqiti (1905 – 1974) one of the most popular exegetes of Saudi school, writes in his explanation on the 18:26 (“Let anyone who wishes believes it, and let

anyone who wishes disbelieve it”), that absence of compulsion here does not mean “the choice”, but definitely “the treat” to unbelievers<sup>34</sup>. The same position is stated in the tafsir of ‘Umar al-Ashqar (born 1940) , who links its meaning to the next part of ayat (“Indeed we have prepared for the wrongdoers a fire”)<sup>35</sup>. For these exegetes, this kind of “choice” is the only parable of the wrong way, which finishes in the hell. Similar ideas expressed by al-Ashqar in his commentary to 2:256, which, on his opinion, speaks only about those who pays *jizyah*. The same view is included in the recent “The Simplified Tafsir” (*At-Tafsir al-Muyassar*), prepared by a group of scholars from the King Fahd Glorious Qur’an Printing Complex (Medina, Saudi Arabia). Thus, the meaning of ayat restricted to those who pays *jizyah*<sup>36</sup>. Abu Bakr al-Jaza’iri (born 1921) in his own tafsir notices, that this verse related to Jews, Christians, Sabians and Zoroastrians, who should pay *jizyah* and may embrace Islam voluntary<sup>37</sup>. On the other hand, followers of Salafism completely recognize a possibility of cooperation with the believers of other religions, restricting it to the “earthly issues” (*dunyawi*)<sup>38</sup>.

Conclusions. Notwithstanding the development of new trends in Qur’anic exegetics during the last half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, in general majority of tafsirs are rooted in the works of their forerunners, be it classical medieval commentaries (at-Tabari, al-Qurtubi, al-Baydhawi and so on) or the masterpieces of reformers like *al-Manar* of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Ridha. In general, the analyzed corpus of contemporary Islamic exegetics may be classified in accordance with the criteria of geography and local traditions (i.e. Egyptian schools, Saudi school, Iranian school, Syrian school and so on) or the ideological components (Sunni-salafi, Sunni-ikhwani, Shia). Thus, in contemporary Islamic approach to the study of the Qur’an we

observe various positions which are differing much in particular issues. The one of these issues is a problem of human rights, which became much discussed in both Islamic and non-Islamic academic circles in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our study shows, that modern commentaries of the Qur'an were highly interested in the problem of inter-religious relations from the viewpoint of Islam and, as a result, the problem of religious tolerance.

What do religious tolerance means from the vistas of Qur'an? The multiplicity of answers is given leads to a few main positions, which may be summarized as follows.

The first is what may be called as "the limited tolerance", described in the works of Egyptian exegetes Rashid Ridha, Mustafa al-Maragi, Sayyid Qutb, Muhammad as-Sha'arawi and Muhammad ibn al-Khatib. Denouncing the classical type of relations with Jews and Christians as *dhimmi*s, this author argues for the tolerant relations, which guarantees the absence of any threats to Islam. "Freedom of religion" here means also a freedom to practice someone's believe freely and a possibility to realize a call to Islam.

The second position, which is more theoretic, represented by the works of Sunni commentators Wahba Zuhayli, Muhammad Zahra and Shia thinker Muhammad at-Tabataba'i. These authors argue for the impossibility of the spread of any religion by sword and a great harm which such claims make for Islam. Speaking about the issue of free will and acceptance of religion as a conscious act, these scholars apply to the rationality of Islam. These commentaries give an in-depth view on the fundamental issues of Islam and modernity, founding a strike base of knowledge and, finally, *ijtihad*.

Third position is declared mainly in the commentaries of the followers of Salafi Islam. Claiming for the tolerant coexistence

between religions, the authors like ‘Umar al-Ashqar insist on the strict traditional interpretations of the verses like 2:256. According to the statements of the Salafi exegetes, Qur’anic tolerance is addressed to Jews and Christians as *dhimmi*s, who must pay *jizyah* for the perseverance of their faith. However, this approach claims for the possibility of cooperation with the followers of other religions in the “earthly” (*dunyawi*) issues.

Finally, none of the mentioned commentaries recognize the tolerant verses of Qur’an as “the abrogated one” (*mansukh*), in contrast to significant part of medieval tafsirs. So, these statements are *actual* along with the other elements of Islamic creed. And, what even more important, majority of contemporary tafsirs presents the formulation of Qur’anic tolerance in a way, where traditional Muslim idea of peaceful coexistence and Western understanding of tolerance are combined. This is a kind of tolerance, which Europe, to some degree, has lost – freedom, which is *for* and not *against* religion, freedom, which helps us to enrich our spiritual experience for the religious, and not secularist and consumerist sense of life. ❖

## NOTES:

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