

# *Religious Diversity and Human Dignity*<sup>1</sup>

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**What is the religious demography of your respective country? Has it undergone significant change in last decade?**

98% of the Iranians are Muslims and religious minorities comprise 2% of our country's population. According to 1976 nationwide statistics, some 420,000 non Muslims lived among Iran's 34 million population. After 1978, that is to say around the victory of the Islamic Revolution, those who immigrated from Iran to Europe or America were mostly Jew or Christian, but the statistics related to twenty years after the revolution reveal that the number of the Jewish, Zoroastrian and Baha'ie emigrants has been more than those of other minorities.

The official population status of Iran in accordance with their religions in the years 1996 and 2006 has been as follows:

1996			2006	
Religion	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Muslim</b>	59,788,791	99.56	70097741	99.94
<b>Christian</b>	78745	.13	109415	.16
<b>Jews</b>	12733	.02	9252	.01
<b>Zoroastrian</b>	27920	.05	19823	.03

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1. Paper presented by Tahereh Kianefar (Avani) at the Sixth Session of Abrahamic Religions, Oslo, June 16-18, 2008

<b>Other religions and undeclared</b>	147925	.25	259551	.37
<b>Total</b>	60055488	100	70495782	100

Among various factors contributing to changes in religious tendencies, we will mention only one main factor. During past decades, women have played an effective role in changing religious tendencies. Comparing women's employment status in the past and present shows this change in attitude perfectly. In the past, Iranian women's major occupation was farming, animal husbandry and handicrafts, which they performed side by side with their main function of housekeeping, taking care of their husbands, nurturing their children, and briefly speaking attending home affairs. Therefore, they were spending most their time with their close family members. But in Iran today, which the urban style of living has spread to almost every corner of the country, women's presence in economic and production activities has been changed. In addition to their presence at production facilities, Iranian women are present in all sorts of social, managerial, political, and other activities alongside the men. Many of them are working at middle level jobs in order to assist their families. But there is another group of women who are scholars and thinkers. For members of this group, who, like those in other societies are a minority, working is a psychological need, and of course their influence on the society is no less than the men. But does this phenomenon have roots in Islam? We must notice that at the time of the Prophet there were some women who were interested in various social activities. The Prophet's wife, Khadijeh the daughter of Khovailed, was a successful merchant. She was also very rich. She is the best proof for the claim that at the time of the Prophet women's activities was not limited to housekeeping. But, since the second century (AH), economic, political and social situation of

Islamic societies was so changed that it even affected legal *fatwas* of the Islamic jurists.

But the changes Iranian women have initiated through their social, cultural and political activities in recent decades has been quite spectacular in the Iranian history. Women's ever-increasing presence in various executive bodies and womanization of the work force specially in service sector, and finally spectacular success of women at universities' entrance exams, have all in all changed the general image of the Iranian society.

After experiencing a decade of political and cultural developments during the last ten years of the Pahlavi era, we have witnessed the re-definition of women's social roles and their abilities after the revolution. Women's increased participation in social activities, particularly at high school and university education, is one the most important developments among them (Farasatkah 2000, p.97).

Among the essential positive developments during the second decade of the Islamic Republic one can mention the followings: growth in development factors such as hope in life (from 61.6 years in 1989 to 70.6 years in 1998), growth of women literacy from 46.3% to 67% (this figure for men has increased from 94% to 97%) and the ratio of girls to boys at different educational level which has increased from 85% to 93% (Farasatkah 2000, p.29).

During the past two decades women have had a considerable role in changing the religious tendencies of the society. Based on 2004 indexes, Iran ranked 82<sup>nd</sup> in GDI index. Although women have tried to have an active role in all scientific, cultural, social and political areas, while observing their Islamic dress code "*hijab*", they are still not enjoying a satisfactory status in economic sector. "Studying the statistics show that the ratio of women's income to men's is 28.5%, while in a country like Norway this figure is 74.1%; although in Norway too, women are far

behind men in this respect (Ja'farnezhad, Ahmad, P. 88). Nevertheless, on the basis of the socialization of culture in Iran, women's tendency is in having a job as an occupation and, compared to men, they get engaged in management jobs less. That is why female managers are only a minority.

### **Does human dignity in Iran require that people be theist and a Shi'a?**

This question can be answered from three different angles, namely from Qur'anic, Traditional, and Constitutional perspectives.

#### **From Qur'anic viewpoint:**

Honor and dignity of human being depends on the level of piety.

Almighty God reiterates in Glorious Qur'an: *إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ*؛

*(Verily, the most dignified among you is the most God-fearing)(49-13).*

Piety and fearing God is a general value in Islam, in which belief and wisdom are combined, and prepares a Muslim for obeying divine laws. In Qur'an, reference is made to the dignity that is bestowed to man (17/70) and God has congratulated Himself on the creation of man (23/14). From Islamic point of view, human being is the core of creation, since God Almighty states in the Glorious Qur'an that He has created everything in the universe for man's sake and granted him the power to subjugate the universe (45/13). Qur'an also considers man to be "Allah's Caliph on Earth" (2/30), "The one whom the angels were ordered to prostrate before" (2/34), "The trustee of divine Heritage" (33/72), and "Capable of conquering the entire universe" (45/13). Therefore, human being is dignified by creation. If we are believers, we are obliged to protect our own dignity, as well as that of the others. Thus, all human beings are respectable due to the dignity granted to them by God, regardless of being in a minority or a majority.

We are Muslims and follow the Glorious Qur'an and the Traditions of Prophet. In Qur'anic verses, too, peaceful coexistence and nice treatment of the followers of other monotheist religions, particularly Christians, is recommended. As in the Holy Verse it mentions: "*The closest group (of believers) to the Muslims are those who call themselves "Nasara" (Christians). That is because there are clean hearted priests and pious clergies, as well as humble personalities among them (5/82)*".

**From the viewpoint of the Prophet's Tradition:** There is a narration from the Prophet on keeping the vows and promises in which the Muslims are addressed as: "*Beware! One who breaches his covenant with a non-Muslim and oppresses him, or one who urges a non-Muslim to perform acts beyond his capability, or takes something away from him without his consent, I will summon him to stand for trial before Allah in the Last Day.*" [Abi-Davoud's Traditions, Vol. 3, P. 23]. The Prophet is also quoted as saying: "*Any of you (believers) who annoys the followers of other divine faiths is not a follower of me, or a member of my community*".<sup>2</sup>

Thus, when the Jews and Christians were denying each other the Prophet of Islam, called on them to abide their own faiths, and observe the unity of followers of monotheist faiths based on shared principles of faith and common objectives (3/64). It goes without saying that one of the most basic commonalties among the followers of all divine faiths, beliefs, and even philosophical or ethical schools of thought is the dignity of human being. When the Prophet established a government in Medina, different communities with different beliefs lived in that city. In order to avoid any conflict among them, his eminence proposed observing a peaceful and logical coexistence among them. He then signed a covenant between them and the Muslims, based on which they paid tax to the Islamic Government

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2. Vahbah Zoheili, آثارالحرب, Vol. 3, P. 729, (Ariyani, P. 8)

and the holy Prophet guaranteed their security and social rights in return, and asked both sides to respect this covenant in which their mutual interests was safeguarded.

It should also be noted that the Prophet of Islam even accepted some of the norms observed during *Jaheliya* (ignorance) era (before the advent of Islam), among which was some of the rituals observed during the Hajj pilgrimage.

It would suffice to pay attention to a part of the covenant signed between the Prophet and the Christians who lived in Sinai desert in the second year (AH), which was recorded by Imam Ali. In this covenant it is stated that: "*... I vow not to change their priests and clergies, not to urge their hermits to leave the temples, not to destroy the temples... None of them should be urged to do things against his will; they should be treated with lenience and none of them should be harmed. The Christians should be respected wherever they are... If their churches need repair the Muslims should help them in mending them, and the Christians enjoy full religious freedom...*"<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, in the Covenant signed between the holy Prophet and the Christians of Najran, under Article 105, their entire civil rights, including the need to respect their social prestige, is fully recognized and they are regarded as allies of the Islamic state, as well as members of the greater community of mankind. A part of this Covenant reads as follows: "*I am obliged to heed matters related to the Christians, convenience and to safeguard them against any harm, so that they would not be hurt at all, and in any city that they live save them from the harms and disturbances of the armed people, aggressions such as confiscation of their wealth or*

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3. History of Islamic Civilization, Zeydan, Jorji, Beirut, Al-Hayat Publications, Chapter 4, Vol. 2, P. 378; Aryani, P. 3; References noted in the footnotes are from Ja'far Aryani's *Mutual Rights of the Muslims and Believers in other Monotheist Faiths' Societies*; included in series of articles of the International Conference on Human Rights and Dialogue among Civilizations, held on May 5-6, 1991 at Qom's Mofid University

*paying undue taxes. They should not be urged to do something against their will and their bishops should not be barred from performing their religious tasks. None of them should be forced to convert to Islam or to abandon his own faith despite his will. O Muslims! Notice the Qur'anic order, speak with the followers of divine faiths nicely, treat them compassionately, and in any place they live safeguard them against all types of harms, inconveniences, and vices. If a Christian is subjected to a crime, all Muslims are required to assist and defend him; Muslims should not violate their rights or leave them idle and jobless in the Islamic societies. That is because I have signed a covenant with them and sworn to Almighty Allah that they would enjoy all the rights that Muslims enjoy and would suffer the same punishments for violation of civil laws that the Muslims do.*

*All Muslims are obliged to abide by the articles of this covenant. The same way that the Muslims share with each other, they should respect the Christians, and assist them to enjoy their rights and benefits."* (Hamidollah, Mohammad, P. 85)

**From Legal Point of View:** Iranian constitution has not limited citizens civil rights to any terms or conditions. The citizens of the Islamic country are divided into two groups: they are either Muslims, in which case in accordance to the Islamic brotherhood they are members of the Islamic community and based on the Qur'anic verse: «انما المؤمنون اخوه»

*(all the believers are verily brethren), enjoy equal rights and shoulder equal social responsibilities; or they are non-Muslims living in the Islamic country (including the Jews, the Christians, and the Zoroastrians) that are called "ahl ul-zimma" or the tax payers to the Islamic system and under certain conditions, in accordance with the mutual agreement between them and the Muslims, they have allied the Muslim community and have jointly established one united nation.*

### **Article 13 [Recognized Religious Minorities]**

Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and rituals, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education. Bahais are also entitled all civil rights.

### **Article 14 [Non-Muslims' Rights]**

In this article, on the subject of just and dignified treatment of the non-Muslims, we read: "*In accordance with the sacred verse "God does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with those who have not fought against you because of your religion and who have not expelled you from your homes" [60:8] the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duly bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with the ethical norms and principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights. This principle applies to all who refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran.*" As stated in this article, one may conclude that an Iranian, even when he is a Shia Muslim, when he acts against the Islamic regime, the way Government will deal with him would be different.

One of the areas in which the present civil code of Iran was criticized was that of unequal payment of blood money for Muslim and non-Muslims. This was recently modified by the Iranian parliament and now Muslims and non-Muslims receive it equally.

### **Article 19 [No Discrimination, No Privileges]**

All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; color, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privileges on anybody.

## **Article 20 [Equality Before Law]**

All citizens of the country, men and women, equally enjoy the protection of the law and enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights in conformity with the Islamic criteria.

If the discussion be pursued beyond the codes of the country's official and ratified laws, it is to be said that the spirit of unity, solidarity, harmony, and spiritual bonds, along with the observance of justice, impartiality, and cooperation, that exists in the relations among the followers of various faiths further strengthens mutual bonds between them (Saqafi, Seyyed Mohammad, P. 85).

### **Does Human Dignity require public support or government back-up? Do Minorities also have dignity?**

There are some problems with this question. Because we believe the dignity of man, or the need to respect him, is incongruous with the conduct of any power, either a popular or state power. Human intellect and wisdom supports the need to protect human dignity on the basis of original nature, and the Islamic law supports it on the basis of Qur'anic teachings and Prophetic Traditions. If we consider human beings to be "Allah's Caliph on Earth", and if based on ethical, legal and other aspects we consider them more developed than the period before the advent of Islam, then why should we put their "nobility", which is an innate or intrinsic value, next to "power", which is an accident? I truly believe and I have so far written a number of articles to prove this claim that human dignity is part of human nature, while the rights are accidental. Human right belongs to a certain era of man's history. Human dignity is more inclusive than human right and so can not be considered as an item of the Charter of Human Rights. It is because of man's dignity that he is entitled to enjoy certain rights.

The other problem is that when we say minority or majority, is it in relation to man or God? We are not in the position of God to divide the men into majority and minority. Thus these two terms are coined by us. In order to establish democracy, we need to take advantage of both majority and minority. As a result, from the political and social points of view, people are divided into majority and minority in social or political scenes, and so these two groups' rights are respectively elaborated.

**In what type of discourse or mentality human dignity will be violated?  
What does respect to human dignity mean in Iran?**

Under Article 5 of the Declaration of Human Rights we read that: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." Thus, inhumane punishment and degrading treatment of human beings violate dignity of a human being.

As a divine being, all the efforts of followers of Abrahamic religions has been to demonstrate and materialize their divine potentials. They have been well aware of the fact that if man loses his creational bond and as a result forgets his divine responsibility and fails to shoulder his divine trust, his dignity would be hurt. Yet, he would definitely not be deprived of all his dignity, since dignity is part of his innate nature. Today, the major obstacle in the path of mankind's progress is the lack of balance between man's technical capabilities and his spiritual abilities. Man's hegemony over the nature, along with his never quenching thirst for progress in science and technology, has led him to think less about his dignity.

We all need peace of mind and tranquility, which is a prerequisite to our freedom and dignity. This is true about all of us, regardless of our religions, schools of thought, or being a member of minority or majority, or being from the north, south, east, or the west.

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