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**AUTHORITY OF THE TEXT AND  
THE LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS TOLERATION IN ISLAMIC  
POLITICAL THOUGHT: THE CASE OF AHMAD IBN TAYMIYAH**

by

**Abdullah Alhomid**

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**A Dissertation Presented to the  
FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**(Political Science)**

**May 1996**

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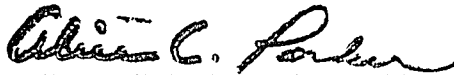
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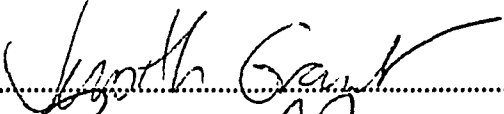
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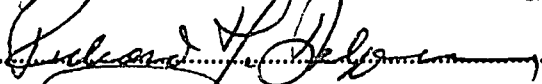



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## DEDICATION

To the one who made my life worth living,  
my son Asim

To the memory of سنا المحيدلي (Sana al-Mhaidli),  
a remarkable Arab woman who died for an honorable cause

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of this dissertation gives me the opportunity to thank many of the people who have contributed to it at different stages of its evolution. Professor Judith Grant, my advisor, deserves my deepest gratitude for being very supportive and accommodating throughout the process of writing this dissertation. Her guidance and constructive comments have invariably contributed to the quality of my work. Thank you, Judith. My most enduring debt is to Professor R. Hrair Dekmejian who overwhelmed me with his generosity, kindness, and boundless support, which extended beyond the writing of this dissertation. I am indebted to Professor Dekmejian for his critical comments on my work, which I found to be very helpful and valuable. Certainly, expressing my gratitude to Professor Dekmejian does not mean that I will ever be able to repay him. I should also thank Professor Donald Miller for kindly agreeing to serve as an outside member of the dissertation committee. I am also grateful to Dee Pulliam for typing this dissertation and, above all, for being a kind and sincere human being.

Personal thanks are due to my brother Khalid and to my dear and loyal friend Yazeed al-Assaf. To my friends, Mansour al-Johar, Sami Ofeish, Adel al-Abdulkarim, Saud al-Sati, and Hamoud Salhi, I owe a debt of gratitude I can never repay; their company has always been a remarkable source of comfort and intellectual

energy. Special thanks go to Fahad al-Husain and Maher al-Laham who made my life in southern California very joyful and interesting.

Last, but certainly not least, I am indebted to my son Asim. The writing of this dissertation has definitely interfered with my performing my moral obligations toward him. This dissertation is partially dedicated to him, by way of a very small return for what I owe him.



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## ABSTRACT

In an apparent divergence from the historicist thesis, the Islamic political thinkers articulated a response to the problem of religious dissent that was remarkably detached from their conflictive religious environment. These thinkers always advocated toleration for the Scripturaries and persecution for the pagans and the Muslim religious dissenters, regardless of the requirements of their historical milieu. As an alternative to the textualist and the contextualist methods of studying past political ideas, the author developed an interpretive method that emphasized the role of frame of reference of political thought as a tool for recovering the meaning and explaining the structure of past political texts. Based on M. A. al-Jabiri's analysis of the formation and structure of Arab-Islamic thought, Ibn Taymiyah was placed within al-Bayan epistemic tradition. Ibn Taymiyah constructed his political thought within a textual universe of discourse in which the textual categories of the Islamic revelation assumed primacy over the historical milieu in determining the substance and formal structure of his political doctrines. Ibn Taymiyah's reliance on the categories of al-Bayan and its epistemological assumptions resulted in the formation of a peculiar style of political thought that was essentially textual and ahistorical. This dissertation found that Ibn Taymiyah's textual frame of reference authoritatively determined his response to the problem of religious dissent within the Islamic polity. His defense of toleration for the Scripturaries was exclusively derived from and limited by the authoritative texts of the

Quran, the Prophetic traditions, and the covenant of 'Umar. Ibn Taymiyah's advocacy of persecuting Muslim religious dissenters was an inevitable consequence of the totality of his frame of reference. He approached the problem of religious dissent within Islam with epistemological, moral, and political assumptions that were antagonistic to the idea of religious diversity and very receptive to the principle of suppressing heterodoxy. Because of the predominance of the textual categories in his discursive universe, the substance and formal structure of Ibn Taymiyah's response to the problem of religious dissent was found to be conventional Bayanist and abstract, where the impact of his historical environment on his views was minimal.

## PREFACE

In 1969, Quentin Skinner published his monumental essay *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Political Ideas*. In that essay, which became a classic statement of the basic doctrines of the New History of Political Theory, Skinner mounted a devastating critique of the dominant methods of studying past political ideas. At the time of the publication of Skinner's essay the American political theorists were recovering from the Behavioral attack on their field of study, and were preoccupied with "reforming" their field by disassociating themselves from historical method of studying political thought. While the American political theorists were trying to accommodate the Behaviorists by accusing past studies on political theory of being too historical, the New Historians who were, curiously, all British, thought that these studies were not *historical* enough. The New Historians' critique of the past scholarship on history of political thought triggered a controversy among political theorists on how to interpret the political texts of the past, a controversy that has continued until the present day. Consequently, the question of interpretation was brought to the center of the sub-field of political theory.

The contemporary political theorists' preoccupation with the question of method is an indication of two main trends. First, it is a reflection of the political theorists' awareness of the autonomy and the distinctiveness of the field of their intellectual activities. Second, the current debate on method signifies the demise of the doubts that some political scientists have expressed about the value of having the

history of political thought as a sub-field within the discipline of political science. During the fifties and sixties, political theorists were occupied with the questions of why and what political classics should be studied. Now, these questions have been relegated to a peripheral status and replaced by the question of how to study the political classics and to recover their historical meanings.

This dissertation is about the problem of interpretation in the history of political thought. While its main concerns are the views of Ibn Taymiyah on religious dissent, the present study is also about interpreting the history of Islamic political thought. The novelty of this dissertation springs from its attempt to examine the notion of religious toleration in Islamic political thought within the context of the ongoing scholarly debate on method in the history of political thought in general. Certainly, there are a reasonable number of competent works on the history of Islamic political thought in general and on the idea of toleration in Islamic political theory in particular. However, these studies gave very little emphasis, or no emphasis at all, to the question of method in the study of past political texts. This dissertation, therefore, is the first study that attempts to give a systematic account of the evaluation of the idea of religious toleration in Islamic political theory within the context of the broader debate on interpretation in the history of political ideas.

The author of this study has developed an interpretive approach that is presumed to be an original method which reflects the uniqueness of Islamic political thinking. However, this assertion must be qualified by expressing my indebtedness to



the achievements of some Western and Arab scholars. The concept of the frame of reference, a central component in the interpretive method of this study, is inspired by the writings of the New Historians of Political Theory who emphasized the role of the broader discursive language in determining the historical meaning of past political ideas. In reference to the style and mechanisms of Ibn Taymiyah's political discourse, this study is indebted to M. A. al-Jabiri's remarkable analysis of al-Bayan epistemological tradition within the Islamic discourse. Combining the views of al-Jabiri with that of the New Historians in one single interpretive approach has not been an easy task. Furthermore, because of its association with the views of al-Jabiri and the New Historians, my interpretive method, admittedly, inherited the limitations and deficiencies of these approaches. However, judgments about the originality and merit of this study's interpretive method and the validity of its findings ought to be left to the thoughtful reader to make.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the notion of religious toleration in Islamic political thought. This study will attempt to explain the apparent discrepancy between the idea of religious toleration as articulated by Islamic political thinkers and the actual practices of religious toleration and persecution in their historical environment. The focus is mainly on the textual frame of reference of Islamic political thinkers and how it determined the structure of their political ideas and especially their views on the problem of religious diversity. This study will investigate how Muslim thinkers' reliance on the textual categories of the divine revelation as the ultimate source of the truth has given rise to moral and political doctrines that, in turn, have operated to shape their response to the problem of religious dissent in the Islamic state. The methods as well as the findings of this research have been presented within the context of the recent scholarly debate on the problem of interpretation in the history of political thought. The thirteenth century Muslim jurist, theologian, and political thinker Ahmad Ibn Taymiyah is taken as a case study.

### **The Research Problem**

The subject of this dissertation started with a methodological problematic. That problematic was the apparent detachment of the Islamic political thinkers' views on religious toleration and persecution from their historical milieu. The research problem will be delineated at two levels. The first section will give a general account of how the historians of political ideas explained the development of the idea religious toleration in political theory. In section two, it will be shown how the development of the idea of religious toleration in Islamic political thought represented a divergence from the generally accepted views on the subject.

### **The Idea of Religious Toleration in th History of Political Thought**

The research problem may be best illustrated in reference to the historicist thesis in the history of political thought. The thrust of the historicist approach is that past political ideas are essentially responses to some immediate historical circumstances. Based on this premise, these ideas must be explained in reference to the socio-economic and cultural settings that gave rise to them in the first place. For these scholars, it is the *historical context* of political theorists that shapes the structure and, more important, the *content* of their political thinking. The historical milieu of the political thinkers, the proponents of historicism contend, is the primary source of the major themes of their political arguments. Thus, the major works in the history of political theory are perceived as mere reflections of their historical environments.

With regard to the issue of toleration, the overwhelming majority of the historicists agree with the idea that only within the context of religious diversity and conflict does the question of religious toleration become a central issue of political theory. Religious controversies become relevant to political thought when the parties involved do not limit their disputes to the intellectual realm but attempt to use the power of the state to settle their theological differences. Such attempts to get the government involved in religion touches one of the most important issues in political philosophy, that is, the question of the proper function of the state in society. And this question, in turn, has brought the idea of toleration to the center of political theorizing.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the historicist thesis, when it is taken to its logical end, can be summarized in the following hypothesis: the higher the intensity of religious diversity and persecution in the society, the more likely that the question of religious toleration becomes a central theme of political theorizing.

There are two traditions of political thought, one of which confirms the historicist hypothesis; the other refutes it. These two traditions are Western European thought and Islamic political thought. Although the present study concerns Islamic political theory, a brief discussion of the historical experience of European thought was

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<sup>1</sup> The assertion can be found in most books on the history of political thought. See for example, John W. Allen, A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1941), 73-76; Robert Blakey, The History of Political Literature, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, n. d.) 1: 4-10; and George Sabine, A History of Political Theory, 4th ed. (Hinsdale: Dryden Press, 1973), 332-333.

deemed necessary for two main reasons. First, it will help in clarifying the central theme of the study. Second, considering the experience of European political thought will place this research within its broader methodological context, that is, the problem of interpretation in the history of political ideas.

In Western Europe, the question of religious toleration was not a significant issue prior to the Protestant Reformation. The idea of suppressing heresy by force became widely accepted, since it was consistent not only with the world view but also with the political and social arrangements of the time. In addition, because the policies of religious persecution were largely successful, the question of religious toleration was only a marginal issue. The ideas of great Christian thinkers, such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas, on persecution had assumed a great deal of acceptance among churchmen and political leaders during most of the Middle Ages. This is not to suggest, however, that the notion of religious toleration had never existed during that era. But advocating toleration as a moral and theological ideal was unpopular and limited to a few political thinkers like Marssilio of Padua.<sup>2</sup>

With the religious and spiritual upheavals that followed Luther's declaration of his ninety-five theses at Wittenburg in 1517, the situation was radically changed. The rise of Protestantism marked, among other things, the end of the idea a unified Western Christianity under the leadership of the Catholic Church. However, as Lecler

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<sup>2</sup> For more data on the question of toleration prior to the Reformation, see Joseph Lecler, Toleration and the Reformation, 2 vols., trans. T.L. Westow (New York: Association Press, 1960?), 65-106.

and Lambert observed, both the Protestant and Catholic leaders continued to uphold such medieval ideas such as the unity of faith as the sole foundation of the state, the heretic as the destroyer of the faith, and repression as an appropriate way to uproot heresy and preserve the purity of Christian doctrine.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Europe was thrown into sectarian controversies and bloody religious wars which extended into the seventeenth century. Appeals to secular authority, by both Protestants and Catholics to suppress their respective sectarian adversaries, had forced Western political thinkers in their writings to confront the question of religious toleration. For these thinkers, the pressing question was: How should the magistrate deal with those who manifest heterodox views within his own state? It is not surprising, therefore, that there was an explosion of works on religious toleration and persecution from 1520 to the end of the seventeenth century. It was during that period that major works on toleration and persecution were published: Luther's *On Secular Authority* (1523), Castellion's *Concerning Heretics* (1554), T. Beza's *Concerning the Duty of Punishing Heretics by the Civil Magistrate* (1554), Bayle's *Philosophical Commentary* (1686), and Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689).<sup>4</sup> Thus, considering the experience of Western

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<sup>3</sup> Lecler, 1:101; Molcolm Lambert, Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from Gregorian Reform to the Reformation, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 395-396.

<sup>4</sup> For a more comprehensive list of works on toleration that appeared during this period, see Henry Kamen, The Rise of Toleration, (New York: Mcgraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), 246-248; and R.H. Murray, The Political Consequences of the Reformation, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), 285-286.

Europe, the historians of political ideas with a historicist orientation should find support for the notion that the question of toleration becomes a major theme in political thought during the periods of religious conflict and upheaval.

However, when the same proposition is taken to the context of Islamic political thought, it loses its validity and universality. The Islamic political thinkers' notion of religious toleration and persecution deviated significantly from the historicist proposition. The historical environment of Islamic political thought typically was characterized by religious diversity and persecution. In fact, one can not find a period of Islamic history where religious conformity was actually achieved. Also, the Islamic state's intervention to punish sectarian dissenters has occurred frequently in Islamic history. However, there is no correlation between the intensity of religious diversity and persecution in Islamic history and the inclusion of the question of toleration in writings of Islamic political thinkers. This is not to say that Muslim thinkers never held any notion of religious toleration. But instead, they maintained the same response to the question of religious dissent, irrespective of their historical context.

It might be argued that the reason for the peripheral position of the idea of toleration in Islamic political thought is that religious persecution in Islamic history was not so severe as in Europe during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. While the difference between the Islamic experience and that of Western Europe in regard to religious persecution is undeniable, this explanation is not totally accurate. Religious persecution had occurred frequently in Islamic history, and it was quite severe and

intense. Thus, to substantiate this claim, the following section will provide a selective description of the phenomena of religious diversity and persecution in the history of Islam. The intensity of religious persecution in Islam will be illustrated not only by citing some incidents of religious persecution from Islamic history but also by showing how these events have become reflected on the Arabic language and the discourse of the sectarian minorities of Islam.

### **Toleration and Persecution in Islamic History**

Religious diversity in Islamic history can be viewed from two angles: the broader religious milieu, which consists of Islam and other religions; and the religious diversity within Islam which manifested itself in the existence of different sects within the Islamic faith.

When Islam appeared in 610 A.D., it was not the only religion in Mecca and the surrounding areas. Judaism, Christianity, Hanifism and Paganism had always existed in Mecca and in different parts of Arabia before the advent of Islam. Paganism, the religion of the majority of the tribe of Muhammad, Quraysh, was the most popular creed in Mecca and the most antagonistic to the new religion. After a series of wars between Islam and Paganism, the former came out victorious in 630 A.D., and Paganism vanished forever. Judaism and Christianity survived the rise of Islam and have always been present in Islamic history. With the expansion of the Islamic empire during the eighth and the ninth centuries, other religions such as Zoroastrianism and



different Christian sects came under Islamic rule; both have managed to survive until the present day.<sup>5</sup>

Religious diversity is more apparent and intense within Islam itself. Before the end of the first Islamic century, Islam was already divided among four major sects: Shi'ites, Murji'ites, Mu'tazilites, and Kharijites (Sunnism did not appear as an Islamic sect until the fourth Islamic century, although its genesis could be traced back to an earlier time). Later, these major sects became divided into smaller sects with distinct theological and political views. There is no consensus among historians on the exact number of Muslim sects. The classical Muslim heresiographers, like al-Baghdadi, al-Shahrstani, Ibn Hazm, and others, have put the number of Islamic sects at seventy-three. The reason for this agreement is that these heresiographers wanted the number of sects to be consistent with an oral tradition, attributed to the Prophet, according to which Islam would be divided into seventy-three sects. But the contemporary Arab writer Muhammad 'Umarah, who questions the authenticity of that tradition, puts the number of Islamic sects at one hundred and ninety-six.<sup>6</sup> Considering the historical facts,

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<sup>5</sup> See W. Montgomery Watt, Muhammad of Mecca, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1953), 23-29; and Philip Hitti, History of Arabs, 10th edition. (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1970), 98-102, 106-108, 233-234.

<sup>6</sup> An example of the classical heresiographers is Abd al-Kahir al-Baghdadi, Moslem Schisms and Sects (al-Fark Bain al-Firak), trans. Kate Chambers Seclye (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1966), 27-30. The claim of Muhammad 'Umarah appeared in his essay "al-Firaq al-Islamiyah," (the Islamic sects), in Mwsu'at al-Hadarah al-Arabiyyah al-Islamiyyah, 2 vols. (Beirut: al-Mu'ssahah al-'Arabiyyah Lil-Dirasat wa al-Nashr, 1986), 2: 547-573.

the number of Muslim sects appears to be much higher than seventy-three, and thus, ‘Umarah’s figure is more accurate than that of the classical heresiographers.

The historical milieu of Islamic political thought was not limited to the existence of religious and sectarian diversity. But such multiplicity of sects and religions was also associated with the use of violent means to settle the theological differences among these sects and religions. While violent conflict between Muslims and the non-Muslim subjects of the Islamic state was very rare in Islamic history, the same can not be said about the relations among the Muslim sects. The appeal to the power of the state by the partisans of each religious sect to suppress their sectarian enemies was not unusual in Islamic history. Such action by the Muslim theologians led to the frequent intervention by Islamic rulers in the theological disputes among the competing Muslim sects. Consequently, religious persecution was usually conducted by the Islamic state against heterodoxy at both the individual and the mass levels.

Incidents of punishment of individual Muslim heretics by the Islamic state have appeared frequently in Islamic history. History books reveal a significant number of instances where some individual heretics were subjected to different kinds of religious persecution, such as imprisonment, exile, or death. For example, between the years 742 to 746, individuals like Ghaylan al-Dimashqi, Ja’d Ibn Dirham, and Jahm Ibn Safwan were condemned to death as heretics.<sup>7</sup> In 922, Husain Ibn Mansur al-Hallaj

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<sup>7</sup> For more information concerning views of these individuals and the circumstances surrounding their executions, see Montgomery Watt, The Formation Period of Islamic

was tried and executed in Baghdad because his mystical views were considered heretical.<sup>8</sup> Abdullah Ibn al-Muqaffa' was put to death as a *Zandiq*<sup>9</sup> by the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur in 762. Also, in 1072, Hatim al-Tulaytali was executed for heresy.<sup>10</sup> These are only a few examples of those who were executed by the Islamic state as heretics. The writings of each individual Islamic sect about its own martyrs may reveal many more cases of persecution.

Other forms of religious persecution, such as imprisonment or interrogation of individual heretics, appeared more frequently than the death penalty in the history of Islam. The most common form of this kind of religious persecution was to summon the individual '*Alim* (Muslim scholar) suspected of holding heterodox beliefs to appear before the Muslim prince or his representative to be questioned about his theological views. The questioning usually took place in the presence of other theologians, the sectarian opponents of the '*Alim* under questioning and, in most cases, the ones who provoked the ruler to take action against that '*Alim*. If the Muslim prince, usually with

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Thought, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 87, 143, 242; and Husain 'Atwa, al-Firq al-Islamiyyah fi Bilad al-Sham fi al-'Asr al-'Umawi, (Amman: Dar al-Jil, 1986), 34-40, 83-90.

<sup>8</sup> See Louis Massignon, The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam, trans. Herbert Mason (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 1: 454-636.

<sup>9</sup> The term *zandiq* was given different meanings by various Muslim theologians. It can mean atheist, hypocrite, or a follower of one of the old Persian religions. All these meanings denote extreme forms of religious dissent. This form of religious dissent will be examined in more details in chapter five.

<sup>10</sup> Ahmad al-Wansharisi, al-Mi'yar al-Mu'rb, (Cairo: Maktabat Mustafa al-Halbi, 1968), 260.

the assistance of other theologians, found the *'Alim's* views to be objectionable, he would ask the *'Alim* to abandon his theological views and adopt what was considered to be the right doctrines. The *'Alim's* refusal to recant would result in his imprisonment, physical torture, and the banning of his books. This form of religious persecution was universal in Islamic history in the sense that it was not limited just to members of the minority sects but was also extended to the *'Ulama* of the Sunni sect, who represented the overwhelming majority of Muslims throughout history. The great minds of the Sunni tradition, like Abu Hanifah, al-Shafi'i, Anas Ibn Malik, Ibn Hanbal, al-bukhari, Ibn Taymiyah, and many others, were questioned by the Muslim rulers, some being imprisoned and physically tortured because of their theological and political views. Other thinkers who belonged to other religious sects were subjected to the same kinds of persecution by the Muslim rulers.<sup>11</sup>

Mass persecution in Islamic history was not so frequent as the persecution of individual heretics, nor was it so intense as that of Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, this kind of persecution was practiced by some Muslim rulers. The history of Islam also records instances where some Islamic sects were subjected to policies of elimination by the state.

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<sup>11</sup> A full account of what happened to dissenting thinkers can be found in their individual biographies. For a brief description of how the major Sunni *'Ulama* suffered this kind of persecution, see *'Abd al-'Aziz al-Badri, al-Islam Bayn al-'Ulama*

*wa al-Hukkam*, (al-Madinah al-Munawarah: al-Maktabah al-'Ilmiyyah, 1966), 129-215, 218-219

The Shi'ite sect, the largest minority sect in Islam, endured policies of mass persecution at least twice in Islamic history. The Muslim historian Ibn al-Athir reported that in 1022, all the Shi'ites of the north African city of al-Qayrawan were massacred for insulting the companions of the Prophet<sup>12</sup>. The second massacre of the Shi'ites took place during the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Selim I. In 1514, about 70,000 Shi'ites living in southeastern Iraq (near the borders with the Safavid state) were arrested and about 40,000 of them were eventually executed.<sup>13</sup> These two events are only examples of religious persecution at the mass level in Islamic history. Further historical inquiry should reveal more cases of mass religious persecution in Islamic history.

Mass persecution was mutual among the Islamic sects. Although the minority sects were in most cases the victims of mass persecution, these sects also took advantage of their opportunities to subject their opponents to ruthless persecution. The members of the majority Sunni sect have suffered considerable religious persecution inflicted on them by some minority sects. The chief example of mass persecution conducted by leaders of minority sects was the action of al-Qaramitah. The members

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<sup>12</sup> 'Izz al-Din Ibn al-Athir, al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh, 12 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Siyad, 1966), 9: 294-295.

<sup>13</sup> Muhammad Farid, Tarikh al-Dulah al-'Aliyyah al-'Uthmaniyyah, (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1977), 73-74; Edward S. Creasy, History of the Ottoman Turks, (Beirut: Khayats, 1961), 131-132.

of this *Batini* (esoteric) Isma‘ili sect<sup>14</sup> were persecuted by the Sunni Caliphs of the ‘Abbasid dynasty during the early years of their movement. But as soon as the Qaramith established their own state in al-Bahrain (now eastern Saudi Arabia) in 899, they started to use violent measures against their opponents. These extremist Qaramitah conducted a series of raids on cities in Yemen, Central and Eastern Arabia, southern Iraq, and Syria. During these raids, thousands of civilians, the majority of whom were Sunnis, were massacred and thousands were taken hostage by the Qaramitah.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, Islamic history has witnessed other episodes of mass persecution that were less extreme than the instances mentioned above. The ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775-785) was the first Muslim Caliph to adopt a systematic policy of inquisition to suppress heterodoxy. In 783, al-Mahdi created an institution which had the function of suppressing heresy within the empire. The primary task of the head of that institution, who was called *Sahib al-Zanadiqah*, was to hunt those individuals suspected of being *Zanidiqs*. As a result of that inquisition, many people were arrested or questioned about their religious beliefs, and a considerable number of them were imprisoned or executed. Even though al-Mahdi's inquisition targeted mainly those who

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<sup>14</sup> For an account of the origin and the doctrines of al-Qaramitah see Bernard Lewis, Origin of Isma‘ilism, (New York: AMS Press, 1975), 76-89.

<sup>15</sup> More details about the atrocities of the Qaramitah can be found in Sabir Tu‘imah, al-‘Aqa’id al-Batiniyah, 2nd edition. (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Thaqafiyah, 1991), 205-220; Hitti, History of the Arabs, 445-446.

were suspected of following the old Persian religion of Manichaeism, who were also the political enemies of the Empire, a large number of other Muslims lost their lives because of that policy.<sup>16</sup> The same anti-heretical policy continued under al-Hadi, al-Mahdi's son, but with less intensity.

However, the most famous case of mass persecution in Islamic history occurred during the reign of the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813-833). This Caliph initiated an inquisitorial policy to enforce acceptance of the Mu'tazilite doctrine of the Created Qur'an.<sup>17</sup> To assure the implementation of the policy, al-Ma'mun ordered the local governors throughout the empire to summon all the judges, theologians and jurists and to obtain from each one of them an explicit acceptance of the doctrine of the Created Qur'an. Those who showed reluctance were imprisoned and subjected to various sorts of physical torture. As a result of that inquisition, a large number of Muslim theologians who refused to compromise their position, especially among *Ahl al-Hadith*,<sup>18</sup> were jailed and tortured, and some of them died in prison, though no one

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<sup>16</sup> See al-Tabari, al-Mansur and al-Mahdi, trans. Hugh Kennedy, vol. 29 of The History of al-Tabari, ed. E. Yar-Shater (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 237.

<sup>17</sup> On the doctrine of the Created Qur'an and the opposing views against it, see Harry A. Wolfson, The Philosophy of The Kalam, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), Chapter III.

<sup>18</sup> *Ahl al-hadith* are those Sunni scholars who give primacy to the sayings of the Prophet (*al-Hadith*) not to independent reasoning (*r'ai*) as a reliable source of their theological and juridical views.

was officially executed. Among those who suffered because of al-Ma'mun's inquisition was the prominent Muslim jurist and theologian Ahmad Ibn Hanbal. al-Ma'mun's inquisition was largely successful, and it continued under the two other 'Abbasid Caliphs, that is, al-Mu'tasim (r. 833-842) and al-Wathiq (r. 842-847).<sup>19</sup> The significance of this inquisition lay in the fact that most of its victims were among the forerunners of Sunnism to which Ibn Taymiyah belonged.

However, when the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861) assumed power, he made a policy reversal and started persecuting the Mu'tazilites and releasing their opponents from prison. Under al-Mutawakkil, the Mu'tazilites were imprisoned, their books were banned, and their testimonies were rejected in the courts. But the persecution of the Mu'tazilites reached its zenith during the reign of the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Qadir (991-1031). Al-Qadir issued a decree, later known as al-Mu'taqad al-Qadiri (the Qadrian creed or dogma), which contained written instructions to suppress the Mu'tazilites. Consequently, the Mu'tazilites were harassed, imprisoned, and banned from teaching or preaching in public.<sup>20</sup>

The thoughtful reader might argue that these cases of persecution were mainly political rather than religious. This is a very powerful and well founded critique that cannot be ignored. This author does not dispute the fact that some of these

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<sup>19</sup> For a full account of al-Ma'mun's inquisition, see al-Tabari, The Reunification of the 'Abbasid Caliphate, trans. C. E. Bosworth, Vol. XXXII of The History of al-Tabari, ed. E. Yar-Shater (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 198-223.

<sup>20</sup> See, 'Umarah, 360-364.



individuals and groups who were subjected to persecution were also engaged in anti-government activities. Nor is he unaware that other heretics who held similar views and lived during the same period and under the same political rule were never questioned or persecuted. But to adopt this sort of historical revisionism, which emphasizes the primacy of political factors over other considerations, is to reduce the number of cases of religious persecution in human history to a handful of cases. While it would be absurd to ignore the political considerations in instances of religious persecution, it is equally absurd to dismiss all cases of religious persecution as merely incidents of political oppression simply because these policies were carried out by the state.

The most obvious deficiency of this objection is that it confuses the motives with the targets of persecution. Religious persecution is always conducted by various actors who have varying political, economic or theological motives.<sup>21</sup> Political leaders are usually motivated by their fear of religious dissent as a source of civil strife and disorder within their own states. Theologians, on the one hand, support the persecution of heresy not because of its undesirable political consequences but because

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<sup>21</sup> F. Pollock classifies the motives of persecution as theological, political or civil, and tribal. A. A. Seaton classifies the motives of persecution as religious, theological, doctrinal, ecclesiastical and politico-social. See Frederick Pollock, "The Theory of

Persecution," in Essays in Jurisprudence and Ethics, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1882), 144-175 and A. A. Seaton, The Theory of Toleration Under the Later Stuarts, (1910; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 9-12.

they perceive heresy as doctrinal error which poses a threat to the existing orthodoxy. But with the various agents of persecution and with all their different motives, the target of persecution remains the same: religious dissenters. Thus, the motives of religious persecution are not the same as its target. To speak of the motives of persecution is to focus on the persecutors, and to speak of its target is to emphasize the persecuted. What makes an event a religious persecution is mainly the use of force against religious dissenters as such, regardless of the identity or the actual motives of the persecutors. In all the cases cited here, all of these individuals or groups were declared, officially at least, as heretics and were punished as religious dissenters, not as political opponents. In addition, Muslim theologians supported these policies and gave them moral and doctrinal justification, because they were perceived as actions against heretics, not political opponents. Had these theologians considered the dissenters as rebels, they would have included them in the category of *Ahl al-Baghi* (the Transgressors), a term in Islamic jurisprudence that refers to Muslims who revolt against the Muslim ruler.

The intensity of religious persecution became reflected in the discourse of various religious minorities in Islam. The most obvious instance is the concept of *taqiyyah* in the theology of the Shi'ite sects. *Taqiyyah* literally means "caution," "concealment," or "dissimulation." But the word was used as a technical term for the concealment of one's true theological views under the threat of persecution. The concept of *taqiyyah* was not limited to the Shi'ite sect, for it was practiced by the early

Muslims and other Muslim sects, like the Kharijites. But in the discourse of Shi'ism, "the idea of *taqiyyah* was developed into a fundamental doctrine, and observance of it was made, for the good of the community, an essential duty of each member."<sup>22</sup> The transformation of the concept of *taqiyyah* into a central doctrine in the Shi'ite theology should not be surprising. In comparison with other Islamic sects, the Shi'ites have suffered the most from religious persecution by various Muslim rulers. Had the Shi'ites been tolerated or less persecuted by the Islamic state, the idea of *taqiyyah*, the author would argue, would have never evolved into a religious doctrine in Shi'ism.

The Arabic language, which is the mirror of Islamic thought, is another indication of the prevalence of religious persecution in Islamic history. The major dictionaries of the Arabic language list four words that mean "religious persecution." Those words are: *fitnah*, *mihnah*, *ibtala'*, and *idtihad*. All refer to the process of subjecting an individual to emotional or physical pressure in order to force that individual to abandon his/her religious views.<sup>23</sup> Muslim theologians, historians, and

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<sup>22</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law, trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 180-181. For general survey of the concept of *taqiyyah* in Islamic history and theology, see R. Strothmann, "Takiya," in Encyclopaedia of Islam, ed. M. Th. Houtsma *et al.* (Leiden: E. Brill, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> See "*fatana*", "*mahana*", "*bala*", and "*dahada*" in Mjid al-Din al-Fayruz Abadi, al-Qamus al-Muhit (Cairo: Maktabat Mustafa al-Halabi, 1952).

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Hisham, al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah (The Biography of the Prophet), 2nd ed. (Cairo: Munsh'at Mustafa al-Halabi, 1955), 1:317-321; also see Watt, Muhammad at Mecca, 117-119.

jurists have used these concepts interchangeably in their writings when describing events of religious persecution and inquisition. Since the words *fitnah* and *mihnah* have appeared more frequently in the classical texts of Islam than the other two words, the present discussion will be limited to these two concepts.

The word *fitnah* literally means “test,” “temptation,” or “seduction.” But the concept of *fitnah* was given a specific technical meaning. It was used in special context by the classical Muslim writers, who employed the term *fitnah* to designate the events involving the use of force in religious and sectarian disputes, that is, religious persecution. For example, the primary biographer of the Prophet, Ibn Hisham (d. 833), used the word *fitnah* to describe the emotional and physical pressure that the Mecca tribes placed on the early Muslim converts. According to Ibn Hisham, these Muslims were subjected to imprisonment and physical torture, which included burning and beating by the clans of Quraysh, to force them to abandon their new religion.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Ibn Hisham asserts that the early Muslims had to emigrate to Abyssinia because of their “fear of *fitnah*.”<sup>25</sup> Other Islamic historians and jurists have also used the term *fitnah* to describe instances of the use of coercive means against religious dissenters. Thus, the classical Islamic thinkers detached the word *fitnah* from its literal

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<sup>24</sup> Ibn Hisham, al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah (The Biography of the Prophet), 2nd ed. (Cairo: Munsh’at Mustafa al-Halabi, 1955), 1:317-321; also see Watt, Muhammad at Mecca, 117-119.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Hisham, 322.

meaning and used it as a technical term referring to the suffering of Muslims in the hands of authorities because of their dissenting religious views.

The other term that was used by the Muslim thinkers with reference to instances of religious persecution was *mihnah*. The word *mihnah* is derived from the Arabic verb *mahana* which literally means “to test.” But, as in the case of the concept of *fitnah*, Muslim thinkers employed the word *mihnah* to denote religious persecution. More specifically, they applied the concept of *mihnah* in situations where the Muslim rulers subjected a theologian to severe trial or physical torture because of his or her heretical views. The most widely known case of *mihnah* in Islamic history was that of Ahamed Ibn Hanbal during the previously mentioned al-Ma‘mun’s inquisition. Ibn Hanbal was one of the theologians who were imprisoned and tortured because of their refusal to accept the doctrine of the Created Qur’an, which al-Ma‘mun attempted to impose by force. The term *mihnah* was not restricted to the case of Ibn Hanbal, but was used by Muslim writers to describe other instances of the use of coercive means, mostly by the state, against religious dissenters. Thus, the concept of *mihnah* has appeared frequently in the biographies of major Muslim theologians and jurists to describe their suffering at the hands of those in authority.

Closer scrutiny of the events described as *fitnah* and *mihnah* show that all have the ingredients of religious persecution. In each instance, the victims of persecution were accused by their persecutors of believing in or advocating religious views considered morally objectionable and threatening to the existing order. Further, the

declared motives of the persecutors were to protect both a given body of religious truths and the cohesion of the community against the doctrinal errors of dissenters. Finally, different forms of emotional and physical pressure were used to force the persecuted individuals to abandon their religious convictions. It is interesting to note that these two concepts were always interpreted pejoratively by the Muslim thinkers. They used *mihnah* or *fitnah* to refer to what they perceived as unjust use of force against members of their own sect. However, these same authors would not use the same terms to describe the persecution of their own sectarian adversaries.

### **Religious Toleration in Islamic Political Thought**

Unlike developments in European political theory, the presence of religious diversity and of religious persecution in Islamic history did not bring the question of religious toleration to the core of Islamic political thought. Instead, the response of Islamic political thinkers to the problem of religious diversity has remained structurally the same throughout history. The Islamic thinkers' solution to the problem of religious diversity was neither persecution for all nor toleration for all. Instead, these political thinkers recommended toleration for some religious dissenters and persecution for others. Religious toleration was granted to the People of the Book (Jews, Christians, and others) with some conditions and restrictions. But the notion of toleration was never extended to other religious dissenters who were not included in the categories of the People of the Book. Islamic thinkers contended that Pagans were not to be

tolerated and the Islamic ruler must force them to choose between accepting Islam and the sword. With regard to heresy, Islamic thinkers have always advocated the use of some kind of coercion against heterodoxy. Such coercion could take varying forms ranging from execution of the heretic to imprisonment or exile. These measures against Muslim heretics have always been enforced by the Muslim ruler or his representatives. This response to the question of religious dissent was not influenced by the occurrence of episodes of religious persecution or toleration in Islamic history.

What inspired the present research is that, despite the intensity of religious diversity and persecution, one cannot find in the literature of Islamic political thought a single argument for tolerating religious dissent within Islam, that is, heresy. What we mean by *argument* is the intentional and logically coherent moral defense of the principle of religious toleration, not some scattered or accidental remarks by an Islamic thinker on the subject. In the whole body of writings on the subject of religious diversity within Islam, the question of religious toleration is largely neglected by Islamic thinkers. This omission is especially true of the question concerning the duty of the Muslim prince towards heterodoxy within the Islamic faith. As previously mentioned, Muslim political thinkers were not only aware of the existence of religious persecution, but also, some of them were among its victims. Even suffering from religious persecution at the personal level was not sufficient reason to persuade some Islamic thinkers to develop a cogent argument for religious toleration. Interestingly, Muslim thinkers were exposed to examples of religious toleration in the early stages of Islam.

The most conspicuous example of religious toleration was the conduct of Abu Talib, the Prophet's uncle, toward the new religion of Islam. Abu Talib never accepted or converted to Islam and was deeply committed to the Paganism of Quraysh. However, Abu Talib's disapproval of Islam and his nephew's attack on the gods of the tribe of Quraysh did not prevent him from defending Muhammad unconditionally against the leaders of Quraysh, even if the cost was the creation of division and animosities within his own tribe.<sup>26</sup> It is true that Abu Talib was motivated primarily by his kinship to Muhammad and not by his commitment to the ideal of religious toleration. But the fact remained that he did not think that his nephew ought to be persecuted because of his religious belief. Muslim thinkers have always admired Abu Talib's conduct as much as they resented the behavior of other leaders of Quraysh who persecuted the early Muslims. But these thinkers' admiration for Abu Talib's toleration was never translated into a defensible moral ideal in Islamic political thought.

Yet, the same political thinkers developed a relatively coherent and systematic argument for religious persecution which is quite visible in the literature of Islamic jurisprudence. Also, these writers devoted considerable space in their works for examining both religious dissent within Islam and the proper course of action that the Muslim ruler should follow to deal with it. One has no difficulty in finding the different categories of religious dissenters, that is, heretics, infidels, apostates, and the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibn Hisham, 265-270.



assigned punishment for each type in Islamic jurisprudence. Also, Muslim thinkers developed a well-defined moral and theological justification for intervention by the Islamic state to enforce conformity and to suppress heterodoxy.

One need look no further than the Arabic language itself to realize the unfavorable position that the concept of toleration occupies in Islamic political discourse. Whereas the classical dictionaries of Arabic contain four words for religious persecution, these dictionaries do not list a single word that has the meaning of religious toleration. The word *tasamuh*, which is now used to mean religious toleration, does not actually have this meaning in the classical dictionaries. For this reason, classical Islamic political thinkers never used the word *tasamuh* to mean religious toleration. Instead, they used the term *tasamuh* to denote generosity or flexibility, but not tolerating dissenting religious views.

This point can be illustrated more clearly by drawing a comparison between the development of the word “toleration” in the English language and the word *tasamuh* in Arabic. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *toleration* started to be associated with religious diversity and moral disapproval during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>27</sup> It was during that period of Western European history that religious conflicts reached their zenith. By contrast, when the meaning of *tasamuh* is discussed, whether in the classical Arabic dictionaries or the

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<sup>27</sup> “Toleration,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition.

writings of Islamic thinkers, the issue of religious or moral diversity is not considered. The rise of sectarian and religious controversies in Islam did not force Islamic thinkers to add a new technical meaning to the word *tasamuh* or to coin a new word to refer to the practice of religious toleration. So, to use the language of the New Historians of Political Theory, this meaning of *tasamuh*, that is religious toleration, was not available to the classical thinkers of Islam. Even when some Islamic thinkers have discussed the idea of tolerating the People of the Book, they have used the word *'iqrar* from the verb *'aqrra* which means to admit or to recognize, but not to tolerate what is morally objectionable. Even the word *'iqrar* totally disappears when the same thinkers are dealing with the question of religious dissent in Islam.

In summary, the Islamic political thinkers' views on the question of toleration do not correspond with their historical environment that was characterized intense religious diversity and conflict. Unlike their Western European counterparts, the Muslim political theorists' response to the question of religious dissent remained generally the same throughout history and was never influenced by the intensity of the sectarian diversity or the severity of religious persecution in Islamic history. For that reason, Islamic thinkers' treatment of the issue of toleration diverges significantly from the historicist thesis, which associates the inclusion of the question of toleration in political thinking with the rise of religious controversies in society. The primary task of this dissertation is to identify the main factors that have contributed to such divergence.

### **The Research Questions**

This dissertation will attempt to answer the following question:

- Why have the Islamic political thinkers' views on religious toleration and persecution remained structurally the same despite the changes in their historical milieu?

To provide an answer to this general question, it must be divided into more specific sub-questions:

- Why did Islamic political thinkers, when confronted with the problem of religious diversity, grant limited toleration to some non-Muslims and persecution to all other religious dissenters?
- Why did Islamic political theorists not extend the notion of tolerating the People the Book to the Muslim heretics and the Pagans, considering that all of them were classified by these thinkers as religious dissenters?

### **Conceptual Considerations**

This study is centered around two historically and conceptually related concepts: religious toleration and religious persecution. Like other concepts in political theory, the concepts of toleration and persecution are not sharply defined or clearly differentiated from related concepts, such as liberty and oppression. This section of the study is devoted to a discussion of these two concepts in terms of their meanings, context, and scope. In the discussion of each concept, I will draw upon the

existing literature on religious toleration. Following that, I will construct working definitions of toleration and persecution that will be adhered to throughout the study.

### **Religious Toleration**

The overwhelming majority of scholars define the concept of toleration in a negative sense. For these scholars, toleration is the abstention from using coercion to change what is considered morally objectionable. J. Horton defines toleration as ". . . the deliberate choice not to prohibit, hinder or interfere with conduct of which one disapproves, when one has both the requisite power and knowledge."<sup>28</sup> For Susan Mendus, ". . . toleration consists in refraining from preventing that of which one morally disapproves."<sup>29</sup> In similar fashion, D.D. Raphael views toleration as ". . . the practice of deliberately allowing or permitting a thing of which one disapproves."<sup>30</sup> Also, Joseph Raz takes "toleration" to refer to ". . . the curbing of an activity likely to be unwelcome to its recipient or of an inclination so to act which is in itself morally valuable and which is based on dislike or an antagonism of that person or of features of his life."<sup>31</sup> Other writers, like W. K. Jordan, A. Seaton, P. King, and C. Kardig, have

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<sup>28</sup> [J]ohn [H]orton, "Toleration," in The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought, ed. David Miller (1987; reprint, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> Susan Mendus, ed. Justifying Toleration: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 6.

<sup>30</sup> D. D. Raphael. "The Intolerable," in Justifying Toleration, ed. Susan Mendus, 139.

defined “toleration” in similar terms.<sup>32</sup> But scholars like Arthur Klein, though they are in the minority, define “toleration” in the positive sense to include not only refraining from using force but also “a willingness to adopt ideas if they prove or seem likely to prove good.”<sup>33</sup> These definitions reveal the different dimensions of the idea of toleration that distinguish it from other related concepts. These dimensions are the conditions, scope, and nature of toleration.

The conditions of toleration are diversity, disapproval, and the capacity of the tolerator to use coercion. The question of toleration, as Susan Mendus points out, “arises in circumstances of diversity.”<sup>34</sup> When one says diversity, he/she is not referring to any kind of diversity, but diversity that emerges out of the choices that the members of a given community have made concerning different, or competing, moral alternatives and belief systems. Other forms of diversity that are based on ethnicity or gender are

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Rax, “Autonomy, Toleration, and the Harm Principle,” in Justifying Toleration, ed. Susan Mendus, 163.

<sup>32</sup> See W.K. Jodran, The Development of Religious Toleration in England from the Beginning of the English Reformation to the Death of Queen Elizabeth, 4 vols., (1932; reprint, Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1965), 1: 17, A. A. Seaton, The Theory of Toleration Under the Later Stuarts, (1910; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 1; Preston King, Toleration, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 21; Carl Koridig, “Concepts of Toleration,” Journal of Value Inquiry 16 (1982): 59.

<sup>33</sup> Arthur Klein, Intolerance in the Reign of Elizabeth (1917; reprint, Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1968), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Mendus, Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1989), 8.

not, by themselves, conceptually relevant to the issue of toleration. Such types of diversity become relevant to toleration when they generate moral statements concerning the relationships between these ethnic or gender groups. One, for example, cannot be tolerant towards an individual from another ethnic group, but the same individual could be tolerant or intolerant towards that person's views concerning the issue of inter-ethnic marriage. Therefore, toleration applies only to those instances where the person has more than one alternative idea or conduct to voluntarily choose from.

In connection with the condition of diversity, there is the second condition of toleration, that is disapproval.<sup>35</sup> The existence of diversity has to be associated with disapproval or dislike, in order for toleration to be considered. While those who have written on the subject agree on the component of disapproval as a necessary condition for toleration, they disagree on what constitutes such disapproval. Some authors draw the distinction between morally-based objection and simple dislike, which is not a criterion for determining the scope of toleration. For some scholars, toleration should be limited only to issues that give rise to morally justified disapproval. Therefore, P. Nicholson asserts that

We must see the moral idea of toleration solely in terms of disapproval, i.e., of the making of judgments and the holding of reasons over which argument is possible. Toleration is a matter of moral choice, and our tastes and inclinations are

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<sup>35</sup> See Mendus, Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism, 8; Jordan, 1: 17; King, Toleration, 41.

irrelevant. No doubt, people's prejudices, their contingent feelings of liking and disliking, have to be taken into account when one is trying to explain why they are tolerant or not; but such feelings are not morally grounded, and cannot be the ground of moral position.<sup>36</sup>

Mary Warnock, on the other hand, rejects Nicholson's narrow perception of the scope of toleration. Instead, she extends the subject of toleration to include instances of simple dislike or disgust. Thus, Warnock insists that the person is tolerant if he or she "refrained from criticizing something that one disliked, hated, or regarded with varying degrees of distaste."<sup>37</sup> To accommodate her wider perception of the scope of toleration, Warnock distinguishes between toleration in the strong sense and toleration in the weak sense. Toleration in the strong sense is the refraining from preventing an idea or action that is considered to be immoral. By contrast, toleration in the weak sense refers to refraining from changing what the person dislikes or considers to be a distasteful thing.<sup>38</sup>

Warnock's proposal to extend the scope of toleration to include issues of simple dislike or distaste raises some conceptual problems. Such a definition could confuse toleration with other concepts such as racism or prejudice. The person's feeling of dislike of certain ethnic or gender groups is not conceptually relevant to the

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Nicholson, "Toleration as a Moral Ideal," in Aspects of Toleration eds. J. Horton and S. Mendus, (London: Methuen, 1985), 160-61.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Warnock, "The Limits of Toleration," in On Toleration, ed. Susan Mendus and David Edwards (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 125.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-127.

question of toleration. The reason for this is simple. The idea of toleration is based on the assumption that the tolerated person has the freedom to choose among a number of alternative ideas or behaviors. In addition, the making of such choices involves varying degrees of reasoning, that is, moral judgments concerning the value of each alternative. So there is the component of voluntarism which means that the tolerated have control over the characteristics being objected to. But in the case of the simple dislike of members of an ethnic group, the elements of voluntarism and moral reasoning do not exist. Therefore, this researcher rejects Warnock's definition of toleration and adopts Nicholson's approach of limiting toleration to issues involving morally grounded disapproval.

The third condition for toleration is the possibility of using force to influence the views or the conduct of the tolerated. As Mendus and King have pointed out, the existence of diversity and disapproval has to be associated with the tolerator's capacity to use coercion to force the tolerated to act or think in a certain way.<sup>39</sup> Without the possibility of the use of force, talking about toleration becomes meaningless. It is this component of coercion that brings the question of toleration to the center of political theory. The use of force could take varying forms and could be carried out by different agents. But it is the appeal to the power of political authority to solve religious and philosophical disputes that has produced the greatest tragedies in

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<sup>39</sup> King, Toleration, 22-24; Mendus, Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism, 9.



history. This is especially true of the use of the arm of the state by theologians to suppress what they consider to be theologically and morally objectionable. So, without the use or the capacity to use the power of the state to remove what is morally objectionable, the conditions of diversity and disapproval are not sufficient to give rise to the question of tolerance.

Finally, no discussion of the concept of toleration can be complete without mentioning its paradoxical nature. Toleration, unlike other concepts of political theory, has an inherent paradox in it. Some scholars, like S. Mendus, P. King, and D. Raphael, have realized that the idea of toleration is founded on a paradoxical argument.<sup>40</sup> The defense of the principle of toleration requires the political thinker to show that it is morally justifiable to not remove what is morally disapproved. The thinker must first prove that a certain idea or conduct is morally objectionable and the community might gain a lot or not lose anything if that idea or conduct were abolished. Then, the same thinker must show that to take any coercive action to suppress these ideas or behaviors is morally wrong. This paradox is especially obvious in religious toleration where the thinker argues that it is morally acceptable not to use force against those who deviate from or distort the Word of God. As will be shown in chapter two, this element of paradox will be a constant threat to the logical coherence and consistency of any argument for tolerance in general and religious toleration in particular.

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<sup>40</sup> Susan Mendus, Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism, 18-20, King, Toleration, 29-33; D. D. Raphael, "The Intolerable," 139.

The conceptual difficulties concerning the idea of toleration arise, not in connection with its definition but with the possibility of confusing toleration with other related concepts. Liberty and indifference, because of their historical association with toleration, are the two concepts that have been confused most with the notion of toleration. The idea of indifference refers to the state of mind of suspending judgment in regard to different moral choices. Thus, the person is said to be indifferent if that person has no opinion on different or competing moral choices. By suspending moral judgment, the condition of disapproval logically becomes irrelevant. Equally true, the suspension of judgment and the absence of moral disapproval make the question of the use of force in moral and religious disputes irrelevant. Therefore, the concept of indifference is different from toleration in the sense that it does not have the components of the disapproval and the possibility of the use of force. Thus, the indifferent person is not advocating tolerance or persecution, although he or she could easily move in either direction, but has no moral judgment on the issue.

However, the concept of liberty, unlike indifference, is not easily distinguished from the concept of toleration. Some scholars, such as H. Kamen, consider toleration to be some kind of liberty with some limitations.<sup>41</sup> But, although the act of tolerance presupposes some kind of freedom, the two concepts describe two different things. The basic difference between these two concepts is that tolerance is a

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<sup>41</sup> See Kamen, 7.

negative action and limited to the domain of morally disapproved acts or views. Therefore, liberty is the right which gives the individual the power to act in certain ways within certain limitations without any reference to the content of the choices being made. By contrast, tolerance refers to the withdrawal of authority from control over those views or acts that are morally disapproved. The distinction between liberty and tolerance is best articulated by Maurice Cranston, who writes

Toleration must be distinguished from freedom or liberty precisely because it implies the existence of something believed to be disagreeable or evil. When freedom or liberty is said to prevail, no criticism, moral or otherwise, is entailed of the people who are said to be free or of the use to which such people put their freedom. . . Toleration on the other hand, has an element of condemnation built into its meaning. We do not tolerate what we enjoy or what is generally liked or approved of. We speak of freedom of speech, of worship, and of movement - speech, worship, and movement being good or ethically neutral things. But when we speak of toleration, we speak of the toleration of the heretics, dissenters or atheists, all of whom were once thought to be wrongdoers.<sup>42</sup>

W. K. Jordan focuses on the possibility of the use of coercion as a criterion to distinguish between liberty and toleration. He asserted that toleration is different from liberty because “[I]t presumes an authority which has been and which again may become coercive; an authority which for subjective reasons is not brought to bear upon the dissenting group.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Maurice Cransont, “Toleration,” The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Ed. Paul Edwards ( New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967).

<sup>43</sup> W. K. Jordan, 1: 17; also see similar remarks by King, Toleration, 25.

Having defined the concept of toleration in terms of its essence and conditions and distinguishing it from other concepts, the author of this study has constructed a working and more precise definition of toleration that is appropriate to the purpose of this study. The most appropriate approach to this task is to focus on the conditions of toleration, that is, diversity, disapproval, and the use of force. The context of diversity refers to the religious and sectarian diversity that emerges from the disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims, and among different Islamic sects. With regard to the element of disapproval, it refers to what a thinker considers to be objectionable on the basis of a certain theological justification. In other words, disapproval is limited to what the political thinker perceives to be doctrinal errors. Further, limiting the scope of disapproval to theological or doctrinal errors entails the distinction between tolerance and toleration. Although toleration and tolerance have been used interchangeably in most of the literature, the concept of tolerance has wider meanings than toleration. As G. Tinder has observed, the concept of tolerance includes all aspects of morally disapproved views or behavior, and toleration is used only in reference to religious diversity.<sup>44</sup> The condition of the use of coercion refers to such coercion that is conducted by those who claim monopoly over the legitimate use of force in the community, that is, the prince or the state. This limitation is suggested not

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<sup>44</sup> Glen Tinder, Tolerance: Toward a New Civility (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 3.

only by the historical fact that coercion was often carried out by the state but also by the main focus of this dissertation, which is Islamic political thought.

Therefore, the political thinker is said to be “tolerant” when he or she deliberately constructs an argument against the intervention of the political authority to punish or to coerce those who hold religious views which the thinker considers to be doctrinal errors.

### **Religious Persecution**

Despite the conceptual and historical connection between the concepts of toleration and persecution, scholars have given the concept of persecution less attention than the concept of toleration. The underlying assumption behind this phenomenon seems to be the belief that persecution is the opposite of or the alternative to toleration. This assertion is historically true since in most cases of religious or moral diversity, the absence of toleration signified the occurrence of persecution. But, while this assertion has some historical validity, one cannot make the same assertion at the conceptual level. The reason is that the political thinker's response to diversity could take the forms of not only toleration or persecution but also indifference. Therefore, we cannot automatically assume that persecution is the opposite of toleration; thus, persecution has to be clarified and differentiated from other concepts. This section of the study has been devoted to outlining the different denominators of the concept of religious persecution. The discussion has been focused mainly on the meaning of

religious persecution and how it is distinguished from other concepts, especially the concept of oppression.

While toleration is essentially a negative concept, persecution is a positive one. In general terms, persecution refers to the process of using coercion to remove what is morally objectionable. John Horton, for example, defines persecution as “the deliberate attempt to eliminate disapproved conduct by coercive means, usually vigorously, perhaps even ruthlessly.”<sup>45</sup> As in the case of toleration, the question of persecution arises in the circumstances of diversity that is coupled with moral disapproval. Since diversity and moral disapproval were examined in the preceding section, it would be unnecessary repetition to discuss the nature and the scope of these two conditions here. Also, the possibility of the use of force is a prerequisite for persecution. It is this component of the potential use of coercion that distinguishes toleration from persecution. Where coercion is suspended in the case of toleration, it is utilized in the case of persecution. Such positive use of force to remove or punish morally objectionable acts makes the argument for persecution avoid the paradox of toleration, that is, it is morally right not to change or remove what is morally wrong.

the concept of oppression. This confusion appears to spring from the existence of the element The concept that has been most commonly confused with persecution is of coercion or physical violence in both persecution and oppression.

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<sup>45</sup> Horton, “Toleration,”.

Although religious persecution is a species of oppression, it has more limited scope and objectives than those of oppression. Persecution is limited to these instances where coercion is used, mostly by the political authorities, in the context of diversity, religious or otherwise, which gives rise to moral disapproval. The main objective of persecution is conversion or simply the punishment of the dissenting groups or individuals. Persecution, therefore, is associated with diversity and has particular targets and specific objectives. Oppression, on the other hand, has a wider scope since it refers to any policy that involves the use of coercive means in a way that is contrary to the ethical norms of the society. So, unlike persecution, in the case of oppression, the ingredients of diversity or difference and the objectives of punishment or conversion are not conceptually relevant. Such a distinction can also be seen in how the dictionary defines oppression and persecution. In *the Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, for example, persecution is defined as "the infliction of suffering, harm, or death on those who differ (as in origin, religion, or social outlook) in a way regarded as offensive or meriting extirpation." But the same dictionary defines oppression, without reference to diversity, as "unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See "Persecution" and "Oppression", Webster's Third International New Dictionary.

Furthermore, the existence of the presumption of voluntarism in persecution makes it distinctive from other forms of oppression. Since persecution and toleration are limited to matters of moral disapproval, the persecuted person is assumed to have made a willful decision to adopt one theological or moral world view and to reject others. This element of voluntarism has two consequences. First, it means that the persecuted agent can avoid persecution, theoretically at least, by conversion, that is, abandoning his or her theological or moral views and adopting those of his or her persecutor. Second, viewing the persecuted individual as being a dissenter by choice implies that the persecutor has control over the persecuted and can force him or her to reverse the conviction. Thus, the notion of persecution refers only to those instances where there is the possibility of conversion, that is, the persecuted has the capacity to choose between different religious or moral alternatives. Thus, other instances of mistreatment of some individuals who are different from the rest of the society by nature, that is, physical appearance, or ethnic background, and not by choice, cannot be considered liable to persecution because the component of voluntarism is missing. The unjust measures taken against certain ethnic, racial, or gender groups are instances of discrimination, oppression, or exclusion but not persecution.

This study has restricted the term *persecution* to its narrow and specific meaning. Exactly as in the case of religious toleration, the concept of persecution applies only to matters of moral disapproval arising out of sectarian and religious disputes. Furthermore, the element of the potential use of coercion is restricted to legal



coercion; that is, coercion carried out by the authoritative entity in the community: the prince, the monarch, or the state. Accordingly, the political thinker is said to be a supporter of religious persecution when he or she deliberately advocates the use of the power of the political authority to punish as criminals those who hold theological or religious views different from his or her own, in order to convert them or simply to punish them.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The present study is limited in respect to its scope and to what it intends to explain. As its subtitle suggests, this dissertation focuses mainly on the views of the Muslim political thinker Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyah. Although the methodological orientation of the study is intended to apply in general to all Islamic political thinkers, its actual application in this research is confined to the writings of Ibn Taymiyah. There is but little originality in Ibn Taymiyah's theology, his jurisprudence, or even his political ideas. His writings on theology, jurisprudence, and politics cannot be compared to those of the masters of Islamic thought such as al-Shafi'i in jurisprudence, al-Baqillani and al-Ghazali in theology, or al-Mawardi in political thought. But it is this lack of originality that makes Ibn Taymiyah an ideal candidate for a case study. Ibn Taymiyah's prominence in Islamic thought came mainly from his abilities to systemize and articulate the already existing, but fragmented, Sunni dogma. As an activist reformer, Ibn Taymiyah, in his polemical exchanges with members of

other Muslim sects and with non-Muslims, defended the Sunni orthodoxy by making frequent appeals to the pronouncements of past Muslim scholars concerning the theological or judicial issues under dispute. However, this is not to say that he was passively quoting past Muslim authors without formulating his own theological or political views. Instead, Ibn Taymiyah adopted this method to persuade his audience that his views were in harmony with those of the authoritative figures of Islam and that his opponents' views were inconsistent with the established teachings of Islam. In addition, Ibn Taymiyah considered himself a defender of an existing tradition, which in his view had been neglected or distorted by heretics, rather than as a founder of a new theological or judicial movement. Ibn Taymiyah's reliance on the teachings of the major figures of Muslim thought makes his thought a true embodiment of mainstream Sunni political thought and theology. Therefore, his views on toleration can be considered an accurate representation of the opinions of the majority of political thinkers who have subscribed to the world view of Sunni Islam.

With reference to the idea of religious toleration, Ibn Taymiyah has been selected for study for three main reasons. The first and the most important reason is that he wrote extensively on the problem of religious diversity within the Islamic polity. Unlike any Islamic thinker, Ibn Taymiyah has dealt with all kinds of religious dissenters in Islam: heretics, apostates, and *zandiqs*. He engaged in heated disputes with his sectarian or religious opponents; also he constructed a relatively coherent argument concerning how the Muslim rulers ought to treat religious dissenters. Ibn Taymiyah

has also written a number of major works on other religions, particularly Christianity. He expressed his views on these religions and touched upon the matter of how their members should be treated by Muslim rulers.

The second reason for considering Ibn Taymiyah as a representative figure is related to the nature of his theological and political doctrines in general. In contrast to other Islam thinkers, Ibn Taymiyah took a moderate position on most of the theological and political issues of his day. For instance, he forcefully condemned the extremism of the militant Islamic sect of the Kharijites, who used to rush in, denouncing as an infidel or unbeliever any Muslim who committed a minor sin. But also, he rejected as too lenient and too passive the views of the sect of Murji'ites, who refused to pass judgment on any dissenter, including those who violated the fundamentals of Islam. This moderate tone was also characteristic of his other theological and political views. Because of the moderate nature of his thought in general, Ibn Taymiyah's views on toleration and persecution should be a fair, middle-of-the-road representation of the mainstream Sunni tradition.

The third consideration is that, although Ibn Taymiyah lived in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the immense impact that his teachings have had on present-day Islamic thought makes him a contemporary thinker. It is no exaggeration to state that Ibn Taymiyah has more influence on the Islamic discourse of today than he had during his lifetime. There is a considerable consensus among leading Islamists of today that Ibn Taymiyah is among the most influential forerunners of contemporary

Islamic movements in the Islamic and Arab worlds. R. Hrair Dekmejian, for example, considers Ibn Taymiyah to be “the most prominent precursor of present-day Sunni fundamentalism after Ibn Hanbal.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, focusing on Ibn Taymiyah’s thought could facilitate some understanding of the intellectual origins of today’s Islamism and, hence, make the present research more relevant to the scholarly interests of today.

Implicit in the selection of Ibn Taymiyah is the restricting of this work to Sunni political thought. Thus the generalizations based on the analysis of the works of Ibn Taymiyah can be extended only to the Islamic political thinkers who adhere to the Sunni interpretation of Islam. Consequently, the views of Islamic thinkers belonging to other sects on the question of toleration are outside the scope of this dissertation.

Finally, for the purpose of this study, the methodological distinction between toleration as a political idea and toleration as a policy has been maintained. Religious toleration as a policy refers to the actual conduct of the Muslim rulers towards religious and sectarian dissenters within their own states. Toleration as a question of political thought, on the other hand, refers to the thinker’s views on the problem of religious dissent in Islam in terms of its nature, sources and treatment by the community. To study toleration as a policy is to deal with empirical questions such as: Who were involved in these events? What were the motives for their policies? and What were the implications of these policies on other events? But to examine the idea

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<sup>47</sup> R. Hrair Dekmejian, Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World, 2nd edition. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 39.

of religious toleration is to deal essentially with arguments containing theological or philosophical justification of toleration or persecution embodied in linguistic entities: the texts. The aim of studying toleration as a historical event is essentially to explain such an event in reference to certain theoretical formulations and to arrive at some empirical generalizations. By contrast, the primary task of the historian of political thought is to recover and to explain the meaning of the thinker's argument for toleration as it appears in the text and to evaluate its logical coherence and consistency. In other words, where the goal of examining toleration as a policy is explanation, the objective of studying the argument for toleration is interpretation. This study has concerned itself only with toleration as a political theory issue as articulated in the writings of Ibn Tamiyyah.

This distinction between these two concepts of toleration is necessitated by the tendency among some of the contemporary scholars, those who have written on the subject, to equate the views of Muslim theologians on toleration with the policies of the Islamic state. Those authors have carelessly moved from the theoretical statements of the Islamic thinkers on toleration to the actual practices of the Muslim rulers, under the assumption that they were conceptually connected. The presumption is reflected in the structure of their writings. To assess the nature of the idea of toleration in Islam, these authors usually start with an introductory section on the teachings of Islam on toleration and, based on that information, their discussion examines some historical

examples of how the Muslim rulers treated religious minorities within their states.<sup>48</sup> This method of approaching the problem of toleration in Islam seems to be founded on the premise that the Muslim rulers had formulated their policies towards religious dissent in accordance with the theoretical teachings of Islam. Nothing is further from the truth. Islamic history shows that Muslim rulers have deviated from the teachings of Islam more than they have adhered to them. And to view their policies as pure enforcement of the teachings of Islam as interpreted by the Islamic thinkers is not only to deny the Muslim rulers most of the autonomy which they actually had, but also to grossly exaggerate the influence of the Islamic thinkers and their views on the major events in Islamic history. The Islamic rulers, like all political leaders, were conducting the affairs of their states according to the universal principle of “politics as the art of the possible” and were concerned with their political survival rather than with the ideas of Muslim theologians. The relationship between political thinkers and statesmen in general is best articulated by George M. Dutcher who points out that “monarchs and ministers are accustomed to looking for guidance in the formulation and elaboration of their policies more to the precedents in their own state than to the writings of philosophical thinkers among their own people.”<sup>49</sup> Although Dutcher was writing on

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Adolph L. Wismar, A Study in Tolerance as Practiced by Muhammad and His Immediate Successors (1927; reprint, New York : AMS Press Inc., 1966); and Muhammad Yusufuddin, “ The Islamic State and its Non-Muslim Population,” The Islamic Review (Nov. 1950) : 16-20.

the “Enlightened Despotism” in Europe, his remarks accurately describe the relationship between Islamic rulers and political thinkers.

This is especially true in reference to the question of religious toleration. In general, Muslim rulers, motivated by considerations of political stability and the accumulation of wealth and power, have been more tolerant than the Muslim theologians and political thinkers. Had these rulers followed the recommendations of the Islamic political thinkers, the situation of the religious dissenters in the Islamic state would have been much worse than it actually was. Islamic history records a considerable number of cases where not only non-Muslims but also Muslim heretics occupied very sensitive positions in the institutions of Islamic polity. Some of these individuals served as close advisors, clerks, and physicians in the courts of the Muslim rulers. The writings of Islamic theologians and jurists in fact were highly critical of these lenient policies. For instance, al-Qurtubi, a prominent Muslim jurist and the author of a voluminous commentary on the Qur’an, expressed his resentment over the practice of giving the People of the Book and Muslim heretics sensitive positions in the cabinets of the Muslim princes during his time. Such policies of accommodating non-Muslims and deviant Muslims were, in al-Qurtubi’s view, a clear violation of the basic teachings of Islam concerning the proper treatment of religious heterodoxy.<sup>50</sup> But

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<sup>49</sup> George M. Dutcher, “Further Considerations on the Origin and the Nature of the Enlightened Despotism” in *Persecution and Liberty* (1931; reprint, Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), 376.

<sup>50</sup> al-Qurtubi made these remarks in the context of his interpretation of the Qur’anic verse “O ye who believe! Take not into your intimacy those outside your ranks. They

there is little evidence that the Muslim princes were committed to the teachings of the Muslim political thinkers; and when they were, they were essentially motivated by political considerations rather than by their religious convictions.

Accordingly, this dissertation focuses exclusively on religious toleration and persecution as political ideas articulated by Ahmad Ibn Taymiyah. The actual practice of the Muslim rulers during Ibn Taymiyah's time, with reference to religious toleration, have been excluded from the scope of this study. But since the distinction between the idea and the policy of toleration is mainly conceptual rather than actual or historical, some incidents of religious toleration or persecution are considered when they are *textually relevant*. These events become *textually relevant* when Ibn Taymiyah is aware of their occurrence and makes clear textual reference to them. What has guided this research is Ibn Taymiyah's attempt to interpret these events of toleration or persecution and try to give them meaning according to his theological and moral assumptions. Other events of this sort that Ibn Taymiyah might have been aware of, but made no textual reference to, were excluded from the focus of this work.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is divided into five chapters. The first chapter deals with some introductory issues which include the outlining of the research problem and its

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will not fail to corrupt you ... (3: 118). See 'Abi 'Abd 'Allah Muhammad al-Qurtubi, al-Jami' li-'Hkam al-Qur'an, 20 vols. 2nd edition. (Cairo: Dar al-Kutb al-Misriyyah, 1966), 4: 178-190.



background, the focus and the limitations of the study, and the definitions of the concepts of toleration and persecution. In chapter two, the methodological orientation of the study is outlined. It starts with a brief discussion of the relevant literature in the field of interpretation in the history of political thought, then moves to the discussion of the structure of the idea of toleration in terms of its epistemological, ethical and political dimensions by focusing on the European experience. This chapter ends with a general discussion of how the idea of toleration in Islamic political thought was limited by the textual frame of reference of that tradition . Chapter three is devoted to the study of Ibn Taymiyah and his basic epistemological assumptions and their implications on his political thought and his response to the question of religious diversity. Ibn Taymiyah's views on toleration and its theological justification and limits are explored in chapter four. Chapter five will present Ibn Taymiyah's theory of persecution in terms of its targets, theological justification, and limits.

#### **A Note on Translations and Transliteration:**

Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations from the Arabic sources are by the author of the present study. The Qur'anic verses are taken from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's *The Holy Qu-ran: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary*. The system adopted in this dissertation for transliterating Arabic words is that of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. The exceptions to this rule are the common names of persons, sects, and places that have gained considerable usage in

secondary sources. The common spellings of these names have been maintained in order to avoid any confusion. For instance, the reader will find Mecca instead of Makkah or Kharijites instead of Khawarij.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Methodological Considerations**

As its title suggests, the main theme of this chapter is to explore the methodological settings of the study. It is my intention here to introduce the reader to the interpretive approach that I have adopted to answer the research questions stated in the previous chapter. In order to achieve the purpose which the present chapter is intended to serve, I have divided it into two main parts. The first part examines the relevant insights that the different schools of interpretations in the field of the history of political ideas have to offer concerning the question of religious toleration in political thought. The purpose of this part is to place the present study within its academic and scholarly context, that is, the problem of interpretation in the history of political ideas. The second part is intended to outline the methodological orientation of this study in respect to its main assumptions, propositions, and sources. The methodological orientation of the study is outlined in three steps which correspond with the three subsections of this part. The first section deals with the concept of the frame of reference of political thinking as a conceptual device of recovering the meaning and explaining the structure of past political ideas. The frame of reference of the idea of religious toleration with its three dimensions, skepticism, relativism, and secularism, is explored in section two. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the textual frame of

reference of Islamic political thought had determined the substance and the form of Islamic political theorists' response to the problem of religious diversity.

**Religious Toleration and the Problem of Interpretation in the History of Political Ideas: A Review of the Relevant Literature**

The literature on the history of political thought could be classified into three main categories: Contextualism, Textualism, and the New History of Political Theory. In the following sections, each one of these approaches will be explored in terms of its basic assumptions and techniques. It is not my intention, however, to give a detailed and comprehensive review of the literature on the problem of interpretation in the history of political ideas. Rather, the goal of this endeavor is to determine the relevance of the major pronouncements of these schools of interpretation to the question of toleration in the history of political theory in general and in Islamic political thinking in particular. To put it differently, the purpose of reviewing the literature on interpretation is to see how these approaches could contribute to explaining why the Muslim political thinkers had treated the question of religious toleration the way they did.

Before I move to the discussion of these schools, a word of caution concerning the topology of the different schools of interpretation is in order. There is an element of oversimplification or distortion in classifying the works on the history of political ideas into three approaches. These schools of interpretation are not mutually

exclusive and they overlap with one another. In their actual practice, the historians of political theory usually do not restrict themselves to one approach; but rather, they make use of all techniques that these schools have to offer. In fact, one can find a historian of political thought who advocates two approaches of interpretation at the same time. For example, Spragens, who is considered a contextualist for his emphasis on the historical setting of political ideas, also believes that political thinkers address some perennial problems, which places him within the textualist school.<sup>1</sup> Another example is Sheldon Wolin who was criticized by Q. Skinner as a textualist, but who also emphasized the role of the crisis environment in shaping political ideas. So, the concepts of Contextualism, Textualism, and the New History of Political Thought should be conceived of as “ideal types” that serve to clarify our discussion of the literature on interpretation, rather than as clear-cut schools of interpretation.

### Contextualism

Contextualism is the oldest school of interpretation in the sub-field of the history of political thought. It was the dominant paradigm in the works of the early historians of political thought like Sabine, Dunning, J. Allen and many others. But despite its prominence in the early writings on political theory, Contextualism is poorly articulated by its proponents. What is called the contextualist method of interpretation

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<sup>1</sup> Thamos Spragens, Understanding Political Theory ( New York: St. Martine’s Press, 1976), 20, 21.

is nothing more than some fragmented and sometimes accidental remarks by historians of political thought on the significance of the historical settings in understanding past political ideas. Contextualism in the history of political thought can be viewed as a distorted or amateur representation of the methods and techniques used by the sociologists of knowledge. In fact, the basic tenets of Contextualism were articulated more by its critics such as Easton, Skinner, and Strauss than by its advocates. The exceptions to this are the Marxist historians who, because of their well-developed world view, have manifested a great deal of sophistication and rigor in their interpretation of past political theories.

The main thrust of the contextualist approach is that past political ideas must be understood within their historical or contextual locations. Political ideas, the contextualists contended, are the product of the institutional and cultural arrangements of their societies. G. Sabine suggested that political theories “are produced as a normal part of the social *milieu* in which politics itself has its being.”<sup>2</sup> In similar fashion, Sheldon Wolin contended that “the boundaries and substance of the subject matter of political philosophy are determined to a large extent by the practices of existing societies.”<sup>3</sup> It is presumed that every political thinker “even the most abstract, is deeply

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<sup>2</sup> Sabine, Preface to the first edition.

<sup>3</sup> Sheldon Wolin, Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1960), 6.

influenced by the circumstances of his day”<sup>4</sup> and by the “economical, social and political events of the time.”<sup>5</sup> For the proponents of Contextualism, the political theorist ought to be seen as writing “out of compelling practical necessity”<sup>6</sup> and responding to “times of crisis.”<sup>7</sup> Hence, those who deal with past political thought must have “a thorough knowledge of the conditions, social, political and economical, under which that thought was developed.”<sup>8</sup> And to recover the meanings of past political texts, the historians of political thought must know something about their social and economical conditions<sup>9</sup>, and “systematically relate them to their social contexts.”<sup>10</sup> So one cannot understand the ideas of Plato without considering the crisis of fourth-century Athens and the execution of his master Socrates. Nor can one understand Machiavelli’s *Prince* without referring to the political fragmentation of Italy

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<sup>4</sup> John Plamenatz, Man and Society: Political and Social Theory: Machiavelli Through Rousseau 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963), I:ix.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Hampton, Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Spragens, Understanding Political Theory, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Wolin, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Allen, xviii.

<sup>9</sup> Plamenatz, ix.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen M. Wood and Neal Wood, Class, Ideology, and Ancient Political Theory: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Social Context (New York: Oxford University Press,

during the sixteenth century, or Locke's doctrines of rights and private property without reference to the rise of the new bourgeois class in seventeenth-century England, and so on.

Consequently, every political theorist is seen not as a mere intellectual who deals with abstract ideas but as an individual who performs definite ideological and political tasks. For example, the political ideas of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle "can be conceived of as the supreme intellectual expression of the increasing class consciousness of the aristocracy of the fourth century, consciousness that seems to become more pronounced as the class was progressively threatened with extinction."<sup>11</sup> And John Locke was the "theorist of early agrarian capitalism" in seventeenth-century England.<sup>12</sup> In sum, for contextualists, past political thought must be perceived as an integral part of and an immediate response to the institutional and cultural arrangements of the time.

As stated in the previous chapter, the development and structure of the idea of religious toleration in Islamic political thought represent a diversion from the contextualist thesis. Neither the presence of religious diversity nor the occurrence of incidents of religious persecution in Islamic history seemed to provoke Muslim thinkers

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1978), ix; also see John Bowle, Politics and Opinion in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Wood and Wood, Class, Ideology, and Ancient Political Theory, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Neal Wood, John Locke and Agrarian Capitalism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 13.



to consider toleration as a remedy for religious dissent within Islam. But since the contextualist proposition concerning toleration was stated in general terms in chapter one, it will be explored more specifically here. The contextualist might argue that the difference between the notions of toleration in European and in Islamic political thought could be explained with reference to different historical circumstances in which the thinkers from these two traditions confronted the problem of religious heterodoxy. The reference might be made primarily to two factors, ecclesiastical and economic, that did not exist in the historical context of Islamic political thought.

The ecclesiastical dimension refers to the fact that heresy in Western Europe was against an institutionalized orthodoxy in the form of an established Catholic Church. In the case of Islam, orthodoxy was never institutionalized, and there had never been an established church in the history of Islam. The lack of an institutionalized orthodoxy in Islam made orthodoxy and heresy overlap and the distinction between the two was blurred.<sup>13</sup> Where sectarian conflict in Western Europe took the form of confrontation between the Catholic church and the dissenting groups or individuals, in Islam it took the form of disputes among individual theologians who were, theoretically, of equal status. So, the sectarian conflicts in Western Europe, though they appeared later than the sectarian conflicts in Islam and were shorter in

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<sup>13</sup> An interesting discussion of the nature of heresy and orthodoxy in Islam is found in Alexander Knysh, "Orthodoxy" and "Heresy" in Medieval Islam: An Essay in Reassessment," The Muslim World, LXXXIII, no. 1 (1993): 48-67.

duration, were very visible and took a more violent form. Consequently, the institutionalization of orthodoxy and the severity of the suppression of heresy in Western Europe had made the problem of heterodoxy an urgent concern, and hence, it was forcefully reflected in the works of Western political theorists.

It would be unreasonable to deny the difference between the nature of religious dissent in the Western European and the Islamic contexts, or to dispute the impact of such difference on how the political thinkers from both traditions had formulated their ideas on the question of religious toleration. One ought to look no further than how heresy was defined by the major thinkers of both traditions. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, defined heresy in institutional terms as the denial of matters of faith “after they have been defined by the authority of the universal church.”<sup>14</sup> By contrast, the Muslim thinkers defined heresy with no reference to any kind of institutionalized orthodoxy. For example, the fifteenth-century Muslim jurist Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi, the author of the classic text on heresy in Islam, defined heresy as an invented method of worship which resembles the original teachings of Islam and the purpose of acting upon it is the exaggeration of worshipping God.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas. Summa Theologica trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. 20 vols. (London: R. and T. Washbourne, Ltd., 1917), II-II, 153. Other Christian theologians defined heresy in similar terms; see Walter Wakefield and Austin Evans, Heresies of the High Middle Ages: Selected Sources (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 1-3.

<sup>15</sup> Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi, al-I'tisam 2 vols. (al-Khubar: Dar Ibn 'Affan, 1992), I: 50.

But still, the lack of institutionalized heresy in Islam did not prevent the occurrence of episodes of religious persecution in Islamic history. And even if religious persecution in Islamic history was less severe than religious persecution in Europe, a reference to such historical fact cannot provide a satisfactory answer to the research questions. It does not explain, for example, the variations within the Islamic political thinkers' response to the problem of religious diversity. As a matter of historical fact, the conflicts between the Muslims and the Pagans and among the different Muslims sects were more severe and bloodier than the conflict between the Muslims and the People of the Book. So, if the criterion of considering toleration as a remedy for religious dissent was the severity of religious persecution, then the Muslim political theorists would propose religious toleration as a solution for the sectarian and Muslims-Pagans conflicts and persecution for the disputes among Muslims and Christians and Jews. But in Islamic political thought, the case was totally the reverse. These thinkers recommended religious toleration as a solution for the mild and infrequent conflicts between the Muslims and the People of the Book. However, the same thinkers proposed religious persecution as a solution for the sectarian and the Muslim-Pagan conflicts which were expressed in very violent and severe forms. So, it would be safe to conclude that the institutionalization of orthodoxy in Western Europe and its absence in the Islamic context cannot explain why the Islamic political thinkers responded to the problem of religious diversity the way they did.

The economic factor refers to the rise of capitalism in Western Europe during the sixteenth century. The genesis of capitalism in Western Europe was seen in the transformation of the agricultural sector from subsistence farming to market-oriented (capitalist) farming. Such economic transition had generated significant structural changes in European societies which received their clearest expression in the rise of the agrarian bourgeoisie class.<sup>16</sup> This new capitalist class was, or it was assumed to be, very antagonistic to religious restrictions on trade, and it perceived sectarian conflicts to be economically costly. Thus, the rise of the idea of the market and the commercial capitalist class had provided the economic and social need for civil peace which, in turn, made defending toleration at the intellectual level not only feasible but also desirable.<sup>17</sup> In the case of Islam such economic transition and the rise of the capitalist class had never occurred, hence, the idea of religious toleration did not have the necessary economic and social basis to make it a defensible principle at the intellectual and practical levels.

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<sup>16</sup> For more details, see H. Koenigshberger and George Mosses, Europe in the Sixteenth Century (New York: Longman, 1968), 21-53.

<sup>17</sup> A good summary and an empirical critique of the role of capitalism in the development of toleration is found in Iain Hampsher-Monk, "The Market for Toleration: A Case Study in an Aspect of the Ambiguity of Positive Economics," British Journal of Political Science, 21- part I (1991): 29-44. For a discussion of the economic motives for religious toleration in Western Europe, see Jordan, I:22; Kamen, 224-27; Richard Tawney, Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937), 206-207; and Steve Bruce and Chris Wright "Law, Social Change, and Religious Toleration," Journal of Church and State, 37 no.1 (Win. 1995): 193-120.

The main problem with this explanation is that it does not explain what this study intends to explain. The rise of capitalism in Western Europe could explain why some policies of religious toleration were adopted. But it does not explain why certain thinkers advocated the idea of religious toleration as a moral ideal. It is true that some of the defenders of religious toleration, like John Locke, were associated with the emerging bourgeois class in Europe, but other thinkers like Erasmus and Castillon defended toleration although they had lived in societies which were hardly capitalist. Furthermore, associating the idea of religious toleration with capitalism is a highly questionable premise. Theoretically, capitalism could be served by either toleration or persecution, as was historically the case when capitalism gave rise to liberalism in England and the United States and to fascism in Germany, Italy, and Japan. However, even if the development of capitalism could partially explain the rise of religious toleration as a policy in Europe, because the scope of this study is limited to the idea of religious toleration as an issue of political thought and not as an empirical question, the role of the rise of capitalism and its relation to religious toleration is considered irrelevant to this study.

### **Textualism**

It is not an exaggeration to say that Textualism has been the dominant interpretative approach in the field of the history of political thought since the 1950s. Until recently, the pronouncements of Textualism acquired prominence among the

majority of the historians of political theory to the degree where Textualism became some sort of an established orthodoxy in the field. In the following, I will attempt to delineate the main features of the textualist school of interpretation. After a brief assessment of the basic tenets of Textualism, the discussion will focus exclusively on Leo Strauss's method of textual interpretation and its relevance to the main theme of this study. But before proceeding with the discussion of these issues, a comment on the intellectual context in which Textualism had emerged is required.

The textualist approach did not initially emerge as a response to the need for the development of more rigorous methodology in the history of political thought or as a reaction to Contextualism. But rather, Textualism in its premises and techniques has evolved as an integral part of the evolution of the discipline of political science in the United States. Instead of being a reaction to the contextualist school, Textualism was primarily a response to the assault on political theory which was waged mainly by those who championed the behavioral movement within American political science during the early 1950's. In the 1950s, the notion of the "decline" of political theory had gained currency among the majority of American political scientists who embraced the notion of modeling the methods of studying politics after those applied by the practitioners of the natural sciences. These scholars believed that what they considered to be the tradition of Western political thought was in a state of decline. David Easton attributed the decline of modern political theory to its reliance on historicism, which was concerned exclusively with the "relation of values to the milieu

in which they appeared”<sup>18</sup> instead of “analyzing and formulating new value theory.”<sup>19</sup> For Alfred Cobban, political theory has declined because it “has become generally disengaged from practical facts. . . [and] the academic political theorist of today may study the great political thinkers of the past, but in the name of academic impartiality he must carefully abstain from doing the kind of thing that they did.”<sup>20</sup> Other political scientists like Robert Dahl went further than Easton and Cobban by considering political theory to be not in a state of decline, but due to its reliance on historicism, was actually dead.<sup>21</sup>

The political theorists of the time, who never attempted to verify the accuracy or the validity of these charges, responded by further assault on historicism (contextualism) and arguing for the relevance of the “Great Books” to contemporary society and the methodological concerns of the discipline of political science. These theorists agreed with the critics on the existence of a tradition in the form of the classic texts of Western political thought and the state of decline in which that tradition was going through. They also agreed that the prevalence of historicism in the major texts of

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<sup>18</sup> David Easton, The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science (reprint, 1953; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 236.

<sup>19</sup> David Easton, “The Decline of Modern Political Theory,” Journal of Politics 13 (1951): 36.

<sup>20</sup> Alfred Cobban, “The Decline of Political Theory,” Political Science Quarterly LXVIII no. 3 (1953): 331.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Dahl, “Political Theory,” World Politics XI (1958): 89-102.

the history of political thought was the major source of the decline of that tradition. Thus, in order for political theory to be revived, the historicist method must be abandoned. Leo Strauss, for instance, insisted that historicism should be rejected because “it denies the relevance of the evolutionist thesis . . . [and] rejects the question of the good society.”<sup>22</sup> So, the reliance on the contextualist method, the political theorists of that period contended, has reduced the study of political theory to purely antiquarian interest.

The textualist thesis is based on the premise that the classic texts of political thought are autonomous and transhistorical. Although the political thinkers of the past produced their ideas in response to their particular historical circumstances, their writings contain timeless and universal elements which are relevant not only to the methodological interest of today’s political scientists but also to the ills of contemporary society. The underlying assumption behind this perception of the classics is that they are “concerned with the same fundamental themes or the same fundamental problems, and therefore, there exists an unchanging framework which persists in all changes of human knowledge of both facts and principles.”<sup>23</sup> It is

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<sup>22</sup> Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy,” in An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 23.

<sup>23</sup> Leo Strauss, “Natural Right and the Historical Approach,” in Gildin, 113-114; also Strauss makes similar remarks in his essay, “On Classical Political philosophy,” in Gildin, 7.



assumed that the major contributors of the tradition of political thought were engaged in a great dialogue on perennial problems from Plato down to Karl Marx and J.S. Mill. Thus, the historian who deals with the works of past political thinkers must be able to determine “the degree to which these men were engaging in the perennial conversation of mankind.”<sup>24</sup>

The obvious implication of such a view is that the purpose of studying past political ideas is not to recover their historical meaning but to determine their *relevance* to the practical affairs of today. Therefore, W. Bluhm asserts that the student of political thought should not be interested in the classics as “reflections of or influences on the political ideologies of the societies in which they were created, but rather in the universal ideas contained in the classic theories.”<sup>25</sup> He or she must show how past political philosophers raised questions that “are alive in our own society”<sup>26</sup> and provide solutions to the ills of their societies which “may enlarge the imagination of the present and make men enlightened in confronting contemporary crises in society.”<sup>27</sup> The

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<sup>24</sup> Dante Germins, Modern Western Political Thought: Machiavelli to Marx (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1972), viii.

<sup>25</sup> William T. Bluhm, Theories of Political System: Classics of Political Thought and Modern Political Analysis 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), 15.

<sup>26</sup> Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds. History of Political Philosophy (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1963), preface.

<sup>27</sup> Paul W. Ward, A Short History of Political Thinking (1939, reprint; Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 5.

proponents of Textualism contend that the classics “can go far toward explaining the political behavior of today . . . because of their universal application.”<sup>28</sup> Instead of locating the meaning of what the political thinkers of the past said, the task of interpretation should be to show that these ideas “have meaning for political science”<sup>29</sup> and are relevant to “the current methodological debate and the larger debate about values which is going on throughout our society.”<sup>30</sup>

To view the classics of political thought as transhistorical and to emphasize their relevance to the present society is to give their historical context a minimal role in understanding them. For the textualists, the classic text is sufficient to understand its meaning. Although the textualists have not totally ignored the context of political thought, they considered it a marginal issue. So, while Plato’s ideas were greatly influenced by the events of his day, this fact “is of little significance to the student of political philosophy [whose interest] lies not in accounting for the origins and the shaping of political ideas, but in analyzing them and in assessing their worth.”<sup>31</sup> Hacker went even further to suggest that the historians of political thought should study only

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<sup>28</sup> Andrew Hacker, “Capital and Carbuncles: the “Great Books” Reappraise,” American Political Science Review 48 (1954):783.

<sup>29</sup> Hacker, 776.

<sup>30</sup> Bluhm, 15.

<sup>31</sup> F.C. White, “Plato and the Good of the Whole,” in Political Thinkers ed. David Muchamp (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 14.

the works or the parts of works that have some ethical and practical relevance to the contemporary world.<sup>32</sup> Such emphasis on the relevance and timelessness of the classics makes the issue of explaining why past political thinkers wrote the way they did, a marginal question for the textualist. This makes the textualist approach to the political ideas of the past essentially a philosophy of reading the classics rather than an interpretative method with an explanatory power.

The only exception to this is Leo Strauss who has developed a well-defined method of textual interpretation. Strauss's method of interpretation and its major assumptions are outlined in his essay *Persecution and the Art of Writing* published in 1952. The underlying assumption of Strauss's method is that the political writers of the past produced their thought under the fear of persecution by those in authority. Such state of affairs forced these writers to conceal their heterodox views by adopting certain ways of expressing their philosophical or theological teachings. He wrote

persecution, then, gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, there with a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines. That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only.<sup>33</sup>

The distinction between two types of readership by Strauss corresponds to two kinds of meanings or teachings, exoteric and esoteric, contained in the classic text

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<sup>32</sup> Hacker, 784.

<sup>33</sup> Leo Strauss, "Persecution and the Art of Writing," in Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1952), 25.

of political thought. The exoteric message of the text is very explicit and accessible to all readers. It is intended for the general and careless readers and it plays the role of hiding or concealing the politically or socially objectionable views of the thinker. The esoteric or hidden teachings of the text are written for the learned and sophisticated individuals who have the will and ability to comprehend these messages by reading between the lines.<sup>34</sup> So, the historian of political theory should not settle for simple or superficial reading of past political texts, but ought to find the hidden or esoteric message which the political thinker intended to communicate privately only to the elect. In addition, by considering the phenomenon of persecution, Strauss contended that the student of political thought could solve what appears to be contradictions in the writings of the great thinkers of the past. For Strauss, such contradictions could be put in intentionally by the author in order to oppose the established orthodoxy by distorting its tenets. Thus, the thoughtful interpreter must attempt to overcome such contradictions by studying the “whole book all over again, with much greater care and much less naiveté than ever before.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, in order for the interpreter to know the truth of the ideas of past political thinkers, he or she must read between the lines.

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<sup>34</sup> Strauss, Persecution, 34-36.

<sup>35</sup> Strauss, Persecution, 32.

Before turning to the relevance of the Straussian method to the question of toleration in Islamic political thought, I should point out an obvious inconsistency in it. Strauss was extremely antagonistic to historicism or Contextualism and had always insisted on the transhistorical nature of political philosophy and the autonomy of the classic texts of political thought. But his emphasis on the phenomenon of persecution and its impact on how the political thinkers of the past expressed their views makes the Straussian approach essentially historical, that is, contextualist. If the exoteric writings are “essentially related to a society which is not liberal,” then the starting point of the historian of political thought should be the description of the context in which the text was produced and to what degree that society was liberal. Instead of focusing only on the classic text, the interpreter must first pay attention to the restrictions placed on the political thinkers by their respective societies and their fear of persecution if they publicly pronounced their views. It seems that the text’s exoteric meaning which was pronounced publicly by the thinker and its esoteric meaning which the thinker decided to conceal because of his/her fear of persecution were historically determined. Such view of the classic texts of political thought not only places the Straussian approach within Contextualism but also is inconsistent with his advocacy of the transhistorical character of political philosophy and could ruin his whole method.

Even if the historian of political ideas decided to overlook this inconsistency, she would see the Straussian method to be of little help in explaining the question of toleration in Islamic political thought. To adopt the Straussian interpretive

method to explain the idea of religious toleration in Islamic political thought would be to focus on the esoteric meanings of writings of Islamic political theorists. One would have to assume that these thinkers believed that the idea of toleration was morally and politically desirable, but due to their fear of persecution, they decided not to advocate it openly. Instead, they could have communicated their approval of toleration by adopting certain styles of writing which could be accessible only to the elect readers who were capable of reading between the lines.

The method of Strauss is particularly inappropriate for interpreting the writings of the Islamic political theorists within the *Sunni* tradition to which Ibn Taymiyah belonged. In their historical practices and theological pronouncements, the *Sunni* political thinkers have always considered the concealment of one's true religious views, with the intention of avoiding bodily harm, to be highly undesirable, though not strictly forbidden. It is true that the *Sunni* political thinkers and theologians have been known for their willingness to interpret the political teachings of Islam in certain ways in order to accommodate the demands of those in power and because of their fear of civil strife and instability within the Islamic polity. But these thinkers were not known for following the techniques of writing that Strauss suggested, that is, constructing the text to have an exoteric meaning which is expressed in explicit terms and accessible to all, and an esoteric or hidden meaning which is intended for the elect and written between the lines. Instead, they were very clear that they were compromising some of the political doctrines of Islam, which were considered to be among the secondary

teachings, in order to achieve higher objectives such as the preservation of the integrity of the Islamic polity and the fundamental doctrines of Islam. However, when the dispute pertained to the basic teachings of the Muslim creed, the Muslim thinkers never attempted to conceal their theological opinions and were always willing to express their views in unmistakable terms even if that meant being exposed to different types of persecution by the regime in power. In addition, had these political theorists used the exoteric-esoteric method of expressing their ideas, later generations of political thinkers within the *Sunni* tradition would have pointed to this fact and attempted to reveal the esoteric messages contained in these writings after the fear of persecution had disappeared. But, as far as I know, there has been no attempt by any *Sunni* thinker to reinterpret the past works of other *Sunni* scholars with the intention of discovering their actual esoteric teachings.

However, Strauss's methodology may be applicable to the writings of Islamic political thinkers belonging to the Shi'ite and other esoteric (*batani*) sects of Islam. Although the principal of *taqiyah* (the concealment of one's religious views to avoid persecution) was universally adopted by all early Muslims; it had lost its significance and was later abandoned by the *Sunni* thinkers. While the concept of *taqiyah* had faded away within *Sunnism*, it has flourished and evolved into a fundamental doctrine among the Shi'ite sects. Thus, it was the intention of the political thinkers of the Shi'ites and *batini* (esoteric) sects to conceal their true teachings by appealing to the esoteric techniques of writing. Indeed, it is among the basic tenets of

the esoteric sects of Islam to view the Quran as containing two teachings or meanings: the exoteric which is attainable by all Muslims and esoteric or hidden message, the knowledge of which is restricted to the pure and the elect. Such perception of the nature of the divine text of Islam was reflected in the style and content of the writings of the esoteric writers of Islam. For example, the Brethren of Purity (*Ikwān al-Safā*), a secret society which belonged to the Shi'ite subset of Isma'ilites, appeared to focus on combining mathematics and astronomy with mysticism, but in fact that society was essentially political under the cover of mysticism.<sup>36</sup> So the Straussian approach, which, according to Bloom, was originated in Strauss's study of the esoteric in the medieval Jewish and Islamic traditions,<sup>37</sup> seems to be appropriate for interpreting past political ideas within the esoteric traditions of Islam. But considering that this study is limited to *Sunni* political thought, Strauss's method of textual interpretation is of little relevance to the theme of this dissertation.

### **The New History of Political Theory**

Unlike the textualists and the contextualists, the New Historians of Political Thought have developed a well-defined methodology of studying the history of political

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<sup>36</sup> For more details on this movement and its doctrines, see Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), chapter 5.

<sup>37</sup> Allan Bloom, "Leo Strauss," *Political Theory* 2 no. 4 (1974): 380.



ideas.<sup>38</sup> The development of this tradition was a reflection of the political theorists' awareness of the autonomy and distinctiveness of their field of activities within the discipline of political science. While the New History of Political Theory emerged as a critical response to past works on the history of thought, its advocates have transcended the task of criticism and focused more on the development of their own interpretive method of studying the classics. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the question of "method" as a primary and independent issue in the sub-field of the history of political ideas has been raised mainly by the New Historians of Political Theory.

The tenets of the New History school have been associated with the works of four British scholars: Q. Skinner, J. Pocock, J. Dunn, and W.H. Greenleaf. It is common among commentators to treat the works of these authors as representing one homogeneous school of interpretation. But while this classification is accurate in respect to these authors' critique of the literature on political thought, it is nonetheless misleading in regard to these scholars' views on how the classic text should be interpreted. As will be shown, the proponents of the New History of Political Theory have expressed differing, and in some cases conflicting views concerning the

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<sup>38</sup> Some commentators, however, have less favorable opinions about the achievements of the New Historians. J. Gunnell, for instance, has suggested that what the New Historians have proposed is not a method of interpretation at all, but rather "a philosophical argument about interpretation." See John Gunnell Political Theory: Tradition and Interpretation (Cambridge: Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1979), 102.

appropriate techniques to recover the meaning of past political texts. In the following sections, the discussion will be directed towards delineating the New History of Political Theory in terms of its genesis, basic assumptions, and the relevance of its methodological assertions to the question of religious toleration in Islamic political thought.

There is a consensus among the New Historians concerning the lack of historicity or historically credible interpretations in the past research in the history of political ideas. In 1964, W.H. Greenleaf published his book *Order, Empiricism, and Politics* in which he criticized those historians who tended to impose their own perception of rationality on past works of political theory. Greenleaf was particularly critical of those who condemned some of the arguments of past political thinkers as naive or obscured because they are not consistent with the contemporary standards of rationality.<sup>39</sup> The lack of historicity among the historians of political thought, Greenleaf contends, has resulted in what he calls “an unsatisfactory allocation of attention.”<sup>40</sup> This tendency to impose the historian’s perception of rationality on past political theorist, who might have belonged to a different notion of rationality, has generated distorted and inaccurate interpretations of the political ideas of the past.

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<sup>39</sup> W. H. Greenleaf, Order, Empiricism, and Politics: Two Traditions of English Political Thought: 1500-1700 (New York: The Oxford University Press, 1964), 5-8.

<sup>40</sup> Greenleaf, Order, Empiricism and Politics, i.

The New Historians' criticism of past works on political thought was best articulated by Quentin Skinner. In 1969, Skinner published his monumental and controversial essay *Meaning and Understanding the History of Ideas* which since has become a classic statement of the New Historians' dissatisfaction with the past scholarship on the history of political ideas. In that essay, Skinner attempts to reveal the deficiencies and inadequacies of textualist and contextualist methods of studying the history of political thought. He is particularly critical of the textualist approach which, according to Skinner, is the main source of confusion and distortion in the history of political thought. The reliance of historians on the textualist methods in interpreting past political writings has given rise to "various kinds of historical absurdity."<sup>41</sup> And instead of producing histories of political thought, these textualist studies have produced "mythologies."<sup>42</sup> The most apparent mythology is what Skinner calls mythology of doctrines. This mythology occurs when the historian is set to expect every political thinker to deal with some important question or idea. Then, the interpreter may "discover" that some thinkers have held a view about some question or doctrine by focusing on some scattered remarks that have appeared in their different writings. For Skinner, this is a historical absurdity, since the textualist historian attributed some views to the political thinkers of the past which they might never have

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<sup>41</sup> Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,," History and Theory VIII (1969): 7, 13-53

<sup>42</sup> Skinner, Meaning and Understanding, 7.

intended to say. Skinner contends that the source of this mythology is the textualists' insistence on the timelessness and relevance of the classics of Western political thought to the contemporary problems of society.<sup>43</sup> The second type of mythology that the textualist method has given rise to is the mythology of coherence. This mythology occurs when the interpreter assigns himself or herself the function of providing the argument of the past political thinker with coherence that it never actually had. So, in order to make what appears to be inconsistent or incoherent ideas in the writings of a given political theorist more coherent, the interpreter is expected to engage in the process of re-reading the classic text and reconstructing its argument to show that the political thinker was actually coherent. In this case, Skinner argued that the past political theorists were not allowed to evolve intellectually and, in the process, abandon their old views and adopt new ones or simply advocate incoherent political doctrines. The outcome of this is not a historically credible interpretation but, rather, a distorted representation of the meaning of the past political texts in which the views of the author and those of the interpreter become virtually indistinguishable.<sup>44</sup>

J. Pocock has raised similar objections to the ways in which past historians of political thought have studied the classics. But unlike Skinner and Greenleaf, he does not dismiss Textualism as a totally illegitimate method of interpreting past political

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<sup>43</sup> Skinner, Meaning and Understanding, 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

texts. Instead, Pocock draws a distinction between two ways of reading the writings of past political thinkers: philosophical and historical. The philosophical reading of the text is concerned with its coherence and it intends to “formalize the relations between ideas.”<sup>45</sup> In contrast, the historical reading of the past political work is interested in presenting “the text as it bores meaning in the mind of the author or his contemporary reader.”<sup>46</sup> For Pocock, the historians of political thought have confused the philosophical with the historical interpretation of past political ideas and, in the process, have produced not actual histories of ideas but some abstractions with little historical validity. In Pocock’s view, if the interpreter is not historically sensitive, she might attribute coherence to the doctrines of the political thinker which they could not actually have had.<sup>47</sup>

Although the New Historians have expressed their dissatisfaction with both, Textualism and Contextualism, their criticism of the latter is minimal and is expressed with a compromising and favorable tone. After his lengthy attack on Textualism, Skinner admits that the contextualist approach can actually overcome most

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<sup>45</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 6. See also, J. Pocock, “The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry,” in Philosophy, Politics, and Society eds. Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (New York: Barnes and Noble Inc., 1962), 140.

<sup>47</sup> Pocock, Politics, Language, and Time, 6.

of the mythologies associated with the textualist method.<sup>48</sup> In fact, in some instances the views of the New Historians appear to be identical with those of the contextualist approach. Skinner, for example, suggested that “political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate.”<sup>49</sup> But he dismissed the historical milieu as a tool of recovering the meaning of past political texts since it, without considering the intention of the author, could yield two or more conflicting interpretations or meanings of the classic text.<sup>50</sup> J. Pocock is critical of the contextualists who tend to perceive language as a mere reflection of the social experience and not part of it. Thus, Pocock is not critical of the contextualist school as a whole or its major premises, but he is critical of those who exclude language from the social context.<sup>51</sup>

The New Historians of Political Thought have developed a considerable consensus concerning the primary function of the interpreter of past political ideas. Such task is essentially historical and descriptive. For Skinner, Pocock, and Greenleaf, the end of the interpreter’s activities should be to recover the historical meaning of

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<sup>48</sup> Skinner, Meaning and Understanding, 40.

<sup>49</sup> Quentin Skinner, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), I: xi.

<sup>50</sup> Skinner, Meaning and Understanding, 47.

<sup>51</sup> Pocock, Politics, Language, and Time, 35-38.

political text as it was intended by the author and not how it appears to the interpreter. Past political writings are treated by the New Historians as purely historical objects and they demand that the interpretations of these texts must be historically valid and credible. And for the interpretation to be historically credible, it must be placed within the author's intention, his or her empirical belief system and the actual activities in which the political thinker was involved. As a consequence of this historicist view, the questions of relevance and coherence to these texts are considered to be illegitimate objectives of the historians of political thought.<sup>52</sup>

However, the New Historians have expressed different and, in some cases, conflicting views concerning the appropriate techniques of retrieving the meaning of the classic texts. Skinner emphasizes the authorial intention as the most suitable tool to recover the historical meaning of the text. For J. Pocock, the historical meaning of the text can be best achieved by focusing on the linguistic paradigm within which the text was written. Greenleaf's method focuses on the notion of the tradition of discourse that shapes the style of political thinking in a given age. All of these techniques will be explored in the following sections.

When Skinner uses the phrase "meaning of the text" he is not referring to what certain words mean in the grammatical sense or to what the text means to the

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<sup>52</sup> See Q. Skinner, "The Limits of Historical Explanation," Philosophy 41 (1966): 215; "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action," Political Theory 2 (1972): 280; Pocock, Politics, Language, and Time, 6.; Greenleaf, Order, Empiricism, and Politics, 2.

interpreter. Instead, he restricts the term to “what does the writer mean by what he says in this work”, and assigns the historian of political thought the task of recovering such meaning.<sup>53</sup> For Skinner, the historical meaning of the text can be obtained by focusing on the original intention of its author, which can be located within the linguistic context in which the writing of the text had taken place. Hence, the past political text is treated as a linguistic act made by the thinker who was intentional in uttering given utterances.<sup>54</sup> To recover the complex intentions of the author, the historians of political ideas must

delineate the whole range of communications which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by the utterance of the given utterance, and, next, to trace the relations between the given utterance and this wider linguistic context as a means of decoding the actual intention of the given writer.<sup>55</sup>

The thrust of Skinner’s method is that the written work is one form of voluntary action. This notion is derived primarily from the philosophy of action theorists especially the ideas of L. J. Austin. According to this, the past political thinkers were, in uttering or writing something, actually engaged in action or doing something with words. To consider the written works as forms of actions is to say that

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<sup>53</sup> Quentin Skinner, “Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts,” The New Literacy History, 3 (1972): 397.

<sup>54</sup> Skinner, Meaning and Understanding, 48; Some Problems, 283.

<sup>55</sup> Skinner, Meaning and Understanding, 49.



they have motives and more importantly intentions without which such acts can not be explained. In unmistakable appeal to Austin's approach, Skinner argues that all speech acts are conventional acts. Therefore, to discover the meaning of a given text, the interpreters must appeal to the linguistic and social conventions of the time. Since the political thinker, in writing the text, must have intended to communicate a message to an audience, he or she must appeal to the conventions available to the thinker and the audience, and without doing so, the communication would be interrupted. Thus, analyzing the prevalent styles of thinking and the vocabulary used to express political views is of primary importance for the historian's endeavor to recover the original intention of the author, and then, the meaning of text.<sup>56</sup>

J. Pocock's technique for recovering the meaning of past political texts is not the intention of the author, but instead, the language within which the political argument is carried out. The concept of language in Pocock's method refers to "sub-languages; idioms, rhetorics, distinguishable language games of which each may have its own vocabularies, rules, preconditions and implications, tone and style."<sup>57</sup> For this reason, Pocock uses the concept of paradigm or "universe of discourse"

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<sup>56</sup> See Skinner, "On Performing and Explaining Linguistic Actions," Philosophical Quarterly 21 (1971): 1; "Conventions and the Understanding of Speech Acts," Philosophy 20 (1970): 134.

<sup>57</sup> Pocock, The Political Language in Early Modren Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 21.

interchangeably with the concept of language.<sup>58</sup> For Pocock, the function of paradigm or language is that “it invokes values; it summarizes information; it suppresses the inconvenient; it makes many kinds of statement.”<sup>59</sup> The political theorists of the past are viewed as members of a given community who were manipulating and modifying the public language of that community. By doing so, the meanings of their written works should be located within the boundaries of the political language of their respective communities.<sup>60</sup>

Therefore, if the interpreter is to discover the historical meaning of the text, he or she must identify the “language” or “vocabulary” with and within which “the author operated, and to show how it functions paradigmatically to prescribe what he might say and how he might say it.”<sup>61</sup> By identifying the paradigm within which the political thinker constructed his or her political argument, the historian establishes limits on the possible meanings which the classic texts might contain. Also, Pocock contends that the historian must be aware of the transformations that paradigm or public language might undergo. Such transformations usually bring about changes in the vocabulary and style of the political language of the time. As an illustration of this,

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<sup>58</sup> See Pocock, Politics, Language, and Time, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Pocock, Politics, Language, and Time, 18.

<sup>60</sup> Pocock, Politics, Language, and Time, 15-17.

<sup>61</sup> Pocock, Politics, Language, and Time, 25, 35.

Pocock cited the examples of how the political thinkers of early modern Europe, especially Machiavelli, abandoned the concepts of grace and custom and replaced them with the concept of fortune to explain the realities of the secular politics of the time.<sup>62</sup>

For Greenleaf, the meaning of the political texts of the past can be attained by relating them to a certain tradition of thought. The starting point of Greenleaf's strategy is the notion that political thinking is an integral part of the larger intellectual climate of the age. "Any mode of reasoning", Greenleaf contends, "presupposes certain criteria of significance and relevance, and these standards depend on the ultimate picture an age forms of the world, a world view which is the final controlling factor in all branches of the thought of the age."<sup>63</sup> Central to Greenleaf's interpretive method is the concept of tradition which refers to a pattern of discourse that has manifested considerable persistence over a given period of time and has exercised an authoritative role in shaping the style of reasoning of certain generations of thinkers. It is the primary source of the axioms and assumptions which were frequently appealed to, by a collectivity of political thinkers during a given age.<sup>64</sup> To illustrate his method, Greenleaf uses the debate between the proponents of absolutist monarchy and the advocates of mixed government within the British political thought of the sixteenth and

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<sup>62</sup> See Pocock, The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 114.

<sup>63</sup> Greenleaf, Order, Empiricism, and Politics, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Greenleaf, Order, Empiricism, and Politics, 10.

seventeenth centuries. He suggests that the debate was essentially connected with two traditions: Order and Empiricism. The supporters of monarchical absolutism and the divine right of the kings invoked the premises of order to support their argument. Empiricism, Greenleaf claims, was appealed to mainly by the political theorists who advocated the notion of mixed government and limited monarchy.<sup>65</sup> Thus, without considering these two traditions or world views, the meaning of the ideas produced by either side of the debate would be unattainable.

In order for the interpreter of past political ideas to recover their meaning, she must discern the tradition in which they evolved. The historian should “look at the text and know the context - know in particular the *tradition* of the style of thought in which the text is cast, especially the particular mode of reasoning it uses.”<sup>66</sup> For Greenleaf, there are two types of tradition that the interpreter is required to discover: explicit and implicit. The explicit tradition refers to the assumptions and style of thought which the political thinkers of a given age appeal to purposefully and consciously. The implicit tradition, on the other hand, refers to the “affinities between writers [which] are recognized by the historian when the writers concerned did not themselves recognize or stress such similarities.”<sup>67</sup> If the historian succeeded in

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<sup>65</sup> Greenleaf, Order, Empiricism, and Politics, 8-9.

<sup>66</sup> Greenleaf, Order, Empiricism, and Politics, 2.

<sup>67</sup> Greenleaf, “Hume, Burke and The General Will,” Political Studies XX no. 2 (1972): 140.

discovering these types of tradition he or she would grasp the notion of rationality according to past political thinkers and, eventually, would be able to construct a historically credible interpretation of their works.

Having outlined the interpretative approaches of the New Historians of Political Thought, I should discuss their relevance to the research question of this study. Unlike the textualists and the contextualists, the views of the New Historians on interpretation have a considerable relevance to the method of interpretation adopted in this study. The basic agreement between the approach of this study and that of the New Historians centered around the tendency of both approaches to interpret the past political text by relating it to its broader intellectual milieu. While there may be some disagreement between the method of this study and that of the New History of Political Theory in respect to some specific techniques of interpretation, both approaches share the basic assumptions and, hence, they belong to the same intellectual family. The most relevant views of the New Historians to the methodological outlook of this work are those made by the most obscure author among them, that is Greenleaf. There is a great deal of resemblance between Greenleaf's emphasis on the tradition of discourse as a determinant of the meaning of the text and this study's focus on the textual frame of reference of Islamic political theory to explain the political ideas that were produced within that tradition.

However, there are some differences between the interpretive approach that has been advanced by the New Historians and the methodological orientation of

this study. The most apparent difference is that, while the method of the New Historians is essentially descriptive, that is, the recovery of the historical meaning of the political text, the approach of this study has, besides the recovery of the meaning of the text, an explanatory purpose. Although the retrieving of the historical meaning of what the Muslim political theorists had said about toleration is of major concern in this research, the main objective of this study is to explain why these thinkers treated the question the way they did. This explanatory element in my approach does not seem to have significance for the New Historians. Further, the method of this study consciously draws the distinction between political ideas and social practices and, hence, differs from the New Historians, especially Skinner, who has insisted on studying past political thought as a part of the social behavior. Finally, while my interpretive method shares some of the major assumptions of the New Historians, it focuses on the textual frame of reference, which is narrower than the concepts of the linguistic context, paradigm, or tradition which have been utilized by those scholars. All of these similarities and differences should become more apparent when the methodological orientation of the study is delineated in the following section.

### **The Methodological Orientation of the Study**

The review of the literature in the previous section has already revealed the general structure of my interpretive approach to the question of toleration in Islamic political thought. As mentioned previously, the method of interpretation adopted here

shares most of the assumptions of the New Historians of Political Thought. This is especially true in its focus on the intellectual settings in which the political thinking takes place as a starting point of interpreting political texts of the past. But without breaking away from the New Historians, this dissertation focuses on the frame of reference of political thought as an interpretive tool which is more specific and more defined than the New Historian's general concepts such as linguistic context, paradigm, and tradition. My interpretation focuses on the textualist frame of reference of Islamic political theory as the major factor in shaping their political ideas in general and their views on religious dissent in particular. The methodological orientation of the study will be delineated in three steps which correspond to the remaining three sections of this chapter. The first section deals with the main premises underlying my interpretive approach. In section two, the argument for religious toleration in its most general form, that is, its epistemological, moral and political dimensions, will be examined. Section three will be devoted to examining how the textualist frame of reference of Islamic political thinkers can explain the nature of their views concerning the question of religious diversity within the Islamic polity. Before proceeding with the discussion of these issues, however, a reminder of what needs to be explained is in order.

As I mentioned in chapter one, the primary objective of this research is to explain why the Muslim political thinkers' response to the problem of religious dissent has remained structurally the same despite the changes in their historical milieu. These thinkers' reaction to the problem of religious diversity took the form of advocating

toleration for the category of the People of the Book, and persecution for other religious dissenters. It was also observed that despite the occurrence of episodes of sectarian persecution in Islamic history, Islamic political thinkers have never developed a coherent justification for toleration of religious dissent within Islam. Thus, to provide an explanation for the persistence of the Muslim thinkers' response to religious diversity, the interpreter must attempt to explain the variations within that response. What is meant here is that the interpreter should seek answers to the question of why these political thinkers advocated toleration for People of The Book and persecution for others. By determining the underlying assumptions of their views on toleration and persecution, the interpreter should be able to arrive at an answer to the general question of why the Muslim thinkers' views on the subject have persisted over time.

The interpretive approach of this dissertation can be summarized as the following proposition: *The notion of religious toleration can only be defended with coherence and consistency within a frame of reference that is hospitable to the ideas of religious diversity. Islamic political thinkers have operated within a textual frame of reference which consisted of certain assumptions that permit toleration for some non-Muslims but are inherently antagonistic to any attempt to justify toleration for religious dissent within the Islamic polity.*

This proposition consist of three basic claims that need more elaboration. The first claim, while implicit, is that the meaning and the structure of political ideas are shaped, or determined, by the frame of reference of the political thinker. Thus, to focus



on the frame of reference of the political thinker would be the most appropriate approach to recover and then to explain the meaning of the past political texts. The second claim in the proposition is that the argument for religious toleration is conceptually associated with a certain frame of reference or world view that gives it consistency and coherence. The third claim centered around the ideas that the Islamic political thinkers' view on toleration and persecution were determined by the components of their frame of reference. In this section, I shall examine the first claim and leave the other two to be discussed in the two remaining sections of this chapter.

### **The Concept of the Frame of Reference of Political Thought**

My interpretive method is based on the premise that the meaning and nature of political ideas of the past must be located within the broader world view to which the political theorist subscribed. This approach does not consider political thought as an autonomous discourse, but rather, as a part of the broader intellectual outlook of the political theorist. And, hence, the interpreter's focus on the world view of the past is a crucial step toward explaining why that particular thinker constructed his or her ideas the way he or she did. It is suggested here that the meaning and structure of the political ideas of past political thinkers are shaped by their previously held philosophical assumptions or their frame of reference.

The approach of this study is indebted the most to the views of Greenleaf, the most obscure author among the New Historians of Political Theory. For Greenleaf,

any political argument consists mainly of three components. First, there is the conclusion of the political argument which refers to what the thinker wants to convey to his or her audience. The second component is the style of argument that the political theorist adopts to arrive at her or his conclusion. Finally, there is a set of assumptions which constitute the world view of the age that gives the political argument its coherence and relevance.<sup>68</sup> Greenleaf's emphasis is on the last element, that is the world view, or the tradition to which the political thinkers belonged, as a determinant of the meaning of their political ideas. But still, Greenleaf's discussion of these three elements was extremely brief, and he made no attempt to relate these elements to one another. Further, the primary objective of his method, as previously indicated, was essentially a descriptive one, that is, the recovery of the meaning of the political argument of the past in reference to its tradition. This study, while benefiting from Greenleaf's remarks, will advance his method by using the notion of the frame of reference, not only as a descriptive tool of recovering the meaning of the text but also as an explanatory device of why the political thinkers of the past wrote the way they did.

Following the vast majority of the historians of political thought, I perceive political thought as a series of arguments concerning the best political order. The political thinkers are viewed as members of the intellectual class of the community who

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<sup>68</sup> See Greenleaf, Order, Empiricism, and Politics, 1.

are engaged in a discourse concerning their vision of how power and influence ought to be distributed in society. Unlike the ordinary members of the community, political philosophers have the skills to express their moral and political arguments with a high level of sophistication and abstraction. Being members of the learned class of society suggests an important fact about the political philosophers. That is, they belong to different domains of knowledge, that is, philosophy, theology, history, and so forth. Hence, the political thinkers usually approach the question of politics with a previously held theological or philosophical frame of reference which furnishes their political arguments with coherence and relevance. I consider the frame of reference of the political theorist to be the key to understanding the meaning and the structure of past political ideas.

The concept of the frame of reference refers to the political thinker's previously held doctrines concerning knowledge, the universe, and human nature. The frame of reference of the political thought consists of the basic epistemological and ontological assumptions upon which the political argument is found. Within the frame of reference, the political thinker solves or attempts to solve, the epistemological questions of what constitutes knowledge, its sources and types. And in connection with this, he or she deals with the question of what is the truth, and what is its criterion and nature. Also, within the frame of reference, the political thinker deals with some ontological problems such as being, nature, essence, and the essential attributes of reality. Furthermore, the question of human nature is usually dealt with within the

frame of reference of the political theorist. The political thinker is assumed to confront these epistemological and ontological questions before he or she constructs his or her political philosophy. In other words, the components of the frame of reference precede the construction of the political argument.

While the elements of the frame of reference seem remote from politics, they, nonetheless, may color the method and the structure of the political argument. The relationship between the thinker's frame of reference and the nature of his or her political ideas is, as Sprangens has put it, "more latent than manifest."<sup>69</sup> The frame of reference is the source of the political thinker's major concepts, categories, and methods used in her or his political theorizing. It determines the scope of the political thought in terms of what should be included or excluded from the political argument. The frame of reference determines the nature of the question of politics, whether it is a theological, philosophical, or practical question. It represents the political thinker's source of information about the questions posed to him or her by the historical environment. When the political thinkers encounter the question of, say, why should someone obey those with authority, they provide different answers according to their frames of reference. A political thinker with a theological frame of reference would turn to the sacred texts and the categories of the divine revelation to justify political obligation. By contrast, a political theorist with, say, a Marxian frame of reference

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<sup>69</sup> Thomas Sprangens, The Irony of Liberal Reason (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 10.

would appeal to the categories of historical materialism to provide an answer to the same question that would totally differ from that of the theologian. Therefore, the contents of the frame of reference of the political thinker plays an authoritative role in shaping the structure and the substance of the political argument.

The role of the frame of reference in political thinking is suggested by a simple historical fact about Western and Islamic political theories. None of the major political thinkers in either tradition is a political thinker, per se. All of these political thinkers were primarily theologians or philosophers by training and profession. Hence, their views on the political questions were developed in connection with their other theological and philosophical doctrines. What distinguished Machiavelli from the rest of the Western political theorists and Ibn Khaldun from other Islamic political thinkers was, besides the substance of their teachings, the frame of reference that each of these two thinkers had relied on. Even though there are considerable differences between the political ideas of Machiavelli and Ibn Khaldun, the two thinkers expressed two similar tendencies. First, both political thinkers manifested a remarkable degree of realism by viewing politics as the exercise of power detached from religious and ethical considerations. Second, and more important, Machiavelli and Ibn Khaldun broke away from theology and philosophy, the two traditional frames of reference of political thinking in their time, and relied on history instead. Machiavelli claimed that he had invented a new way of looking at politics that was based on “real knowledge of history,

the true sense of which is not known.”<sup>70</sup> In striking similarity to Machiavelli, Ibn Khaldun claimed that he followed “unusual [and] a remarkable and original method” for he was “dealing with historical facts” concerning the rise and fall of dynasties and civilization.<sup>71</sup> Hence, the reliance of Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli on history, as a frame of reference of their political ideas, made these two political thinkers stand unique in both traditions of political thought. The examples of Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli show how the interpreter’s focus on the frame of reference could explain the varieties of responses given by different political thinkers who had lived in identical historical circumstances, something that the contextualist method failed to achieve.

The history of political thought reveals numerous examples of how the frame of reference shapes the form and style of the political argument. I should limit my discussion to a few. Let me start with the political philosophy of Plato, the most influential thinker in Western political thought. The most apparent feature of the ideal *polis* of Plato is its authoritarian character. I am referring to the Platonic notion that those who have knowledge of the Good ought to rule the society. Although it is undeniable that the execution of his master, Socrates, had a lot to do with Plato’s rejection of the Athenian democracy, the authoritarian structure of his ideal *polis* was related more to his epistemology. Plato’s first assumption was that the ultimate truth is

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<sup>70</sup> Cited in Sprangens, The Irony of Liberal Reason, 11.

<sup>71</sup> Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History trans. Franz Rosenthal 3 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), I : 11.

knowable through philosophical reasoning. The truth about the ideal political order is seen in the form of the *polis*. Since the philosophers have the will and capacity to discover the form of the *polis*, then they are the ones who possess the knowledge of the proper ends of the *polis* and how it should be arranged. Therefore, the philosophers, because they know the Good, should be the political rulers, and the other members must obey them. Hence, Plato's political philosophy, especially in the *Republic*, was influenced by and coherent with his epistemological and metaphysical doctrines, that is, his frame of reference, which he had formulated in the *Republic* and the *Socratic Dialogues*. Aristotle, on the other hand, rejected his master's conclusion and constructed a political theory which was, in many respects, different from that of Plato. He rejected Plato's mathematical method of reasoning and relied instead on biology as a model. Aristotle's "empiricist" method of dealing with the question of politics seemed to be an important factor in his preference for the best polity, which is dominated by a large middle class, as an approximation of the ideal *polis*. Thus, the reliance of Aristotle on a frame of reference that was based on biology as a model of reasoning led him to a conclusion that was different from his former master, despite the fact that they were responding to the same crisis.

Karl Marx's conception of the state is another good example of how the frame of reference can condition the political insights of the theorist. The frame of reference of Marx emerged through his critique of the dominant modes of thought during his time. While Marx was critical of a number of European thinkers like Bruno

Bauer in *On the Jewish Question*, and M. Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, his criticism was directed mainly toward the Hegelian method and the writings of the classical political economists especially the works of Smiths and Recardo. Marx dismissed the Hegelian method of studying history as too abstract and detached from reality. In *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, he rejected the assertions of the classical political economists regarding commodity, money, property, and value, and redefined these concepts within the contexts of alienated labor, exploitation and class conflict. The frame of reference of Marx in his early writings was essentially a critique of Hegel and a humanist critique of the basic assumptions and categories of classical political economy. Within that frame of reference, Marx analyzed the state in the context of the civil society-state relations and the problem of human emancipation. In *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, Marx dismissed the Hegelian notion of the state as a universal entity that transcends the particular interests of the civil society as abstraction and illusion. For Marx, the state was the product, not the originator, of the civil society, and hence, the state must be shaped by the particularism of the civil society.<sup>72</sup> It is obvious from Marx's remarks on the state, in his early writings, that he was primarily concerned with how the state and its institutions relate to the civil society in general. Besides some scattered remarks about private property and the stat, in his *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's*

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<sup>72</sup> Karl Marx, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law Vol. 3 of Collected Works (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 6-8, 101-103.



*Philosophy of Law*, Marx makes no reference to the class theory of the state. The reason for that, I think, is that his historical, materialist frame of reference was in its formative stage and, therefore, the state as an instrument of class rule was not conceptually present in the Marxian world view at that time.

However, as Marx's historical materialist frame of reference evolved and gained more maturity, his conception of the state was significantly modified. For Marx, the historical materialist, the state emerged as a result of the division of labor in the civil society. The unequal distribution of property gave rise to social classes with different and irreconcilable interests. In order to resolve the conflict between these antagonistic social classes, an entity called the state was created to represent the common interests of the society. But since the state grows out of the contradictions of the civil society, it is incapable of maintaining its universality and neutrality and must serve the interests of those who control or own the means of production.<sup>73</sup> So approaching the question of the state with a frame of reference based on historical, materialist categories such as class struggle, exploitation, and relations of productions, Marx developed certain views on the origin and functions of the state that were not possible within the humanist and Neo-Hegelian world view of the young Marx.

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<sup>73</sup> Marx's views on the state as an instrument of the ruling class can be found in The German Ideology, Vol. 3 of Collected Works, (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 90; The Manifesto of the Communist Party, in The Marx-Engels Readers ed. R. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 475; and Capital, 3 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1967), III :791.

Finally, there is the case of the feminist theory. Feminism represents an interesting illustration of the role of the frame of reference in political thinking, especially in regard to the questions of coherence and consistency. Despite the fact that feminist theory has different manifestations and has been associated with varying philosophical traditions, feminism has revolved around three major concepts which were developed by the early radical feminists. Those core concepts of feminism are: Woman, experience, and the personal is political. Within the radical feminist discourse, woman is considered a universal and transhistorical category and being a woman is the source of oppression and domination. The concept of experience refers to the subjective feeling of woman as a member of an oppressed group and the existence of such a feeling is a proof of the existence of the category of woman. The notion of *the personal is political* was formulated by the early feminists to show that the problems of women are not private or personal issues, but rather, they are public and, hence, political problems.<sup>74</sup> The development of these three core concepts was, I think, essential for feminist theory to accomplish its objective, that is, the critique of society and culture, and to distinguish it from other social and political discourses. Those core concepts represent the frame of reference that makes feminist theory *feminist*. However, the problems of logical consistency and coherence appear when the feminist

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<sup>74</sup> For a critical review of these three core concepts of Feminism, see Judith Grant, Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory (New York: Routledge, 1993), 20-39.

theorist decides to retain these core concepts and remain within other intellectual traditions, especially the two dominant orthodoxies of modern Western thought: liberalism and Marxism.

The question of personal politics is the most apparent conceptual problem in any attempt to incorporate feminism with liberal political theory. One of the basic tenets of the liberal tradition is the theoretical distinction between the public and private domains, and the limiting of the activities of the state to the former. This public-private distinction has served as a moral foundation for the liberal notion of the limited or neutral state. To advocate the idea of *the personal is political* would mean the violation of the liberal separation between the public and the private spheres by advocating state intervention in matters that are considered by the liberal thinkers to be outside state jurisdiction. Thus, without modifying either the radical feminist notion of personal politics or the liberal distinction between public and private domains, the problem of incoherence would be inevitable.

The same problem of coherence becomes more apparent in the attempts to incorporate feminism within Marxism. This is especially true in reference to problem of reconciling the feminist concept of woman as a universal and transhistorical category with the Marxian conception of social class. For the feminist thinker, women have been dominated and oppressed because of their gender, regardless of their social class or ethnic backgrounds. For the Marxist theorist, however, oppression, exploitation, and domination are defined in socio-economic terms and not in terms of gender or

ethnicity. The reason for this is that the universe of Marxism is centered around the category of social class not gender. Individuals in the Marxist world view are classified as members of social classes according to their positions in the mode of production. So, considering the universality of the Marxist category of social class, other concepts such as gender, ethnicity, culture, and religion become conceptually irrelevant within the Marxist world view. This does not imply, however, that the question of racism, women's oppression, or religious persecution are illegitimate concerns in Marxist theory. But rather, these problems are treated by the Marxists as essentially economic problems or manifestations of deeper class conflicts in the social structure. In other words, the Marxists will deal with the question of the oppression of women as Marxists, that is, with reference to the dominant mode of production and class struggle and not gender. Therefore, the radical feminist's claims for the universality of the category of woman enter into unavoidable conflict with the Marxian concept of social class. For the Marxist thinker, it is theoretically possible that a woman could become an oppressor or exploiter of man if she is a slave owner, feudalism or capitalist. Likewise, for the feminist, it is theoretically conceivable that a male proletarian man could oppress a woman proletarian and the same oppressive relation could exist within the capitalist class. Thus, accepting the universality of the category of woman would mean, by definition, the rejection of the universality of social class and the distortion of Marxism. Being well aware of the incompatibility between the core concepts of feminism and the historical materialist categories of Marxism, some contemporary

feminist theorists have attempted to harmonize the two by trying to provide a materialist conception of female experience. As Judith Grant has noticed, such an attempt by the socialist feminists has serious conceptual problems and might lead to the distortion of Marxism itself. Grant writes

But socialist feminism is conceptually flawed in that it fails to acknowledge the fundamental, and I think irresolvable, tension between Marxism and the core concepts [Woman, experience, and the personal is political]. In order to use Marxist theory to understand gender, it distorted Marxist categories so badly that they can no longer understand capitalism or gender.<sup>75</sup>

In summary, the political theorist's previously-held epistemological and metaphysical assumptions, that is, the frame of reference, determine, to a large extent, the form and contents of his or her political thought. The meaning and the structure of political ideas of the past can be recovered and explained by focusing on the frame of reference that gave rise to them in first place. Based on this premise, the historian of political ideas should be able to explain why some political thinkers, who had lived in identical historical settings, gave different responses to the same problem. My remarks on the role of the frame of reference in the formation of past political ideas should become clearer when I consider the frame of reference of the idea of religious toleration.

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<sup>75</sup> Grant, 56-57.

### **The Frame of Reference of the Idea of Religious Toleration**

The role of the frame of reference in conditioning the political ideas of the thinker become more apparent in reference to the idea of religious toleration. The reason for this is related to the fact that the question of religious toleration has never been a permanent issue in political theory. Unlike the issues of justice, political obligation, or liberty, the idea of religious toleration has always been a contingent question that appeared only in the context of religious and sectarian upheavals. Such contingent nature of the idea of toleration in political thinking makes it conditioned not only by the epistemological and metaphysical assumptions of the thinker, but also, by his or her previously-held moral and political views, especially those concerning the proper functions of the state.

In its most general form, the argument for religious toleration has three dimensions: epistemological, moral, and political. Any political theorist who deals with the problem of religious toleration, regardless of whether he or she is for or against it, must confront three major questions. First, there is the epistemological question of what is the truth. Second, there is the ethical question: Is an error in doctrinal matters morally relevant? Finally, the political thinker must settle the question: What is the proper role of government in religious disputes? The ways in which the political thinkers answer these questions represent the frame of reference within which the ideas of religious toleration or persecution is justified. Historically, the political thinkers who approach the religious truth with a skeptical attitude, believe

in the subjective nature of moral claims, and exclude doctrinal errors from the realm of morality have advocated toleration as a remedy for the problem of religious diversity. By contrast, advocates of the state's intervention to suppress heresy tend to perceive religious truth in certain and exclusive terms and consider doctrinal errors as morally objectionable acts which threaten the peace of the community. In this section, I will explore these three dominions of the frame of reference of the idea of religious toleration in Western political thought.

The works of four major European thinkers who had confronted the problem of religious factionalism directly have been studied in depth. This group includes Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1523), Sebastian Castellio (1515-1563), John Locke (1623-1704), and Pierre Bayle (1647-1706). The ideas of other thinkers who dealt with the problem with less emphasis, such as Hobbes, J. Bodin, M. de L. Hôpital, and Voltaire, are only considered briefly and whenever they are relevant to the issue under discussion. Since the notion of religious toleration was historically and conceptually connected with the idea of religious persecution, the writings of the advocates of persecution must be considered in this study. Therefore, the arguments for religious persecution presented by thinkers like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Jean Calvin are examined side by side with the case for toleration.

Before proceeding with the discussion of the three dominions of toleration, I should make a few remarks concerning the purpose that this section is intended to serve. What is relevant to this study is not the contents of these thinkers views on

religious diversity but rather, the style and mechanism of their arguments for or against religious toleration. The primary purpose for considering the European thinkers' views on the question of toleration is to illustrate the methodological orientation of this study. Considering how these thinkers attempted to defend the idea of toleration or persecution will give us an idea about the logical and conceptual problems that prevented the Islamic political thinkers from considering toleration as a solution to the problems of religious diversity within Islam. It must be emphasized, however, that the European thinkers' views on the problem are far from ideal types of arguments for toleration. Instead, they ought to be perceived as attempts to defend religious toleration, which had some success but also suffered from a number of logical inconsistencies.

Although the advocates of religious toleration were essentially responding to particular historical events of religious persecution, the content and style of their arguments were determined not by these events but by the structure of the justification of religious persecution. These thinkers were particularly troubled by the use of secular authority to enforce sectarian conformity. The proponents of religious toleration were well aware of the fact that, for religious persecution to end, the secular arm must be removed from religious controversies. But they also knew that the idea of religious persecution would have never survived for a long period of time if it had not been based on very strong epistemological and moral grounds. So, in order for the principal of toleration to flourish, the epistemological and the moral grounds of religious



persecution had to be dismantled. In other words, tolerationists had to modify or break away from the frame of reference within which the idea of religious toleration was constantly justified and construct a world view that was more hospitable to religious toleration. The way to that was to appeal to varying forms of skepticism, moral relativism, and secularism.

### **Skepticism: the Epistemological Dimension**

The relationship between the idea of religious toleration and skepticism has been a subject of debate among the historians of toleration. The vast majority of the commentators associate the rise of the idea of toleration with skepticism. For scholars like Q. Skinner, J.W. Allen, T. Glenn, Seaton, W.K. Jordan, Jaynes, and G. Mara, the political thinker's advocacy of religious toleration is a result of his or her skeptical perception of religious truth.<sup>76</sup> Other writers, such as J. Harrison, E.W. Nelson, A. Klein, G. Mensching, J. Hick, and S. Mendus, see the relationship between skepticism and religious toleration in the emotional connection between commitment to religious truth and the urge to persecute. For those scholars, the idea of persecution rested on the notion of the revealed and exclusive truth, and toleration had to be

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<sup>76</sup> See Q. Skinner, The Foundation of Modern Political Thought, II: 247-49; T. Glenn, 39; W.K. Jordan, I: 23; Seaton, 17, 45-7, 53; E.S.P. Haynes, Religious Persecution: A Study in Political Psychology (London: Duckworth and Co., 1904), 2-11, 15; and Gerald M. Mara, "Socrates and Liberal Toleration," Political Theory 16 no. 4 (1988): 474.

justified within a conception of the truth that is formed on an element of doubt.<sup>77</sup> However, a few scholars have disputed such a connection and suggested that the idea of toleration can be defended without appealing to skepticism.<sup>78</sup>

As far as the European thinkers included in this study are concerned, the connection between the idea of religious toleration and skepticism and certainty and persecution is historically, though not necessarily logically true. The proponents of religious persecution manifested a considerable degree of certainty and dogmatism concerning religious truth. St. Augustine's starting point of defending the use of the secular arm to suppress heresy was the notion of the exclusive Catholic truth. So, for Augustine, the heretic was the person who deviated from the true word of God as it was embodied in the teachings of the Catholic church. The purpose of the intervention of the temporal power to punish heresy was to preserve an existing body of religious

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<sup>77</sup> See J.P. Harrison, "Utilitarianism and Toleration," Philosophy 62 no. 242 (1987): 429.; Ernest W. Nelson, "The Theory of Persecution," in Persecution and Liberty: Essays in Honor of George L. Burr (1931; reprint, Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), 12.; Arthur Klein, Intolerance in the Reign of Elizabeth (Port Washington: Kennikat Press Inc., 1968), 3-4; Gustav Mensching, Tolerance and Truth in Religion, trans. H.J. Klimkeit (University: University of Alabama Press, 1971), 127-132; John Hick, Problems of Religious Pluralism (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 47-49; and S. Mendus, Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism, 7-8.

<sup>78</sup> See Richard Tuck, "Skepticism and Toleration in the Seventeenth Century," in Justifying Toleration: Conceptual and Historical Perspective, ed. Susan Mendus, 21-35; Alan Ryan, "A More Tolerant Hobbes?," in Justifying Toleration, ed. Susan Mendus; 37-59; and Preston King, "Justifying Toleration," The History of Political Thought ix no. 4 (1989): 738, 743.

