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# Religious Pluralism and Civic Rights in a “Muslim Nation”: An Analysis of Prophet Muhammad’s Covenants with Christians

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Academic Editor: Todd Green

Received: 30 November 2015; Accepted: 28 January 2016; Published: 4 February 2016

**Abstract:** This article examines the roles that religious pluralism and civic rights played in Prophet Muhammad’s vision of a “Muslim nation”. I demonstrate how Muhammad desired a pluralistic society in which citizenship and equal rights were granted to all people regardless of religious beliefs and practices. The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of his time are used as a framework for analysis. These documents have received little attention in our time, but their messages are crucial in light of current debates about Muslim–Christian relations. The article campaigns for reviving the egalitarian spirit of the Covenants by refocusing our understanding of the *ummah* as a site for religious freedom and civil rights. Ultimately, I argue that the Covenants of Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of his time can be used to develop a stronger narrative of democratic partnership between Muslims and Christians in the “Islamic world” and beyond.

**Keywords:** Prophet Muhammad; religious pluralism; civic nation; Covenants of Prophet Muhammad; Muslim–Christian Relations

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When assessing current trends in Muslim–Christian relations, there is a tendency to view this complex relationship through the prism of contemporary events alone. Any account of Muslim–Christian relations, however, must consider historical processes and events in order to position current developments in their appropriate context. Before embarking on contemporary issues affecting Muslim and Christian communities, a few historical issues are in order. In the modern era (1500–1945 CE), the major part of the “Muslim world” was ruled by “Christian civilization”. During this period, the Islamic world, as noted by Armstrong, was “convulsed by the modernization process. Instead of being one of the leaders of world civilization, Islamdom was quickly and permanently reduced to a dependent bloc by the European powers” [1]. Europeans assumed that European culture had always been progressive and that Muslim societies were backward, inefficient, and corrupt [1]. European colonialists in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia also wreaked havoc by plundering Islamic economies and supplanting Islamic educational systems with secular or Christianity-based systems [2]. These kind of colonial interactions had a decisive influence on the religious and political relations between Muslims and Christians, and shaped not least the mutual theological images and assessments of the other [3]. Towards the end of European colonial rule, the Ottoman Empire crumbled, which created a vacuum in the Middle East that contributed to tensions between local inhabitants and external powers of interests. As World War I ended, “Westerners”—primarily the British—“saw an opportunity to bring modern coherence to [Arabia] by imposing new kingdoms of their own devising, as long as the kings would be compliant with the strategic interests of the British Empire” [4]. When the British and other European powers (such as the French) drew up state borders in the Middle East, they paid little attention to the ethnic and religious division within Arabian societies. Muslims today see these historic events as influencing the development of Islamic societies as well as shaping perceptions of Christians living within their own borders and around the “Western world”.

In recent years, relations between Muslims and Christians have been described in light of a “clash of civilizations” ([5], p. 22) in which the “Muslim world” (Islamic civilization) and “the West” (Christian civilization) are situated in binaries such as “us versus them”, “good versus evil”, “civilized versus uncivilized”, and “secular versus non-secular”. The “clash of civilizations” gained particular prominence after the events of 11 September 2001 and the West’s subsequent military operations in Muslim-majority countries, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, and Syria. The widespread violence caused by these invasions helped fan the flames of “radical Islam” and fostered opposition to the “Western world” and Christianity alike. To further complicate relations between Muslims and Christians, Muslims today might perceive “Christian nations” like the Philippines and the United States as severely oppressing Muslims, whereas Christians may perceive “Muslim nations”, like Pakistan, Iraq, and Sudan, as severely oppressing Christians. Furthermore, Muslim-Christian relations today are negatively shaped by centuries-old fears of “Islamic jihad” and the “Christian crusade”. Daesh—or otherwise known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS or IS)—has taken over a large swath of territory across Mesopotamia. Daesh has declared a Caliphate and professed a plan to establish political and religious hegemony over Muslims and non-Muslims across the Middle East and beyond [6]. Concern over Daesh activities in the United States [7] and the so-called “tide of Muslim migrants” coming into Europe [8] have served to further the suspicion between Muslims and Christians.

All of these political, religious, and cultural developments throughout history have shaped how Muslims and Christians perceive each other today; for example, there is currently a high level of “anti-Muslim world” sentiment in the United States and “anti-Western world” sentiment in Muslim nations across the globe. The United States, a predominantly “Christian” nation that frequently depicts itself as advocating for religious pluralism and civil society, has a “high to very high” level of social hostilities involving religion. A poll taken at the end of 2013 by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life [9] showed that 60 percent of all Republicans exhibited prejudice towards Muslims. American citizens are particularly hostile towards Arab-Americans, many of whom are Muslim. A survey carried out in 2014 by Zogby Analytics [10], an Egyptian research group, found that only 36 percent of American citizens have a “favorable” view of Arab-Americans, a number that fell down from 43 percent in 2010 [11]. Comparatively, states that have a high percentage of Muslims almost uniformly persecute minority religious communities, especially Christians in Middle Eastern states [12]. In Syria and Iraq, Christians have borne the worst of the religious persecution that has inflicted the Middle East in recent years. Daesh—and its extreme practice of Takfirism [13]—has enslaved, killed, and uprooted hundreds of thousands of Christians [14]. Iraqi Christians, who trace their origins back to the period of the first century, have witnessed 125,000 people leave their homes over the course of 2014 and 2015 [15]. Griswold [16] goes so far as to say the rise of Daesh signals the end of Christianity in the Middle East altogether. Considering the persecution of Christians in Middle Eastern states, it becomes imperative to distinguish injurious treatment of Christians to that of Prophet Muhammad and his defense of Christian communities. This article discusses and sheds light on how “Islamic” groups such as Daesh disregard the Prophet’s commandments on how Muslims should treat, incorporate, and interact with Christians in their midst.

Religious persecution in the United States and throughout the Middle East has made theologians, sociologists, and political theorists acutely aware of the need to foster pluralism and civility in religiously diverse nations. One potential source for creating this type of society is to treat the Covenants of Prophet Muhammad as a third foundational source of Islamic scripture that is entirely in line with the *Qur’an* and *hadiths* [17]. While the Covenants have been known to scholars for many centuries and accepted as law by Muslim leaders, “traditional” Muslims and “modern” Western scholars have largely neglected these documents ([18], pp. 1–2). Issues of the authenticity of the Covenants are one potential reason as to why these texts have been largely ignored. The Covenants of Prophet Muhammad with Christians have been the subject of much discussion among scholars. An examination of their authenticity is necessary in order to address the legitimacy of these documents

and the integrity of their messages. As a framework of analysis, four of the Covenants will be used to explore the concepts of religious pluralism and civic rights in a “Muslim nation”. These Covenants include: “The Covenant of the Prophet with the Monks of Mount Sinai”; “The Covenant of the Prophet with the Christians of Najran”; “The Covenant of the Prophet with the Christians of Persia”; and “The Covenant of the Prophet with the Christians of the World”. The authenticity of each of these documents will be discussed on an individual basis below. It is worth noting that a complete and detailed account of the authenticity of these documents is outside the boundary of this paper. Morrow, however, provides a more in-depth break down on issues pertaining to authenticity ([17], pp. 65, 99, 109, 139).

Christians have reportedly guarded the “Covenant of the Prophet with the Monks of Mount Sinai” for nearly nine centuries ([17], p. 65). The French knight Greffin Affagart, who performed a pilgrimage to Saint Catherine’s monastery between 1533 and 1534 CE, provided one of the earliest accounts of this Covenant; he noted the existence and presence of the original copy in his journal ([17], p. 68; [19]). Approximately two centuries later, the French General Marie-Joseph de G6ramb (1772–1848 CE) confirmed Affagart’s observation and claimed that the document had been kept in the Covenant of the Holy Transfiguration of God at the Monastery of Saint Catherine ([20], p. 294). Hobbs, who also investigated the authenticity of the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai, stated that the original document was transported in 1517 by military personnel of the Ottoman Empire from the Sinai region to the palace of Sultan Selim I in Istanbul ([21], p. 160; [22], p. 148). Indeed, as Ratfliff argues, every authority has accepted 1517 as the year in which this Covenant was taken to the capital of the Ottoman Empire ([22], pp. 14–15). Perhaps the most convincing argument for the authenticity of the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai came from Burckhardt, who visited the monastery in 1816 and had the opportunity to examine the copy ([17], p. 68). He observed, “in a note it is expressly stated that the original, written by ‘Ali’, was lost, and that the present was copied from a fourth copy taken from the original” ([17], p. 68). Despite the observations made by the aforementioned travellers, “[t]he dating of many [of the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai] bristles with difficulties” [23]. As previous copies became old and brittle and started to distinegrate, “new copies of [this Covenant] were created for the sake of posterity” ([17], p. 66). The claim, therefore, is that the existing copy of the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai is a replica of the original. The monks from Saint Catherine’s Monastery have consistently upheld its authenticity since the early days of Islam, so have the Jabaliyya Arabs of the Sinai. It is also worth noting that scholars of the five schools of Islamic jurisprudence during the Fatimid, the Ayyubi, and the Mamluk dynasties recognized and respected the Covenants by following its orders in relation to the treatment of Christians [24].

Scholars have also deliberated over the authenticity of “The Covenant of the Prophet with the Christians of Najran”. This Covenant first came to light in *Patrologia Orientalis*, a body of work that attempts to create a comprehensive collection of the writings by scholars of Eastern Churches including those of the Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, Coptic, Georgian, and Slavonic traditions [25]. Scher, an Assyrian Chaldean Catholic archbishop of Sirrt in Southeastern Turkey, claimed that a copy of the Covenant with the Christians of Persia was based on a document found in the year 878/879 CE [25]. Scher’s claim stemmed from the testimony of Habib, a monk in the city of Brimantha who made a copy from a document originally found in the Library of Philosophy, where he was the curator ([26], p. 281). Scher, however, dismissed the authenticity of the document, claiming that it “was forged by the Christians so that the Muslims would spare them” ([26], p. 282). However, as Morrow duly notes, Scher “did not advance a single argument to support his allegations and did not present a shred of proof to demonstrate that the covenant in question was counterfeit” ([17], p. 109). While Scher also argued that the Covenant with the Christians of Najran is written in flawed Arabic, Morrow again points out that the Archbishop “does not avail himself of his linguistic expertise to support the supposition” ([17], p. 110). Moreover, as Ibn Ishaq (704–761 CE) reports, the Prophet seems to have been in contact with the Christians of Najran around the second year before the *hijrah* (the migration or journey of Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina):

Ishaq discusses Muhammad’s tolerance and hospitality towards the visitors of Najran:

[W]hen they came to Medina they came into the Messenger's mosque as he prayed the afternoon prayer clad in Yamani garments, cloaks, and mantles, with the elegance of men of B. al-Harith b. Ka'b. The Prophet's Companions who saw them that day said that they never saw their like in any deputation that came afterwards. The time of their prayers having come they stood and prayed in the Messenger's mosques; and he said that they were to be left to do so. They prayed towards the east ([27], p. 271.)

After several rounds of negotiation over whether the Najrans should pay the *jizya*, or poll tax for non-Muslims, the Christians Najrans eventually sent a delegation to meet with Prophet Muhammad in Medina. Resulting from this meeting was the Treaty of Najran, which, according to Abu Bakr, conferred on the non-Muslims, living in the Islamic State, autonomy, both religious and administrative [28]. Evidently, the Christians of Najran "had been accorded special terms and privileges by the Prophet, which were maintained by Abu Bakr and Umar" ([17], p. 113). Based on the various meetings and treaties between Prophet Muhammad and the Christians of Najran, the messages in the Covenant with the Christian Najrans appear at the least feasible, if not authentic.

Far fewer scholars are familiar with "The Covenant of the Prophet with the Christians of Persia" than they are with the previous two Covenants ([17], p. 99). The Covenant with the Christians of Persia was first discussed in detail by the historian Arpee, who wrote that the document "was preserved in the archives of the Armenian Bishop of New Julfa" and presented to the Armenian Bishop of New Julfa in the 17th century by Shah Abbas I of Persia ([29], p. 355; [17], p. 99). According to Arpee, "Ja'far, sixth Shi'ite Imam (8th century), testifies to its authenticity after comparing the text with the original in his own hand" ([29], p. 355). In the opinion of Dadoyan, however, Arpee's argument is "highly dubious yet intriguing" ([30], p. 60). Dadoyan argues that "[n]o such document exists . . . and no record exists of any such document in the archives of the Prelacy of New Julfa" ([30], p. 64). Arguing alongside Arpee and opposing Dadoyan, Morrow posits that Arpee had insufficient linguistic proficiency as to replicate a 17th-century Persian edict, nor did he have enough knowledge of Shi'ism to produce a convincing product. Furthermore, Arpee "had nothing to gain by perpetrating a historical fraud . . ." ([17], p. 103). According to Morrow, Shah 'Abbas obtained the document through several potential avenues including: (1) from another Christian community, likely the Armenian Christians of Julfa; (2) the Safavid Persians obtained a copy from Christian monks, likely from Egypt; and (3) "the Safavids obtained a copy of the covenant from Arab Shi'ite scholars from the Levant who moved to Persia in masse during the rule of Shah Abbas" ([17], p. 100). The most likely scenario, as argued by Morrow, is that Abbas obtained the Covenant from Safavid state archives ([17], p. 101). Nevertheless, the message of the Covenant itself reflects the treatment of Christians under the rule of Shah Abbas. The Safavid Empire during his reign was noted for its tolerance of Christians. Abbas was regarded as a liberator by Christians, who joined in Shi'ite-Christian solidarity under Persian rule [31].

The fourth and final Covenant examined in this paper is "The Covenant of the Prophet with the Christians of the World". According to Fortescue, this document originates from Yeshu'yab II, who was said to have visited Muhammad and to have obtained from him a legal document granting certain rights to Nestorians ([32], p. 92). Father Pacifique Scaliger (1588–1648 CE), a Capuchin monk, is said to have been the first Christian to bring the document to Europe sometime in the 16th or 17th century ([33], p. 291; [34], p. 255). According to Sir Paul Ricaut (1629–1700 CE), the document was allegedly found in the Monastery at Mount Carmel:

The *Treaty* . . . was found in a convent belonging to the monks of Mount Carmel, close to Mount Lebanon and at one day's journey from Mecca, where Muslim pilgrims perform their Qurban, or sacrifice, prior to entering the City. It is said that the original was brought to the Library of the King of France ([35], p. 320).

However, as Morrow points out, Ricaut likely made a mistake. The discovery of the Covenant with the Christians of the World was probably discovered in Arabia as opposed to Palestine ([17], p. 140). After all, "it takes approximately forty days to go from the Hijaz to Syria or Iraq by caravan" ([17], p. 140).

It is also worth pointing out that Ricaut himself used the phrase “*On dit*”, which is Latin for “It is alleged”. Nevertheless, Bayle ([36], p. 38; [37]) is convinced that Father Scaliger discovered the Covenant in a monastery somewhere in the Middle East. Morrow, in support of Bayle, is persuaded that Scaliger brought it to France, where it was eventually deposited in the library of the French King ([17], p. 142; [38], p. 100). Father Scaliger, like Arpee (who studied the Covenants with the Christians of Persia), was not proficient in classical languages or well-versed in Islamic studies, meaning it is highly unlikely that he forged the document. Ultimately, many scholars over the centuries have argued for the authenticity of all of these Covenants. According to Morrow, individuals and groups who oppose the Covenants—and Islam in general—use “the hermeneutics of suspicion” to widen the gap between Muslims and Christians and to fulfill their own self-fulfilling prophecies about Prophet Muhammad [39].

Nevertheless, Muhammad’s Covenants offer leaders of Muslim nations a blueprint for advancing pluralism, a concept that is frequently overlooked in discussions about “Islamic values”. The notion of “nation” itself remains a topic of perennial debate; adding the “Muslim” before “nation” complicates the matter even further. According to Saunders, the word *ummah*, or Muslim nation, is most closely linked to the term “people”, and is thought to be a cognate of the Hebrew *am* and *ummetha* ([40], p. 306). Reflecting such usage, “*ummah* has been historically translated as ‘nation’, and is often used in Arabic to denote the Western concept of ‘nation’, e.g., *al-Umam al-Muttahida* (the United Nations)” ([40], p. 306). When Prophet Muhammad rose to prominence in the seventh century, the *ummah* was “marked by a pervasive new moral tone”, but eventually morphed into “a state of mind, a form of social consciousness, or an imagined community which united the faithful in order to lead a virtuous life” ([41], p. 50). Furthering the discussion of the *ummah*, Tibi suggests that it is wrong to conceptualize the *ummah* as coterminous with Islam’s “righteous believers” because “Islam has always been characterized by complexity and diversity” ([42], pp. 128–29). The *ummah* can also be used as a political term that signifies a united and diverse nation based on a “universalist creed” ([43], pp. 236–38). This creed is rooted in egalitarianism and equality; it allows non-Muslim religious and cultural groups into the “community of believers”.

## 1. Exploring Religious Pluralism in Islam

Scholars of pluralism, such as Eck, suggest that four elements must be in-place if a community—or in this context, a nation—aims to consider itself “pluralistic”. First, “pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity” [44]. Eck implies that pluralism is not a given in socially diverse societies, and that reaching a state of pluralism requires genuine social interactions and the building of authentic relationships. Second, Eck states “pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of differences” [44]. While religious tolerance, broadly speaking, encourages a level of respect for religious traditions, it does little to counter ignorance and stereotypes of religious communities. Tolerance, Eck argues, reproduces old patterns of division and violence; as a result, it “is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity” [44]. Tolerance also does not require Muslims and Christians to know anything about each other. In essence, Eck calls on individuals and groups to move beyond the “indifference” of tolerance and towards the “celebration of difference” as found in the pluralist tradition. Pluralism can be further distinguished from tolerance in another other way. While pluralism treats religious diversity as something to be celebrated in order to produce positive social changes, tolerance can be said to encourage social isolation and impenetrable social group boundaries. The third feature of pluralism, as put forth by Eck, is that pluralism “is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments” [44]. In this regard, pluralism can be seen as open and supportive of various religious values and institutions. Finally, Eck’s last feature of pluralism stresses the importance of inter-religious dialogue, which she summarizes as “encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism” [44]. She adds: “Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences” [44]. Eck’s fourth feature of pluralism follows Kamali in that pluralism “does not simply aim at tolerance of the other but

entails active effort to gain an understanding of the other” ([45], p. 28). People of different religious backgrounds can live side-by-side with one another in a relative state of tolerance, yet these people can remain ignorant of the lifestyles and beliefs practiced and expressed in other religious communities. Unless individuals actively engage with people outside of their immediate religious circles, there is no pluralism.

In light of this overview of pluralism, it is important to recognize that there are different types of pluralism, among them being cultural, political, and religious. For the purpose of this article, it is necessary to focus on religious pluralism. In the Covenants, Prophet Muhammad can be seen as an advocate for a religiously pluralistic society ([45], pp. 34–35); he not only considered the interests of Christians, but he safeguarded them; he also demonstrates a preference for pluralism in the sense that he viewed Christianity as containing some “true values” that were in-line with Islamic values and principles [46]. The Covenants of the Prophet—in addition to the *Qur’an* and *hadiths*—attest to Islam’s affirmative stance on pluralism ([45], p. 35). A special place is reserved in Islamic scripture for Christians as well as Jews. In the *Qur’an*, beliefs in the truth of Christian and Jewish doctrine are encapsulated in the term *ahl al kitab* (“People of the Book”), or people who have received and believed in earlier revelations from the prophets of the Abrahamic tradition. The pluralistic nature of the term *ahl al kitab* is evident in the use of the noun “book” in the singular and not the plural, meant to emphasize that Jews, Christians, and Muslims follow one and the same book, not various conflicting scriptures [47]. Islamic holy texts like the *Qur’an* also accept all Abrahamic prophets before Muhammad and recognize Jewish scripture—the Talmud—and Christian scripture—the Gospel—as sacred books. Furthermore, under Prophet Muhammad’s leadership, Christians and Jews received the special status of *dhimmi*, or “protected peoples”, and *al-mu’minin*, or “the faithful” ([18], p. 2). These two statuses indicate that the Prophet considered both Christians and Jews to be monotheistic “believers” alongside Muslims. Far from denying the validity of Christianity and Judaism, Muhammad regarded them as standing in *de jure* with Islam as religions from the same God ([48], p. 2).

Emon, however, argues that the discursive intersection of Islamic law and the rights of minorities creates the “*dhimmi* rules”, which often lie at the center of debates about whether Islam as a “political system” is tolerant or intolerant of non-Muslims [49]. The “*dhimmi* rules”, he argues, means that non-Muslims

are subjected to various rules regulating the scope of what modern layers would call their freedom and liberty, whether to manifest their religious beliefs or to act in ways contrary to Islamic legal doctrines but in conformity with their own normative traditions ([49], p. 323).

While Emon claims that *dhimmi* rules are important indices of the inherent intolerance in the Islamic tradition, they appear to contradict several *hadiths*. Prophet Muhammad, for example, stated “Whoever oppresses a *dhimmi* or burdens a weight over him more than he can carry, I will be his enemy” [50]. Similarly, Prophet Muhammad stated “I am claimant of anyone who depresses a *dhimmi*. The one who I claimant of (in this world), I am also claimant of on the Day of Judgment” [50].

Yet, despite these favorable *hadiths* towards “People of the Book”, there are also passages of the *Qur’an* which appear to support the “*dhimmi* rules” as described by Emon. One particular verse of the *Qur’an* verse (9:29) states the following:

Fight against those who do not believe in God or in the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and his Prophet have forbidden or practice the true religion, among those who have been given the Book, until they pay the *jizya* [poll tax] from their hand, they being humbled ([51], p. 236).

This verse has been traditionally interpreted to mean that the *jizya* was intended as a symbolic expression of subordination of Jews and Christians [52]. However, this verse stresses that certain conditions have to be met to fight against “People of the Book”. Abualrub elaborates:

This verse stresses the necessity of fighting against the People of the Scripture, but under what conditions?...The Islamic State is not permitted to attack non-Muslims who are not

hostile to Islam, who do not oppress Muslims, or try to convert Muslims by force from their religion, or expel them from their lands, or wage war against them, or prepare for attacks against them. If any of these offenses occur, however, Muslims are permitted to defend themselves and protect their religion. Muslims are not permitted to attack non-Muslims who signed peace pacts with them, or non-Muslims who lived under the protection of the Islamic State ([53]).

Abualrub's analysis suggests that verses of the *Qur'an* must be examined in a scriptural and historical context. Another controversial verse of the *Qur'an* (8:55–56) is frequently taken out of context; according to some critics of Islamic scripture, this verse refers to non-believers of Islam as "The worst of beasts":

Verily, the worst of beasts in the sight of God are those who conceal (the truth), and do not acknowledge it. These are those whom you have made a peace treaty with, but they break their treaty at every opportunity and have no fear of the law ([51], p. 227).

This passage, however, goes on to clarify the cause of the condemnation of the "non-believers". Prophet Muhammad condemned them not simply because they were "non-Muslims", "but because they violated a treaty they had agreed to, which resulted in the deaths of many Muslims" [54]. Treating this verse as supposedly "violent" quickly dissolves with a brief consideration of the textual and historical context. As discussed below, the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of his time are further substantiated when one looks at verses of the *Qur'an* and *hadiths* in their historical context.

In his Covenant with the Christians of Persia, the Prophet is nothing less than emphatic on the issue of complete religious freedom:

And even as they honor and respect me, so shall Moslems care for that people as being under our protection and whensoever any distress or discomfort shall overtake [Christians], Moslems shall hold themselves in duty bound to aid and care for them, for they are a people subject to my Nation, obedient to their word, whose helpers also they are.

It therefore is proper for my sake to attend to their comfort, protection and aid, in face of all opposition and distress, suppressing everything that becomes a means to their spoliation ([55], p. 18).

A similar—if not identical passage—is found in the three other Covenants addressed in this paper. Muhammad makes it clear that freedom of religion is an inherent right for Christians living in a Muslim nation. Christian Persians are allowed to practice Christianity and they are under no compulsion whatsoever to accept or reject Islam. In viewing Christian Persians as *mu'minin* or believers, the Prophet is consistent with the *Constitution of Medina*, one of the earliest known documents in Islam ([17], p. 104). Although this particular document addressed the *ummah's* relations with Jewish tribes, it nevertheless highlights how Prophet Muhammad wanted Muslims to interact with "People of the Book". Article 20 of the Constitution notes how non-Muslim minorities have the same rights as Muslims: "A Jew, who obeys us (the state) shall enjoy the same right of life protection (as the [Muslims] do, so long as they [the Muslims] are not wrong by him" [56]. Jews and Christians were not only given the same rights as Muslims within the realm of the Muslim nation, but also "throughout Christendom", as clearly noted in the Covenant with the Christians of Persia.

The specific community referred to in the Covenant with the Christians of Persia is, of course, composed of people "who are friends of Islam, the brothers and sisters of the believers, and not Crusaders, colonizers, or imperialists" ([17], p. 104). The Covenant of Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of Persia, the *Constitution of Medina*, and the *Qur'an* all provide religious freedom to non-Muslims, but they, by no means, forbid Muslims from fighting them if there were violations of an agreement or treaty. The *Qur'an* (22:39, after all, permits self-defense regardless of the religious background of enemies: "Permission (to fight) is given to those on whom war is made, because they

are oppressed ([51], p. 417). Nevertheless, the expression of religious pluralism in the Covenant with the Christians of Persia is a corollary of the freedom of religion in the *Qur'an* (11:118): “And if your Lord pleased, He would have made people a single nation” ([51], p. 284). An informative *hadith*, summarized by Musa, offers a compelling story in support of this verse of the *Qur'an*:

Christian merchants from Syria came to Medina to trade. While they were there, they converted the two sons of one of Muhammad’s followers. The sons then returned to Syria with the merchants. When their faith sought permission from the Prophet to go after his sons and demand their return, the Prophet responded by reciting the verse: “There is no compulsion in religion”. The story goes on to say that the man held this against the Prophet, which led to the revelation of a verse of the *Qur'an* (4:65): “But no, by *your* Lord! they do not believe until they make *you* a judge of what is in dispute between them, then find no reluctance in their hearts as to what *you* decide and submit with full submission.” So no matter how much the Muslim father wished to demand that his sons return to Medina and Islam, the *Qur'anic* command that there is no compulsion in religion prevailed ([57]).

By guaranteeing the Persian Christians—and the two sons of Muhammad’s follower—the right to freely practice Christianity, Prophet Muhammad emulated “real pluralism”, which implies equal treatment of citizens before the law without any distinction being made based on religion ([45], p. 28). Securing the rights of these people meant that the Prophet wanted Christians to feel like they “can bring their full identities to the table”, which for Patel and Meyer is a crucial element in creating a religiously pluralistic society ([58], p. 2). Muhammad allowed Persian Christians the right “to believe that they are right and others are wrong, and they are allowed to think their beliefs are true and others’ are not” ([55], p. 2).

The religious freedom that Muhammad granted the Persian Christians directly contrasts with how states such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia treat their minority religious communities. Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Islamic state that bases its law on the *Qur'an* and *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad [59]. While Article 8 of the Saudi Constitution states the government is based on “the premise of justice, consultation, and equality—in accordance with the Islamic Shari’ah”—the United States State Department claims that religious freedom is heavily restricted in Saudi Arabia. Freedom of religion, in fact, “is neither recognized nor protected under the law and is severely restricted in practice” [60]. In Saudi Arabia, the public practice of Christianity—and indeed every other religion other than Islam—is prohibited, nor does the Saudi Constitution separate “state” and “religion” [60]. Saudi Arabia’s Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) continues to conduct raids on private non-Muslim religious gatherings [60]. Despite these restrictions on Christians, the United States State Department did note “incremental improvements” in terms of safeguarding religious freedom in Saudi society [60]. However, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia does not appear to care for Christians to the same extent of the Prophet himself. Prophet Muhammad set a legal precedent for Muslim rulers; non-Muslims were given the right to live in a nation that neither promotes nor disparages any particular religion. Under the leadership of the Prophet, religion—whether it be Islam, Christianity, or any other tradition—was not meant to be a matter of duress, intimidation, or persuasion, but rather of conscience and free will. According to the Covenant with the Christians of Persia, Muslims who coerce Christians into converting to Islam commit an act of *fitnah*, or sedition and, therefore, must be resolutely avoided. The Covenant explicitly points out: “There shall be no compulsion or restraint against them in any of these matters” ([61], p. 14). This commandment, which mirrors a verse of the *Qur'an* (2:256) on religious freedom, indicates that coercion and faith are not to mix in a “Muslim nation”.

Lapidus explicitly claims that Prophet Muhammad separated religious matters from political matters; he also argues that secular governments have existed in the Muslim world throughout history. He notes:

In fact, religious and political life developed distinct spheres of experience, with independent values, leaders, and organizations. From the middle of the tenth century effective control of the Arab-Muslim empires had passed into the hands of generals, administrators, governors, and local provincial lords; the Caliphs had lost all effective political power. Governments in Islamic lands were henceforth secular regimes—Sultanates—in theory authorized by the Caliphs, but actually legitimized by the need for public order. Henceforth, Muslim states were fully differentiated political bodies without any intrinsic religious character, though they were officially loyal to Islam and committed to its defense ([62], p. 364).

In modern times, there are many “Muslim nations” that can be considered secular states. Turkey, for example, has negated its Islamic Ottoman system and adopted a secular-oriented system of government [63]. Turkey adopted a secular civil code to replace *shari’a*; the secular code provided equal rights to men and women in matters of marriage and divorce and dropped the Islamic court system as well as institutions of Islamic education [64]. Other Muslim-majority nations said to have “secular governments” include Albania [65], Gambia [66], Kazakhstan [67], Senegal [68], and Uzbekistan [69]. These secular countries maintain their loyalty to Islam as the dominant religion in a similar manner to how many Americans consider the United States to be “secular” but still loyal to Christianity. Islam might be the religion of the majority, but the state or nation itself has no overt religious identity.

The emphasis the *Qur’an* places on respecting the “People of the Book” indicates that Muslims are tolerant of religious groups so long as they are monotheists, or believers in “one God”. While the *Qur’an* frequently calls on and encourages non-Muslims to worship God according to “Islamic principles”, the Islamic holy text can be interpreted as extending freedom of religion to “disbelievers” or those outside the Abrahamic tradition. Verse 9:6 of the *Qur’an*, for example, provides protection for “idolators”: “And if anyone of the idolaters seek your protection, protect him till he hears the word of Allah, then convey him to his place of safety. This is because they are a people who don’t know” ([51], p. 232). While this verse calls on “disbelievers” to embrace Islam as the “truth”, it does not call on Muslims to convert—whether by persuasion or force—non-Muslims to Islam. According to Ali, this verse leaves no doubt that the Holy Prophet was never ordered by God to oppress anyone on account of his or her religion ([51], p. 233). While the Covenants of Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of his time deal specifically with Christian communities in his midst, there is reason to believe that the Prophet would extend freedom and protection to polytheists as highlighted in the *Qur’an*.

According to Prophet Muhammad, a “Muslim nation” must also extend rights to Christian religious leaders, as discussed in the Covenant with the Christian Monks of Mount Sinai. This particular community had complete freedom in anointing leaders and control over their places of worship. Consider the following passage from the Covenant:

A bishop shall not be removed from his bishopric, nor a monk from his monastery, nor a hermit from his tower, nor shall a pilgrim be hindered from his pilgrimage. Moreover, no building from among their churches shall be destroyed, nor shall the money from their churches be used for the building of mosques or houses for the Muslims ([61], p. 14).

This passage suggests that an Islamic state must not harm Christian churches in any way, nor can any Muslim leader intrude on how Christian groups anoint leaders. So long as Christians submit to Muslim authorities and seek the protection of Muslims, all help would be given to them by Muslims in every way legitimate ([17], p. 106). In this agreement with the Monks, Muhammad showed himself to be a religious pluralist rather than a religious absolutist, or denier of religious diversity ([70], p. 23). Muslim absolutists assert that democratic principles, such as the right to private property and freedom of religion, are fundamentally incompatible with “Islamic values” and that Muslims, by necessity of their religion, must oppose all forms of democratic culture and governance. Recent Pew Global

Attitudes surveys, in fact, show that majorities in the “Arab world” favor democracy as a form of government [71]. As noted above, most experts cite Turkey, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Malik, and Senegal as democracies [72]. Indonesia, the world’s largest “Muslim nation”, is an interesting case study in observing how the pluralist spirit of the Covenants has been applied to modern societies. Article 28E of the Constitution reflects much of what was written in the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai:

- (1) Every person shall be free to choose and to practice the religion of his/her choice, to choose one’s education, to choose one’s employment, to choose one’s citizenship, and to choose one’s place of residence within the state territory, to leave it and to subsequently return to it.
- (2) Every person shall have the right to the freedom to believe his/her faith, and to express his/her views and thoughts, in accordance with his/her conscience.
- (3) Every person shall have the right to the freedom to associate, to assemble, and to express opinions [73].

Moreover, Article 28D states that every Indonesian citizen—regardless of ethnic or religious background—“shall have the right of recognition, guarantees, protection and certainty before a just law, and of equal treatment before the law” [73]. The Constitution of Indonesia clearly protects religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respects the religious freedom of the six officially recognized religions [74]. However, in some instances, the government fails to protect citizens from discrimination and abuse based on religion [74]. For example, the central Indonesia government holds authority over religious matters, but in previous years has made no effort in some regions of the country to overturn local laws restricting rights otherwise provided by the Constitution [75]. Despite these shortcomings, the Constitution of Indonesia can be seen as closely mirroring the Covenants of Prophet Muhammad, who did not subscribe to “Islamic absolutism”; he respected Christians as equal members of the Muslim nation, and showed appreciation for cultural and religious diversity as something to be protected. The relations that he forged with the Monks at Mount Sinai were based on plurality and not sectarianism.

Prophet Muhammad, nonetheless, did enforce the *jizya*, or poll tax, on Christian communities. In fact, the *jizya* is enforced in all of the Covenants discussed in this paper. The *jizya* is one area in which Christians criticize Islam for its oppression and creation of “second-class” citizens in Muslim societies. However, the Prophet made it clear in the Covenants with the Christians of Mount Sinai, Persia, Najran, and the World that in the levying of taxes, it is necessary not to exact from Christians more than they are able to pay. Rather, Muhammad asks Muslims “to adjust matters with their consent, without force or violence” ([55], p. 18). The Prophet added “Whosoever shall not do as is here prescribed, but shall do contrary to my behests; the same shall be held a despiser of the Compact, and a gainsayer of the word of God and of his Prophet” ([55], p. 19). Similarly, in the Covenant with the Christians of the World, Prophet Muhammad suggested that—in extraordinary cases—the *jizya* can be dismissed altogether: “I remove from them the harm from taxes and loan in the supplies borne to the People of the Pact except what they themselves consent to give. They should not be compelled or unfairly treated in this matter” ([75], p. 50). Nonetheless, the money that Muslims collected through the *jizya* was to be placed in the Treasury for public use ([17], p. 105). This is an important point because corrupt individuals or groups were not meant to acquire money collected through the *jizya*. The *jizya* was collected for the betterment of the “public good”, of which Christians were a part. It is also worth noting that during the reign of Umar, the third *Caliph* of the *ummah* and Companion of Prophet Muhammad, the *jizya* was abolished in light of all non-Muslims that were unable to earn their livelihood [76]. Such conditions were clearly stated in contracts and other documents signed by Muslims and non-Muslims during the reign of Umar [77].

Prophet Muhammad was a religious pluralist because he engaged in “a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing the well-being of each and all” ([78], p. xv). Consider how he embodied religious pluralism in his Covenant with the Christians of Najran:

The Muslims must not abandon the Christians, neglect them, and leave them without help and assistance since I have made this pact with them on behalf of Allah to ensure that whatever good befell Muslims it would befall them as well and that whatever harm befell Muslims would befall them as well ([79], p. 36).

The passage encapsulates the spirit of religious pluralism in that it fosters mutually inspiring relationships and common action among members of different religious groups for the “common good” ([58], p. 2). As Patel and Meyer remind us, religious pluralism is “not simply relativism, but makes room for real and different religious commitments” ([58], p. 2). In the Covenant with the Najrans, Muhammad encourages Muslims and Christians to become mutually dependent upon one another for safety and prosperity. Benevolence, encouraging goodwill, commanding charity, and deterring evil are the most sincere mechanisms to reaching these aims ([79], p. 32). This particular passage from the Covenant with the Christians of Najran aligns closely to verse 16:91 of the *Qur’an*: “And fulfill the covenant of Allah, when you have made a covenant, and do not break (your) oaths after making them firm, and you have indeed made Allah your surety. Surely Allah knows what you do” ([51], pp. 333–34). On the other side of the spectrum, however, there are verses of the *Qur’an* that can be viewed as contradicting the messages of the Covenants. For example, the *Qur’an* (9:29) commands Muslims to “Fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the Last Day, nor forbid what Allah and His Messenger have forbidden, nor follow the Religion of Truth” ([51], p. 236), which can be interpreted to mean fight “infidels”, or non-believers, such as Christians. In the *Qur’an*, however, the term “infidel” is not just a noun or an adjective; “infidel” is the word that the *Qur’an* uses to describe exclusively the Meccan aristocracy with which the Muslim community was at war with. Scholars of the *Qur’an* tell us that verses dealing with “infidels” are not meant to encourage the use of violence among Muslims. In fact, “such an interpretation is completely false and contradicts authentic Islamic teachings” [80]. Consider the following commentary for further evidence of the defensive nature of verse 16:91:

If the non-Muslim country did not attack the Muslim one nor mobilize itself to prevent the practice and spread of Islam, nor transgress against mosques, nor work to oppress the Muslim people in their right to profess their faith and decry unbelief, then it is not for the Muslim country to attack that country. Jihad of a military nature was only permitted to help Muslims defend their religion and remove oppression from the people ([53]).

The context of *Qur’an* (9:29) must also be placed in its proper historical context. The Byzantine Empire, the great Christian power of the time, had mobilized its forces to fight against the rise of Islam. As Ali notes, the use of force against Christians “was not in any way the object of the *Qur’an* to bring the Christians into subjection. On the other hand, the Christians “first moved themselves to bring Muslim Arabia under subjection” ([51], p. 236). Prophet Muhammad did not initiate aggression; rather he and his followers were under attack from those groups who wanted to destroy the Islamic state [80]. As for fighting the Jews, they had conducted a peace pact with the Prophet after he migrated to Medina. Soon afterwards, as Musaji notes, “they betrayed the peace pact and joined forces with the pagans and the hypocrites against Muslims” [80]. Therefore, the command to fight in verse 9:29 was not directed towards *all* Christians, only those who were aggressive and threatening violence against the *ummah*.

The equitable ethos of the Covenants—in tandem with the *Qur’an*—challenge those who declare Islam as fundamentally intolerant of Christians. In line with the message of the Covenants, the *Qur’an* (5:82) establishes Prophet Muhammad as an admirer of Christians: “. . . you will find the nearest in friendship to the believers to be those who say, We are Christians. That is because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not proud” [51], p. 155). In the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai, Muslims and Christians are asked to work with one another in order for members of each group to recognize valuable gains in interfaith interaction:

If in the interest of the benevolent Moslem public, and of their faith, Moslems shall ask of the Christians for assistance, the latter shall not deny them what help, as an expression of friendship and goodwill, they are to render . . . we deem all help and succor rendered to them every way legitimate ([55], p. 21).

This passage follows Patel in that pluralism occurs when people of different religious traditions make their unique contribution for the common good of society by actively assisting each other in ways that are mutually beneficial to both parties ([78], p. 2). The nearest Arabic word that captures the essence of this passage is *al-tasamuh*, often translated as meaning “tolerance” ([45], p. 29). *Tasamuh* “denotes generosity and ease from both sides on a reciprocal basis” ([81], p. 74). Building on Abdel Haleem, Kamali argues that the more precise Arabic equivalent of pluralism is *al-ta’addudiyah*, which he translates literally to mean “pluralism” ([45], p. 29). Prophet Muhammad’s commitment and recognition of diversity is not an attempt to assimilate Christians into Muslim society; on the contrary, this kind of “deep pluralism” recognizes religious and cultural differences and engages in them in order to gain a sound understanding of the values and commitments of the different other ([45], p. 28).

At this stage of the paper, it is important to distinguish Prophet Muhammad’s religious pluralism from toleration, which allows only for coexistence [44]. In addition to encouraging Muslims and Christians to form bonds of solidarity, he advises individuals in each group to vigorously defend each other. The Covenant with the Christians of Persia reads:

All pious believers shall deem it their bounded duty to defend believers and to aid them whosoever they may be, whether far or near, and throughout Christendom shall protect the places where they conduct worship, and those where their monks and priests dwell. Everywhere, in mountains, on the plains, in towns and in waste places, in deserts, and wheresoever they may be, that people shall be protected, both in their faith and in their property, both in the West and in the East, both on sea and land ([55], p. 18).

The text declares that defending Christian communities is the responsibility of the *ummah*. The text, furthermore, states that membership of a particular religious grouping does not set the standard of citizenship in Muslim nations. With regard to Christian citizens, the Prophet valued them and validated their beliefs by protecting them by means of his army. In the Covenants with the Christians of the World, he echoed the treatment of the Christian of the World by stating:

The covenant of Allah is that I should protect their land, their monasteries, with my power, my horses, my men, my weapons, my strength, and my Muslim followers . . . I place them under my protection, my security, and my trust at every moment ([75], pp. 49–50).

Muhammad’s protection of Christian communities is diametrically opposed to Muslim absolutists who view Christians as morally inferior to Muslims and thus incapable of becoming equal members of an Islamic state. Consider several recent events during which Daesh destroyed the property of Christians. In July 2014, Daesh set fire to a 1800-year-old church in Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul [82]. A statement released by Daesh a week before this incident stated that Mosul’s Christians should convert, pay a special tax, leave, or face death [82]. Months later, in February 2015, Daesh members rounded up 220 Christian civilians in the village of Tal Tamir and burned two Christian churches. According to reports, they were peaceful villages that had nothing to do with the war [83]. The Covenants show that Muslim leaders are not advised by Muhammad to prohibit citizens from expressing non-Muslim identities or ruin churches, but are instead commanded to treat them as equal members of the *ummah*.

Considering that the “People of the Book” have a special status in the Islamic tradition, critics have wondered about the rights of non-Abrahamic communities living inside the territories of the *ummah*. Muslims during the time of Prophet Muhammad used the term “polytheists” to refer to people who do not have a tradition of a revealed book in their religion. A *hadith* reports a particular story that highlights the Prophet’s position on dealing with religious groups outside of the Abrahamic tradition.

In calling his Muslim army to defend themselves against polytheist aggression towards the *ummah*, the Prophet stated:

don't exaggerate, don't cheat, don't mutilate, don't kill a new-born child. If you meet your enemies of polytheists call them for one of three options. Whatever they take, you must accept, and stop fighting them. Call them to Islam . . . they will have the same rights and duties of the immigrants ([84]).

Although he encouraged Muslims to engage in defensive warfare against the polytheists, it is clear that Muhammad was willing to grant them the same rights that he would later grant Christians (immigrants) in the Covenants. History shows us that Muslim rulers and empires followed in the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad by granting non-Abrahamic communities privileges and political rights under "Islamic rule." For example, governments of the Indian subcontinent readily extended the *dhimmi* status to Hindus and Buddhists of India ([85], p. 278). On several occasions throughout history, Muslim rulers and jurists eradicated the *jizya* ([86], pp. 79–80). Akbar the Great of the Mughal Empire abolished the *jizya* in relation to Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs under his rule ([87], pp. 28–39; [88], pp. 282–89; [89], pp. 401–6). To reiterate, it is worth remembering that each of the Covenants discussed in this paper include a passage on how to levy the *jizya*. Muslims are not to enforce the tax on Christians without their consent, nor are Muslims able to enforce the *jizya* with force or violence ([55], p. 18). Furthermore, as Prophet Muhammad noted in the Covenant with the Christians of Najran, the charges of the *jizya* shall not exceed the measure of their means, meaning that taxes should not be excessive and be judged based on individual cases depending on the status of the citizen.

## 2. The Muslim Nation as Civic Nation

Having considered the concept of religious pluralism in the Covenants, the paper now takes up the discussion of civic rights among members of the "Muslim nation". Scholars have dedicated much time and effort to unpack the various kinds of nation-building projects, but the distinction between "civic nation" versus "ethnic nation" is perhaps the most widely-employed conceptual building block in the study of nationhood and national identity ([90], p. 554). While these types of nations share common elements like historical territory and common culture, they have distinct features. An ethnic nation bases national group membership upon qualities such as ancestry, marriage, and blood. In this sense, an ethnic nation is an exclusive nation because it places emphasis on historical experiences and the resulting phenotypes that outline the boundary of the "natives." Some contemporary scholars argue that Eastern European and Asian countries are historical examples of ethnic nations while Western European countries and the United States are historical examples of civic nations. In the "Eastern model", nationalism arises in polities that coincide with cultural or ethnic boundaries (e.g., Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires) ([90], p. 555). In these regions, Kohn argues, imagining the ethnic nation led to redrawing "political boundaries in conformity with ethnographic demands" ([91], p. 329). Kohn, on the other hand, argues that in the "West", particularly in the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, nationalism was primarily political. Commenting on Kohn's theory, Shulman adds: "ideas of the nation and nationalism arose within preexisting state structures that encompassed populations with a relatively high degree of cultural homogeneity" ([90], p. 555). He continues: "Members of the [civic] nation were unified by their equal political status and their will as individuals to be part of the nation" ([90], p. 555).

In light of Kohn and Shulman, a civic nation can be viewed as the opposite of an ethnic nation. A civic nation determines national group membership upon citizenship rights, rather than that of ancestry, marriage, or blood, as commonly found in an ethnic nation. A civic nation can be defined as "a community of equal, rights-bearing citizens, united in patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values" ([92], p. 6). Civic nation building envisions "one people" with a common sense of "we", but not in the sense that "we" derive from a particular ethnicity or religion. Civic nationalism

separates culture and state whereas ethnic nationalism joins them ([93], p. 204). In summary, a civic nation allows individuals to define the national community rather than having the national community define the individual, which is not necessarily the case in an ethnic nation. As such, an ethnic nation abandons the idea that national belonging is a choice and not an inheritance.

The “Eastern” (ethnic) *versus* “Western” (civic) model for nation building is not just a historical argument; many scholars see the continuation of historical patterns in current national identities in the East *versus* West framework ([90], p. 556). According to Brubaker, the twenty or so “post-communist” states of Eastern Europe were “conceived and justified, in the nationalist movements . . . as the state of and for a particular ethno-national group” ([94], p. 65). As such, in Eastern Europe, understandings of nationality have become institutionalized and fundamentally “ethno-cultural” rather than “political”. However, some scholars have attacked the narrow logic that ethnic nations are simply “ethnic” in the sense of being emotionally-charged and exclusive entities based only on dominant ethno-cultural groups. Quebec and Flanders, for example, have been labeled “ethnic nations” but in actuality can be treated as “cultural nations” ([93], p. 126, 133). Quebec and Flanders do not restrict immigration or necessarily give preference to ethnically similar individuals. However, they do encourage assimilation into the prominent culture and give preference for “culturally similar immigrants” in terms of immigration policies ([93], p. 561). In this sense, a government that pursues the cultural assimilation of minorities is a “cultural nation”; cultural unity is seen as the foundation for a strong nation-state ([90], p. 561). The differences between the cultural and ethnic nation model is that “cultural nations” encourage assimilation whereas “ethnic nations” do not, because the latter concept demarcates culture by ancestry and “race”, which cannot be gained or learned by human effort. Another topic of interest in discussions about the nature of cultural nations is the role religion plays in relation to “national belonging”. A cultural nation can be seen as having key components such as religion, language, and tradition ([90], p. 559). As discussed below, Prophet Muhammad did not require Christians to convert to Islam, nor did he encourage them to assimilate into “Muslim culture”. In effect, he distanced himself from the cultural and ethnic nations and moved the *ummah* closer to the civic approach in terms of nation-building.

Prophet Muhammad insisted that the Muslim national group boundary is not the property of any particular religious or ethnic group. In this regard, he can be seen as being a “political pluralist” in that he desired “a political culture of non-centralised action, which endows civic centres of activity with initiative rather than imagining that the state has to license and delegate everything from the top” ([45], p. 40). For the state to give preference to one or more groups means devaluing citizens based upon their ethnic or cultural backgrounds. The Prophet did not want to inflict harm on Christians, nor interfere or encroach on their privacy or private property. In the Covenant with the Christians of the World, he laid down the injunction:

The covenant of Allah is that I should protect their land, their monasteries, with my power, my horses, my men, my strength, and my Muslim followers in any region, far away or close by, and that I should protect their businesses. I grant security to them, their churches, their businesses, their houses of worship, the places of their monks, the places of their pilgrims, wherever they may be found . . . ([75], p. 48)

This is the sanctity of privacy and property rights that Muhammad granted Christian citizens in an Islamic state. The rights he granted them are “not simply a claim of individuals against the state but a claim of individuals that the state itself underwrites for the good of all” ([95], p. 600). These rights include property rights of individuals as a basic condition for democratic citizenship ([95], p. 600). Prophet Muhammad instructed his followers to follow these commands, and stated that any Muslim that disobeys them acts against the will of God. Muslims who disrespect his ordinances are “[enemies] on the Day of Judgment among all the Muslims” ([75], p. 54). In the Covenant with the Christians of the World, a civic conception of the nation was developed by Muhammad in the sense that ethnic or cultural unity was not a requisite for belonging to the *ummah*. People in a civic nation are united by such traits as common citizenship, respect for law and state institutions, and belief in a set of political

principles ([90], p. 560). Nevertheless, it is important to discuss another characteristic of civic nations, that is cultural preservation and access to political power among minority communities. As Kymlicka argues, the idea that the government of a civic nation could be neutral with respect to ethnic and national groups is patently false [96]. He claims that the government of a civic nation “cannot avoid deciding which societal cultures will be supported” ([96], p. 110). However, Kymlicka may be overly hasty in arguing that a civic nation acts unfairly towards minorities. While Prophet Muhammad did use the *Qur’an* as the basis for his political philosophy, he did not “take sides” in terms of offering citizenship in a diverse and pluralistic society like Arabia in the 7th century.

Stilz offers several views on this issue of neutrality in a civic nation. One, “neutrality of impact”, sees neutrality as “a thesis about the consequences of government action. It holds that the state should pursue no policies that have the end result that one way of life is advantaged, favored, or assisted in ways others are not” ([97], p. 265). The other, “neutrality of justification”, sees neutrality as “a thesis about the kind of reasons for which governments should act”. In terms of neutrality of justification, specific laws are not created to impinge upon the beliefs or practices of minorities. One potential way to argue against the validity of “neutrality” in Prophet Muhammad’s *ummah* is by turning to the “*dhimmi* rules”, as discussed in the previous section. While *dhimmi* literally means “protected person”, *dhimmis* in Muhammad’s *ummah* were asked to pay the *jizya* and faced certain political restrictions. However, as Glenn points out, *dhimmis* were treated equally in practically the whole of the law of property and of contracts and obligations ([98], p. 219). Throughout Islamic history, there are plenty of instances where “Muslim nations” treated Christians equally in the court of law. For example, in the early *Caliphate*, Al-Andalus, Indian subcontinent, and the Ottoman Millet system, *qadis* (Islamic judges) typically did not interfere in the legislative or legal matters of Christians [99]. Christians living in these “Muslim nations” were granted the right to create and maintain their own laws independent of *sharia*. Moreover, throughout history, Christians and Jews living as *dhimmis* were allowed to engage in practices such as the consumption of alcohol and pork, both of which are forbidden under *sharia*. While an argument can be made that Christians were excluded from specifically Muslim privileges, one can also make the argument that they were excluded from specifically Muslim duties like serving as soldiers during times of war ([98], p. 219). The Muslim nation as designed by Prophet Muhammad can be regarded as anti-hierarchical and non-centralist in terms of governance; it was meant to be a confederation of religious groupings rather than a space for Muslims alone. Citizenship in Muhammad’s nation did not derive from the solidarity of people who feel responsible for—and committed to—members of a single racial or ethnic community, but rested on the ability of citizens to get a “fair hearing” for their views and “fair protection of their interests” ([100], p. 2). The Prophet’s nation entailed no need for religious unity or conversion to Islam.

Perhaps the most obvious of the civic rights that Muhammad gave to Christians was freedom of conscience. As the ruler of the first Islamic state, he did not require Christians to adopt the religion or culture of the majority nation, hence why he told the Christians of Persia: “No Christian shall be brought by force to confess Islam, and no disputes except over the better things shall be envisaged in with them” ([55], p. 20). This type of governance follows the concept of civic nation because a civic nation takes account of their fellow citizens’ interests; citizens are also not forced to adopt the cultural practices of the majority within ([98], p. 278). In the Covenants, Prophet Muhammad established civic national principles by creating a fair set of rules within which Christians had equal opportunity to make free choices (perhaps based on their cultural preference) [97]. If Muhammad had favored an “ethnic” framework for his nation, he would have tried to forcibly incorporate and assimilate Christian minorities into the dominant “Muslim culture”.

Although modern conceptions of “citizenship” are largely considered products of the Enlightenment, the Covenants demonstrate that “Islamic civilization” conceived of citizenship rights long before the aforementioned period in history. To reiterate, Prophet Muhammad defended the rights of Christians in an Islamic state by offering them security and protection in moments of danger or strife. He elaborates in the Covenant with the Christians of the World:

defend them from any damage, harm or retribution. I am behind them, protecting them from every enemy or anyone who wishes them harm . . . In virtue of this pact, [Christians] have obtained inviolable rights to enjoy our protection, to be protected from any infringement of their rights, and they are not to be disputed, rejected or ignored so that they will be bound to the Muslims both in good and bad fortune ([75], p. 50).

The language that Muhammad used in his Covenants is remarkably similar to that of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, a political document passed by France's National Constituent Assembly in 1789. Article VI of this document states that citizens of the French Republic are to be treated equally under the law. French citizens should be "eligible to all honours, places, and employments, according to their different abilities without any other distinction than that created by their virtues and talents" [101]. Like the Covenants with the Christians of the World and the Christians of Persia, Article XII of the Declaration declares that state officials are permitted to use public force if necessary "to give security to the rights of men and of citizens" [101]. The Covenants, therefore, exhibit civic principles in that "national belonging" is not predicated on race, ethnicity, or religion, but rather "rational attachment" to a political body ([92], p. 4). Membership into the Muslim nation is open equally and without any qualification or restriction. In this sense it embodies the universalism of Islam: the nation becomes a consciousness of belonging to a religious and political community that is independent of the Muslim state ([41], p. 49). While the Covenants may be interpreted as requiring only Muslims themselves—and not the actually Islamic state—to protect Christians, one can also argue that Muhammad's role as Caliph of the *ummah* and his commandments outlined in the Covenants were in fact a type of "law" alongside the *Qur'an* and *hadiths*. As the *Qur'an* (4:59) notes, "O you who believe, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority from among you . . ." ([51], p. 118). This verse gives us the basis of Islamic political authority and tells us that Muslims are to obey the commandments of the Prophet. As the leader of the *ummah*, Muhammad used his authority to dictate official state policies in relation to Christian minorities. One can, therefore, surmise that it was not simply individual Muslims who were called upon to protect Christians, but rather the entire state itself as led by the Prophet.

### 3. Conclusions: The Muslim Nation as Pluralistic and Civic-Oriented

In an attempt to provide direction for improving relations between Muslim and Christians, this article drew upon Prophet Muhammad's Covenants as establishing freedom of religion and civic rights for Christians living within the *ummah*. The Covenants of the Prophet with the Christians of his time bring to the foreground the question of how Muslim leaders govern in relation to non-Muslim communities. The Covenants, as this article highlighted, were designed "to protect and defend peaceful Christian communities, not attack them" ([18], p. 3; emphasis original). For this reason alone, the Covenants can be used in policy-making circles concerning current tensions between Muslims and Christians. Ultimately, this article shows that contemporary Islamic states that mistreat and discriminate against Christians cannot be justified in light of Prophet Muhammad's Covenants. The "re-discovery" of these documents provides an opportunity to give new birth to Islam and regenerate the essence of Islamic teachings ([17], p. 120).

The Prophet's cordial relations with Christians were not due merely to political expediency or personal aspirations, but rather they resulted from his belief that Christians should be able to freely practice their own faith in accordance with their own will. The *Qur'an* (2:256) clearly supports this statement when it declares in no uncertain terms: "There shall be no compulsion in religion" ([51], p. 62). In tandem with the *Qur'an*, *hadiths*, and the Constitution of Medina, the Covenants assure Christians that they will have the freedom to choose their spiritual destiny as citizens of the *ummah*. His inclusive position on incorporating Christians reflects this verse of the *Qur'an* (3:64): "Say: O People of the Book, come to an equitable word between us and you" ([51], p. 83). Far from being a tyrant, as depicted in modern representations [102]. Muhammad developed a democratic aptitude towards Christian

communities. The Prophet's relationships with Christians can be characterized by more than mere tolerance, but rather by compassion and the fostering of peace.

The Covenants and their common message of dignity and equality help to minimize the scope and scale of current polarization between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East and beyond. By striking harmony with Prophet Muhammad's Covenants and vision for the *ummah*, Muslims will draw upon the best principles of their Islamic tradition. The value of the Covenants lies in its moral authenticity and its virtue. The Covenants do not simply provide theoretical possibilities of Muslim and Christian coexistence; they are, on the other hand, historical realities that provide a framework on which future prospects can be envisaged for Muslim and Christian understanding. The Covenants, therefore, should be referred to and used in current inter-religious and political conflicts, especially those involving the persecution of Christians in so-called "Islamic states".

According to Prophet Muhammad, a nation consisting predominantly of Muslims does not necessarily mean that the nation is "Islamic": it can become truly "Islamic" only by virtue of consciously turning to religious pluralism and civic rights as the pillars of the *ummah*. This is part of the vision imparted to Muslims and Christians by his example.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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