

Islam and Democracy
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Islam and Democracy - incompatible?

Talking about the topic „Islam and Democracy“, means moving on dangerous grounds. Islam and democracy do not go together for many people: in the West as well as in the Islamic World.

Many Non-Muslims see the fact that there are few democratic states in the Islamic world as proof that Islam is not compatible with democracy. However they forget that e. g. Indonesia, the country with the largest number of Muslims on earth knows parties, elections and change of government by elections. The same happens in Bangla Desh and it happened in Pakistan before the military took over.

Many Muslims think Islam and democracy are not compatible, because democracy is the product of thousands of years of western history, which has nothing to do with Islam. They do not believe that democracy is a universal system, because they judge it as a system of cultural imperialism invented by the West.

There are Muslims who think democracy is the government of the majority which can do what it wants. They confront this with their ideas of an Islamic government which rules by the consensus of all Muslims. Others are against democracy, because they think only Allah s. w. t. is the sovereign and there is no sovereignty of the people. They think man does not have any self determination.

Statements and papers from Muslims and Muslim associations, which are in favour of democracy, are not widely known.

To create a common basis for Muslims and Non-Muslims to enable them to discuss „Islam and Democracy“, this paper will proceed in the following steps:

- Contemporary positions of Muslims for and against democracy will be presented and evaluated
- Passages in the Qur'an that deal with government will be discussed
- Finally it will be pointed out why Muslims and Non-Muslim both can accept democracy.

I Islam and Democracy: contemporary statements

Islam and Democracy – contra and pro

To give Muslim and Non-Muslim readers an idea about the discussion concerning democracy in the Islamic world, let me document three authors who are opposed to democracy for different reasons.

Contra: democracy as a godless system

Iranian author Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi writes in his book “Imamate / The Vicegerency of the Prophet”, Wafis, Tehran 1985, p. 33:

"Let us examine the system of Islamic leadership. Is it democratic? The best definition of democracy was given by Abraham Lincoln when he said that democracy was “the government of the people, by the people and for the people”.

But in Islam it is not the government ,of the people'; it is the 'government of Allah'. How do people govern themselves? They govern themselves by making their own laws; in Islam laws are made not by the people, but by Allah; these laws are promulgated not by the consent and decree of the people, but by the Prophet, by the command of Allah. The people have no say in legislation; they are required to follow, not to make any comments and suggestion about those laws and legislations.

‘And it is not for a believer man or believer woman to have any choice in their affair when Allah and His Apostle have decided a matter...’ (33:36)

Coming to the phrase ,by the people', let us now consider how people govern themselves. They do so by electing their own rulers. The Holy Prophet, who was the supreme executive, judicial and overall authority of the Islamic government, was not elected by the people. In fact, had the people of Mecca been allowed to exercise their choice they would have elected either 'Urwah ibn Ma'sud (of at-Ta'if) or al-Walid ibn al-Mughirah as the prophet of Allah according to the Qur'an:

‘And they say: ‘Why was not this Qur’an revealed to a man of importance in the two towns?’ (43:31)

So not only was the Supreme Head of the Islamic State appointed without the consultation of the people, but in fact it was done against their expressed wishes. The

Holy Prophet is the highest authority of Islam: he combines in his person all the functions of legislative, executive and judicial branches of the government; and he was not elected by the people.”

Rizvi comes to the conclusion:

“So Islam is neither the government of the people nor by the people. There is no legislation by the people; and the executive and judiciary is not responsible to the people.

Nor is it, for that matter a government ‘for the people’. The Islamic system, from the beginning to the end, is ‘for Allah’. Everything must be done ‘for Allah’; if it is done ‘for the people’, it is termed ‘hidden polytheism’. Whatever you do – whether it is a prayer or charity, social service or family function, obedience to parents or love of neighbour, leading in prayer or deciding a case, entering into war or concluding peace – must be done with ‘qurbatan ila’llah’, to become nearer to Allah. In Islam, everything is for Allah.

In short, the Islamic form of government is the government of Allah, by the representative of Allah, to gain the pleasure of Allah.

‘And I did not create the jinn and the human beings except that they should worship me.’ (51:56)

It is theocracy, and it is the nature and characteristic of Islamic leadership.”

Contra: democracy as illegitimate religious surrogate

In his book “Living as a Muslim”, Cordoba-Verlag, Karlsruhe 1995, pp. 263, Sayyid Abul A’la Maududi, founder of the organisation “Dschamaati Islami Pakistan” condemns democracy. His reason: democracy is a religion and, since human beings are allowed to have only one religion, Islam, democracy is a sin.

„Din, Shari’a and `Ibada

Din means obedience and submission. The *Shari’a* teaches us, how we have to obey and to submit: it is the law. *`Ibada* means worship and service.

If you accept somebody as your leader whom you owe obedience, this means accepting his „*Din*“ (religion). He will be your Lord and you will be his subject. His directions and

the rules which he gives are the law or the *Shari'a*, which you have to follow. If you live in accordance with his laws and in obedience, then you are serving him, you are conducting *'ibada*. You give him what he demands you avoid what he has forbidden and you observe his commands and rules.

Din in this perspective is equal to state and government. *Shari'a* is its law and *'ibada* means observing and fulfilling it.

As soon as you have accepted somebody as the one who gives you his law and you have submitted to him, you have joined his *Din*. If you accept Allah as your ruler, you have acknowledged his *Din*. Is this ruler either a foreign or your own people it is its *Din* which you are following. If you obey its laws you are performing *'ibada* towards it.

Can anybody follow two religions?

It is necessary to present this aspect, because then you will see that it is impossible to belong to more than one „*Din*“ at the same time. Among all the different rulers there can be only one who rules your life. From all the systems of law only one can rule your life and from all that can be worshipped only God is worth being worshipped.

You may answer that this is not the whole truth and that you can obey one lawmaker in theory while you accept some other one in reality; or that you can pray to one God and at the same time submit to another one. It might also be possible to believe in the law with your heart and use another one for every day purposes.

I repeat that there is no doubt that this can be done and that this is done. But that is *Shirk* and it is based on pure lie.“

Contra: democracy as a Western misdevelopment

Political scientist Abdul Rashid Moten writes in "Political Science – An Islamic Perspective", Macmillan Press Ltd. London 1996, p. 106:

"Democracy is the product of the overall evolution of Western civilization; its secular content is the result of centuries of conflict between the church and the state in which the latter won; its emphasis on suffrage, political freedom and voluntary association is the consequence of demands made by the rising industrial proletariat in the nineteenth century. In short, democracy is the product of the materialistic philosophy which considers man as the measure of everything whose work is weighed in absolute

material terms to the utter neglect of his spiritual aspects. Consequently, the laws in the West lay much emphasis on the individual's right that allows him to do anything he pleases. The separation of politics from religion makes morality a matter of personal discretion. Parties are formed with the expressed purpose of capturing political power and laws are formulated to provide the strong with the right to gratify their interests at the expense of the weak. The principle of justice they profess to uphold is shelved if it does not serve their interests. In the name of justice, Iraq could be demolished to save Kuwait, avowedly to protect their source of petroleum. Bosnia not being oil rich, could be sacrificed and Serbs allowed to massacre the Bosnian Muslims. Democracy is, as such, antithetical to the Islamic way of life."

Evaluation of these positions

Rizvi

The mere statement that democracy is “the government of the people, by the people and for the people” in itself does not give any indication of whether there is a spiritual dimension to this form of government or not. In the context of French Laicité, there certainly is no religious dimension. If we look at Germany the whole framework of the German democracy is based on “Christian values” and there even are sister parties: a Christian Democratic Union (Party) and a Christian Social Union. If you look at the United States of America (where this statement was originally made) you cannot separate it from the deeply religious roots of this nation the founding fathers of which declared that all men are created equal (by whom if not by God) and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. People who elect people to take care of the needs of the community can do so following God’s rules or by completely ignoring the existence of God.

Maududi

Whereas Rizvi states that democracy is a-religious, Maududi attacks democracy, because he sees in it a rival religion to God’s revelation. Here the same applies what I have said about Rizvi: Democracy can be seen as important as a religion, and certainly there are many people in the Western world, who are doing just this. But this does not necessarily have to be so. Democracy can also be viewed as a technique of a society to elect a government that takes care of their communal problems, based on the rules given to this community by God.

Moten

Being a citizen of the West I do not share Moten’s critique of democracy as a purely materialistic concept. The USA and France have started with democracy well before industrialization. As I have said, in the USA and in Germany democracy is deeply rooted in religious and spiritual roots, and it is not true that everybody can do as he pleases, because in the Western constitutions there are certain basic provisions which cannot be changed ever.

The tragedy of democracy is that those who called themselves enlightened did not spread the idea of self government around the world but instead colonialism and imperialism. Therefore it is no wonder that the victims of this development identify democracy with aggressive behaviour. However we should be careful not to judge good principles by the bad actions of their so called adherents.

For me democracy is the only acceptable form of government, and as far as human beings have defined this form of government I think the description of democracy given in the American Declaration of Independence is the best text ever written by men:

“...that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, (laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness...)”

Fortunately it appears – as I shall show with my next examples - that Muslims in the US, Germany and worldwide have accepted this idea also.

Pro: Muslims are obliged to participate in democracy

In his “*Fatwa Concerning The Participation of Muslims in the American Political Process*” Dr. Taha Jaber al-Alwani, Chairman of the “North American *Fiqh* Council” und President of the “Graduate School of Social and Islamic Sciences” writes
(www.amconline.org/newamc/imam/fatwa.shtml):

“First, it is the duty of American Muslims to participate constructively in the political process, if only to protect their rights, and give support to views and causes they favour. Their participation may also improve the quality of information disseminated about Islam. We call this participation a “duty” because we do not consider it merely a “right” that can be abandoned or a “permission” which can be ignored. It falls into the category of safeguarding of necessities and ensuring the betterment of the Muslim community in this country.

Second, every legitimate means or tool that helps achieve these goals is similarly judged. This includes:

1. The nomination of any competent American Muslim for election to any post where his or her presence may ensure either bringing benefits to American Muslims and other citizens or preventing harm to them. These posts range from those of mayor, state governor, and membership in educational and municipal councils, all the way up to membership in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.
2. Self-candidacy by an American Muslim, if the initiative for his/her nomination is not undertaken by the community, or if election laws require this form of candidacy. (Refer to the statement by Ibn Hajr on the question of becoming an Amir (or coming into power) in the ‘Introduction’.)
3. Adopting a non-Muslim candidate if he/she would be either more beneficial or less harmful to the American Muslim community and the rest of the country.
4. Providing financial support to a non-Muslim candidate. God the Almighty has permitted righteous conduct and good relations with non-Muslims in exchange for nothing. So how much more so is such support permitted if clear and tangible benefits were to result from such behaviour?
5. Obtaining American citizenship. Such citizenship emphasizes the true diversity of this country and is a necessary condition for participation in the political process.

6. Both registering to vote and participation in elections and voting are means to a goal. Hence, they are subject to the same legal rulings as their intended goal.”

Pro: Central Council of Muslim's declaration for democracy

In the „Islamic Charta“ which was published by the Central Council of Muslims in Germany in February 2002 we can find a clear declaration in favour of democracy with the following words:

„Whether German citizens or not, the Muslims represented by the Central Council (ZMD) accept the basic legal order of the Federal Republic of Germany as guaranteed by its Constitution, providing for the rule of law, division of power, and democracy, including a multi-party system, universal suffrage and eligibility, and freedom of religion...“

(Islamic Charta, Fundamental Declaration of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD) on the relationship between Muslims, their State and their Society, Berlin, February 2002)

Pro: Cairo Declaration demands democracy in the Islamic world

It is most important of all that Muslim define the rules how they can govern themselves, especially how to get rid of governments, which brake laws, and thus become dictatorships or which do not follow the consensus of the governed any longer. To kill the caliph cannot be the only solution. In this aspect, Muslims can indeed learn something from the West, by rethinking how they want to govern themselves. An important point concerning this question was made in the Cairo Recommendations, which were passed in the form of a resolution in May 2003 by the participants of the conference „The Future of Islamic Nation“ in Cairo, which was organised by the “Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs”:

“Recommendations

...Third: The Political Theme

...

3. The Islamic Shura system incorporates the most appropriate forms of democracy. Hence the Conference calls upon Islamic countries to adhere to true democratic norms, particularly: impartial elections, to promote the multi-party system and eliminate any obstacles before it, and to provide a suitable environment for rotation of power.

(Additionally accepted by the plenary but not yet included into the official text: Independence of judiciary system and securing human rights.)“ Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Al-Awqaf, Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs. Conference: The Future of Islamic Nation, 9–12. May 2003 G

After these contemporary statements let us examine what is said in the Qur'an about how human beings should take care of their affairs on earth.

II Islam and Democracy: Qur'anic principles

The basic principles: khalifa and shura

If we deal with the question how Muslim should organise their communal affairs on earth we come across the fact, that in the revelation there are only few indications how this should be done. The most important terms concerning these matters are *Khalifa* and *Shura*.

Man as khalifa

Concerning the position of man on earth the term „khalifa“ is of vital importance. Political scientist Abdulrahman Abdulkadir Kurdi writes in his book “The Islamic State / A Study based on the Holy Constitution”, Mansell Publishing Ltd, London, 1984, p. 23:

„Khalifa was used twice in the Holy Qur'an (2:39; 38:26) to describe both the Prophet Adam and the Prophet David. In both verses the term ‚khalifa‘ denotes the one responsible for keeping order and carrying out the laws. Both Prophets Adam and David were, of course, implementing the law of God

Traditionally khalifa is translated into English by both Muslim and non-Muslim writers as an equivalent of the term ‘vice-gerent’. Actually there is no relation between the two terms, especially considering that most writers assume that ‘vice-gerent’ refers to one holding power through the delegation of God (Rosenthal, 1962, pp. 21-60). Usually writers use khilafa to mean God’s deputy on earth. However, the original root of the term is the verb khalafa, which generally means in both its common Arabic usage and lexical meaning, ‘coming after the other, i. e., ‘to succeed’.” (Kurdi, p. 23)

„When our Lord said to the angels: ‘I am placing on the earth one that shall rule as My deputy,’ they replied: ‘Will You put there one that will do evil and shed blood, when we have for so long sung Your praises and sanctified Your name?’ He said: ‘I know what you know not.’“ (2:30)

„We said: ‘David! We have made you master in the land. Rule with justice among men and do not yield to lust, lest it turn you away from God’s path. Because they forget the Day of Reckoning, those that stray from God’s path shall be sternly punished.’“ (38:26)

How was this principle implemented during the history of the Islamic world? First of all we know that the Prophet Muhammad s.a.s. was the last of all prophets, the seal of the prophets. After his death human beings came to the conclusion – at least as far as the majority of the Muslims, the Sunnites are concerned – that there were no religious directions on how a successor should be appointed and also that there was no authorised predetermined model of government. The early Muslims helped themselves by using different methods for the elections of the first four caliphs (called the rightly guided caliphs), who are considered to be models for government today. And from these different modalities it is assumed that there are different legitimate ways of determining the head of government. As for the question, who may be qualified for this task, a saying of the Prophet s.a.s. may give an indication:

„Listen and obey your leader, even if he is Abyssinian with a head like a raisin.“ (Buhari, Hadith Nr. 7142 - 93/4)

In the course of Islamic history we find many caliphs, sometimes more than one at the same time, and many other titles for rulers until the caliphate was officially ended in 1924 by decree of Atatürk.

The principle of shura

Know body wants to prove that Islam invented democracy; however people have to recognise that the Qur'an clearly demands that Muslim have to have consultations before they take decisions. These consultations are called shura in the Qur'an:

„...who obey their Lord, attend to their prayers, and conduct their affairs by mutual consent: who bestow in alms part of what We have given them and, when oppressed, seek to redress their wrongs.“ (42:38)

„...Take counsel with them in the conduct of affairs.“ (3:159)

Today some Muslims want to re-establish the caliphate, thinking at the same time that this excludes democracy. But if you take into consideration that – caliphate or not – the ruling principle of Islamic government is shura, there is no contradiction between caliphate and a democratic way of decision making. The only question that remains to be solved then is how you call it: “Caliphate”, „Demokratiyya” or “Schurakratiyya“ see also: Murad Hofmann, Der Islam im 3. Jahrtausend. Eine Religion im Aufbruch, Hugendubel, Kreuzlingen 2000, pp.107. and: John L. Esposito/John O. Voll, Islam and Democracy, Oxford University Press, New York/Oxford 1996

Forms of government in the Qur'an

The Qur'an as a religious revelation contains a comprehensive but not a totalitarian system of rules for the life on earth. But the Qur'an also is a history book, which according to author Abdulrahman Kurdi shows and evaluates forms of governments. Kurdi states that about 80% of the content of the Qur'an deals with states and forms of government, which existed before the revelation. According to Kurdi the systems of monarchy, junta and tyranny are described in the Qur'an and evaluated on the basis of how much the rulers followed God's guidance:

The monarchical system - mulk

„The monarchical system is illustrated in the Islamic Holy Constitution in many diverse styles and patterns. The three most outstanding examples are the kingdoms of Talut (Saul), Dawud (David), and Sulayman (Solomon)...The kingdoms of the Prophet David and of his son, The Prophet Solomon, appear at length in the Islamic Holy Constitution. Many verses describe the kingdoms and their appropriate rulers in terms of the justice and equality which distinguished their kingdoms by God's blessing. Both kings are described as thankful and humble.“ (Kurdi, pp. 17)

The junta system - mala

As examples for the junta (mala) Kurdi mentions the Prophets Noah and Shu'ayb. Junta is understood as the government of a mighty council, which organises the affairs of the city and the citizens.

„According to the Islamic Holy Constitution, the mala, or junta usually consisted of the men who defended the city against outside attack and also kept order within. This system was common in the ancient world. Prior to Islam, Makkah was ruled by a council representing the clans of a large tribe. This council usually enforced the law, defended and governed the city. Normally every citizen abided its decisions. However, this type of ruling class served its own interests first and the general welfare second.“ (Kurdi, p.20)

The tyranny system - taghut

„Two tyrannies described in the Islamic Holy Constitution exemplify systems based on absolute dictatorship that were devoid of any justice and/or equality. The systems were modelled on the

pattern of a kingdom, but their leaders, gradually corrupted by power, assumed the status of gods. The first example is Al-Namrud ibn Kan'an (Nimrod), a king at the time of Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham)...The second example is that of the Pharaoh in Egypt who was a king at the time of the Prophet Moses...These two examples represent not merely ordinary powerful kings, but two dictators so intoxicated by an almost absolute power that they were incited to proclaim themselves gods. Consequently, they subdued their nations to carryout their will by force.” (Kurdi, p. 22)

Summary and conclusion

It is time now to summarize what we have found written in the Qur'an: We have seen “that the term 'khalifa' denotes the one responsible for keeping order and carrying out laws.” (Kurdi). We have learnt that Muslims have to deliberate (conduct shura) before they decide. And we can take from the stories about different kinds of rulers that a junta and a tyranny are not systems accepted by God and that a monarchy with a just ruler may be one acceptable way of government. Further details like different ways of electing a ruler can be taken from the history of the first four caliphs. – and that's about it! The only conclusion based on these findings can be: that the Qur'an does not prescribe one particular form of government, but allows Muslims the freedom to choose for themselves.

Participation of women

In today's discussion about the religion of Islam the question of Islam and women is of great importance. As far as participation in the process of shura is concerned, there are many examples in the history of the Islamic world, that women were actively participating in the decision making process.

In the early times of Islamic government, men and women have followed the rule of shura, because the Qur'an limits the command of shura not to one single sex, i. e. it does not exclude women. Today is the time that Muslims should return to this tradition and start applying it again! (For the following examples I would like to extend my thanks to Amir Zaidan, The "founding father" of the Islamic Religions Community in the State (Land) of Hesse in the Federal Republic of Germany.)

Here are some examples of the decision making process of the early history of the Islamic world: Shortly before hijra Prophet Muhammad s.a.s. entered the second *Bai'a of al-'Aqaba* with the Muslims from Medina. The word *Bai'a* means agreement in the form of a pledge of loyalty. A *Bai'a* for the khalifa e.g. means his institution into his office. The *Bai'a of al-'Aqaba* was an agreement, in which the Muslims from al Madina offered their unrestricted support for the establishment of an Islamic community and a government based on the principles of Islam. There were 73 men and two women, *Nusaiba bint Ka'b* und *Asma bint 'Amru*. It is important to understand that this meant breaking existing traditions, because among the Arabs women did not participate in political deliberations and decision making.

After his arrival in Madina the Prophet s.a.s. gathered all Muslim women in one house and entered into a *Bai'a* with them. After the conquest of Makkah all Muslim women have entered the *Bai'a* with the Prophet s.a.s., as is written in the Qur'an:

„Prophet, if believing women come to you and pledge themselves to serve no other deity besides God, to commit neither theft, nor adultery, nor child-murder, to utter no monstrous falsehoods of their own invention, and to disobey you in nothing reasonable, accept their allegiance and implore God to forgive them. God is forgiving and merciful.“ (60:12)

Before *'Umar ibn al-Khattab* died he proposed a six Sahabi as his successors amongst whom the Muslims should choose the next khalifa. After short negotiations four of the six resigned from the election and only *'Uthman ibn 'Affan* and *'Ali ibn Abi Talib* remained. In order to come to a final decision the Sahabi *'Abdulrahman Ibn 'Auf* was asked to ask to Muslims about their

opinion. In due course *Ibn 'Auf* interviewed all Muslims, men and women without any exception for their opinion. They all voted for *'Uthman*. Thus it is clear that women in the history of the Islamic world have had a vote right from the beginning.

Nobody should be astonished about this equal treatment, because the early Muslims practised the egalitarian message of Islam as it is described in the following text by the English historian Norman Davies in „Europe - A History“, Pimlico, Random House, London 1997, p. 252:

„Islam, meaning ‚submission‘, was a universal religion from the start. Although it has always clung to Arabic as the sacred language of the Koran, it appeals to all nations, to all classes, and to both sexes. One of the most basic precepts is that all Muslims are brothers and sisters. In his lifetime Muhammad denounced the economic privileges of the ruling élite, the subordination of women, and the ‚blood laws‘ of the semitic tribes. His call for social, economic, and political equality threatened the foundations of traditional societies. His insistence on the rights of the oppressed and of women, and on the duty of charity and compassion, spelled liberation for the masses. Here was a revolutionary creed, whose almost instantaneous military power derived from the fervent devotion of the faithful. It enjoined that soldiers were the equals of their generals, subjects of their rulers, wives of their husbands.“

Today, Muslims have different opinions about the role women should play in politics. Olivier Roy describes the following attitudes in “The Failure of Political Islam”, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 83:

„The most obvious difference between „Islamists“ and „Neo-Fundamentalist“ can be found with respect to their attitude towards women. ... The FIS is against the right of women to work, a right that went without saying for Khomeini. This shows their conservatism. Many foreign women, doctors or journalists, which had originally been accepted by the Afghan and Iranian Islamists, have in the meantime become *personae non gratae*. The Neo-Fundamentalists use political pressure to limit the right to vote for women.... It is significant that in 1990 an agreement between the Afghan Shiite Mujahidin, who were supported by Iran and the Sunnis, which were supported by Saudi Arabia, failed, among other reasons because of the question of women: the Shiites demanded the right of women to vote, the Sunnis refused it.

The field of personal status (women, family, divorce) becomes a main area of neo-fundamentalist demands, which want to enforce sharia literally and brutally without the social and educational programs favoured by Iranian und Egyptian Islamists.“

III Democracy as a global system of government

Following the lines of traditional Islamic discourse the temptation was great to use an alternative title for this chapter, such as: "Democracy as a System of Government for the Islamic and the Western World". However since I agree with the President of the North American Fiqh Council, Taha Jaber Al Alwani, that the division of the world into a dar ul Islam and a dar ul Harb is not only non-qur'anic, but also outdated, I have chosen the title as written above.

In these final chapter I would like to discuss the following points:

- that Muslims and Non-Muslims both have to take care of their individual and communal affairs on earth by themselves
- that Muslims and Non-Muslims can govern themselves according to the same methods
- that no Muslim can deny responsibility towards his fellow Muslims by claiming that he is fulfilling the will of Allah and
- that Muslims and Non-Muslims are both responsible before God and their fellow citizens.

The same starting points for Muslims and Non-Muslims

Muslims and Non-Muslims are living in the same situation: They must make decisions concerning their private lives and their communities. Muslims and Christians follow rules given to them by God and obey regulations, which have been issued by the representatives of the people, governments, in areas which God has left open for human beings to decide.

Muslims (as well as Non-Muslims) may decide to the best of their knowledge, but they cannot claim that they are fulfilling the will of God on earth and that they therefore are only responsible to God and not to their fellow citizens. Muslims act in a state of uncertainty, because in the Qur'an it is said:

„But God leaves in error whom He will and guides whom he pleases.” (14:4)

or in the translation by German Muslim Ahmad von Denffer: „and Allah lets go astray, whom He chooses to and He guides rightly whom He chooses to.”

In this sense, Muslims and Non-Muslims live in the same situation, and the method of democracy gives to both of them the opportunity in a modern mass society that all people can participate in taking decisions.

No big differences

We have seen that the arguments of those who think Islam and democracy are not compatible cannot be upheld. We have also seen that major groups, initiatives and the Fiqh Council of North America have issued statements endorsing democracy. Last not least there are no passages in the Qur'an that forbid democratic engagement.

In the Western societies we find constitutional monarchies, presidential democracies, democracies with an elected chancellor plus a president, one and two chamber systems. All these forms can be institutionalised in the Islamic world also – and in many countries they already function. Even if some Muslims want to call their political system a caliphate they still will have to find institutions in order to channel shura and control the khalifa. And if the only differences is in the names: Muslims may call their institution of decision making majlis and Non-Muslims may call it parliament – then there really is no big difference.

We also do not only know that different electoral systems are used in the Western world. We know that from the start during the phase of the four righteous caliphs different methods have been used in the Islamic world. There is no reason why this diversity could not be the case today.

Democracy – based on the principle of responsibility

It is a fact that there are many people in the Western world who think democracy is only possible in conjunction with the acceptance of human rights. It is also a fact that there are Muslims who do not feel at home with the ideas of human rights for religious reasons: they think God has given human beings duties rather than rights. On the other hand Muslims all over world have accepted human rights in many statements.

I think it is not very productive to spend much time arguing whether or whether not the acceptance of human rights is a prerequisite for being able to accept democracy or for being able to act as a democrat. We have to remember that the idea of democracy dates back to a time where nobody ever heard of human rights: the early days of Greece. Of course, there democracy was limited to the Greek men only, it was not extended to women and slaves. (In a way it resembles the situation we have today e. g. in Kuwait, where also only the male Kuwaitis

are eligible to participate in the process of shura in the majlis.) But what is important, the basic principle was applied then as it is today.

For me this basic principle of democracy – as well as Islam - is the personal responsibility of the individual for whatever he or she does. This applies to personal affairs as well as to affairs of the community if somebody is acting on behalf of others and most important of all it applies in religion where every human being has to face God on the Day of Judgement.

'Every man is a pledge for that which he hath earned' (52:21)

'That no laden one shall bear another's load. And that man hath only that for which he maketh an effort, and that his effort will be seen, and afterwards he will be repaid fore it with fullest payment.' (53:38-41)

For me those two surahs outline the principles of my life on earth as a Muslim. And as a Muslim who is a citizen of the Federal Republic of Germany I can feel at home in a state, the constitution of which begins with the following words: "In responsibility before God and human beings..."