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The culture of coexistence in Muslim societies: Historical rooting and principles for rebuilding

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the idea of a "culture of coexistence" in medieval Muslim societies and asks what its historical record implies for the way religious texts and juristic opinions are read today. It first clarifies the concept of coexistence (taʿāyush) and distinguishes it from tolerance, peace, and the legal status of protected non-Muslim communities (ahl al-dhimma). It then applies an analytical-inductive, qualitative method to a purposive selection of sources: the Prophetic biography (sīra), historical and travel writing, collections of legal cases (nawāzil) and judicial rulings (aqḍiya), and market-inspection (ḥisba) treatises, drawn from Arabia, Iraq, al-Andalus, and the Maghrib between the seventh and fifteenth centuries CE. The evidence points to recurrent practices of religious freedom and mutual recognition (emotional, legal, and social) in everyday life. These practices existed alongside legal restrictions and juristic objections, which the study treats as part of the same record rather than as exceptions to be set aside. The study concludes that coexistence is best described as a historically situated and contested culture, not a uniform reality, and proposes that its contemporary reconstruction requires a consistent contextual method for reading both foundational texts and juristic opinions. It recommends critical studies of the juristic heritage on relations with religious others and a religious discourse informed by historical experience. The study does not analyse present-day conditions; that task is left to future research.

KEYWORDS: coexistence, culture of coexistence, religious pluralism, recognition, religious freedom, Dhimma, juristic contextualization, social cohesion

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and problem

Coexistence (*taʿāyush*) and culture (*thaqāfa*) are among the most frequently used terms in contemporary discussions of religious and cultural plurality, and it may reasonably be asked whether anything remains to be said about them. This article does not claim novelty for the topic. Its contribution lies in the way the topic is approached. It treats the claim that Muslim societies developed a "culture of coexistence" as a proposition to be tested against documentary evidence, and it links the outcome of that test to a methodological question: how should religious texts and juristic opinions on relations with religious others be read today?

Questions of coexistence among religious and cultural groups figure prominently in debates within Muslim-majority and plural societies. Contemporary Arabic-language scholarship, for example, has examined the foundations and conditions of religious coexistence through the thought of Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn ʿĀshūr (Boutera & Khalifi, 2021). At the international level, UNESCO's Declaration of Principles on Tolerance (1995, art. 1) articulates a related but distinct normative framework. These sources document contemporary engagement with the subject; they do not support a claim that most problems of humanity originate in coexistence or culture.

Two tendencies motivate the study. The first is a celebratory narrative of historical tolerance, which tends to overlook legal inequality and episodes of conflict. The second is a restrictive reading, sometimes found in contemporary religious discourse, which relies on isolated texts or juristic opinions without regard for the circumstances in which they arose. Between these positions lies the question of how Muslims and non-Muslims actually lived together, and how jurists and other writers responded to that life. The literature reviewed in Section 2 addresses parts of this question. In that literature, studies of social practice and studies of the interpretation of texts are, for the most part, conducted separately. This article attempts to bring them into one analysis.

1.2 Research questions and working hypothesis

The study is organised around four questions:

1. How can coexistence be defined, and how does it differ from tolerance, peace, and the legal status of *dhimma*?
2. What do early and medieval sources reveal about coexistence as a social practice in Muslim societies, and which values underlie it?
3. How do juristic texts that restrict the visibility or social participation of non-Muslims relate to those practices?
4. What methodological principles should guide the contemporary reading of religious texts and juristic opinions on this subject?

The working hypothesis is that sources of several genres attest to recurrent, socially embedded practices of coexistence founded on the values of freedom and recognition, that these practices existed alongside a hierarchical legal framework and juristic objection, and that the tension between the two is best addressed through a consistent contextual method. The hypothesis is tested in Sections 5 and 6 against explicit criteria set out in Section 4.6.

1.3 Contribution, scope, and structure

The study makes four contributions: it clarifies the concept of coexistence and separates it from related notions; it proposes criteria for deciding when a pattern of practice may be called a "culture"; it assembles evidence from several source genres and evaluates it, including evidence that complicates the thesis; and it proposes methodological principles, with stated criteria, for reading foundational texts and juristic opinions.

The scope is limited in three ways. The evidence comes from Arabia, Iraq, al-Andalus, and the Maghrib, and spans roughly the seventh to the fifteenth centuries CE. Nothing is claimed here for the Mamluk, Ottoman, Persianate, South Asian, Southeast Asian, or African contexts, nor for the period after the fifteenth century. Second, the study does not analyse contemporary conditions; its references to "rebuilding" concern the methodological principles that such work would require. Third, the selection of sources is illustrative and not exhaustive (Section 3).

Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 describes the method and sources. Section 4 develops the conceptual framework. Section 5 presents the evidence and its limits. Section 6 evaluates the evidence against the criteria. Section 7 presents the findings, the methodological principles, the recommendations, and the limitations.

2. Literature Review

**Coexistence and* convivencia. *The notion of a lived coexistence of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the medieval Mediterranean is associated above all with the Spanish term* convivencia*, popularised by Castro (1948). Menocal (2002) presented medieval Iberia as a model of interfaith creativity, and this picture has been contested by authors who stress legal inequality and violence (Fernández-Morera, 2016). Cohen (1994) argued, with respect to the Jews of the Islamic world, that their experience was neither an interfaith utopia nor an unbroken history of persecution, and Safran (2013) examined how boundaries between religious communities in al-Andalus were defined and negotiated. In Arabic scholarship, al-Kaʿbī (2014) studied peaceful coexistence among the revealed religions in al-Andalus from the conquest to the end of the* ṭawāʾif* states, and al-Mālikī (2015) offers a sociological treatment of culture on which the present study draws for its definition of the term.

The legal status of non-Muslims. The classical framework of *dhimma* has been studied extensively, including the tradition of the Covenant of ʿUmar (Tritton, 1930), the legal status of non-Muslims (Fattal, 1958), the early treaties and the transition "from surrender to coexistence" (Levy-Rubin, 2011), the relation between tolerance and coercion (Friedmann, 2003), and the place of *dhimmīs* in the juristic discourse of governance (Emon, 2012). These studies show that coexistence in Muslim societies usually took place within a hierarchical legal order, a point that any claim about a "culture of coexistence" must address.

The Medinan documents. The agreements of the Prophet with the groups of Yathrib, usually called the Constitution of Medina, have been analysed as a composite of several agreements (Serjeant, 1978) and as a single early legal document (Lecker, 2004). The disagreement concerns dating and unity. It affects how far the document can bear the weight placed on it in arguments about coexistence.

Normative and hermeneutical approaches. Several authors argue from within the Islamic tradition that pluralism and tolerance have textual and ethical roots (Sachedina, 2001; Abou El Fadl, 2002). Ibn Bayyah (2017) approaches the question through the grounding of the jurisprudence of reality (*fiqh al-wāqiʿ*) and the need to read texts in light of their contexts and purposes.

Positioning. The works above address either the historical record or the interpretive question, and they differ on whether the record supports the idea of a culture of coexistence. Arabic-language research has also examined the foundations and limits of religious coexistence through the thought of Ibn ʿĀshūr (Boutera & Khalifi, 2021). The present study contributes a framework that joins historical social practice to the interpretation of religious texts and juristic opinions. It defines criteria for a "culture", tests them against evidence drawn from several genres, treats restrictions and objections as part of the evidence, and derives from the result a set of methodological principles. The claim that these two strands of scholarship have generally been conducted separately is a provisional assessment of the literature reviewed here, not the result of a systematic bibliometric survey; it should be retained only if the authors confirm that it accurately represents their reading.

3. Methodology and Sources

Design. The study is qualitative and historical-analytical. It is analytical in that sources are read for what they report and what they imply about social practice and legal reasoning, and inductive in that general patterns are drawn from specific cases. It does not attempt a statistical survey.

Corpus. The sources fall into five categories: (1) the Prophetic biography (*sīra*) and related reports; (2) documents and covenants preserved in later compilations; (3) historical and travel literature; (4) collections of legal cases and rulings (*nawāzil*, *aqḍiya*); and (5) *ḥisba* treatises and works on religious innovations (*ḥawādith wa-bidaʿ*), together with biographical dictionaries and etiquette literature.

Selection. Sources were selected purposively. A source was included when it (i) describes or documents interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims in everyday life, in legal proceedings, in markets, or on shared occasions; (ii) can be attributed to an identifiable author, period, and place; and (iii) is available in an edited edition. The selection is illustrative. A systematic survey of the *nawāzil* and *ḥisba* literature lies beyond the scope

of this article, so statements about frequency are made with caution and are indicative only.

Use of juristic texts. Juristic and quasi-juristic texts are used in two distinct ways. Used *descriptively*, they are witnesses to social practice: the questions put to jurists, the cases brought to judges, and the practices that muftis and market inspectors report. Used *normatively*, they are expressions of juristic opinion bound to their own circumstances. The study uses them for the first purpose, and where it discusses their normative content it applies the same contextual standard to opinions that favour coexistence and to those that restrict it (Section 7.2).

Counter-evidence. Evidence that cuts against the thesis, including persecution, legal restrictions, and juristic objections, is treated in its own section (5.4) and is included in the evaluation of Section 6.

Source criticism. Where the authenticity or transmission of a report or document is debated, this is noted. Reports are not treated as established merely because they appear in classical sources, and no conclusion rests on a single report.

Limitations. The evidence is confined to the regions and periods named in Section 1.3. Translations from Arabic are the authors' own unless otherwise indicated.

4. Conceptual Framework: Coexistence

4.1 Meaning of the term

Some definitions may seem contrived where the concepts are already clear, since there is little benefit in dwelling on outward forms once the meanings are known (al-Bīrūnī, 1958, p. 136). There are, however, concepts that become more ambiguous the more the terms denoting them are used. "Coexistence" is one of these.

Taʿāyush is a reciprocal verbal noun of the form *tafāʿul*, derived from *ʿaysh*, which means life and survival, and from which comes *maʿīsha*, that by which life is sustained (Ibn Fāris, 1979, entry "ʿaysh"). Because the form *tafāʿul* denotes participation between two or more parties (al-Ḥamlāwī, n.d., p. 81), the term means sharing in living, or living together. This linguistic meaning has influenced some contemporary dictionaries. The *Diccionario enciclopédico español* defines coexistence as living in the company of another or others, and gives married life as its example (*Diccionario enciclopédico español*, 1996).

In contemporary usage, however, the term is associated mainly with religious and doctrinal affiliation and is rarely separated from neighbouring concepts such as mutual acquaintance, tolerance, mutual understanding, peace, cooperation, pluralism, and difference. It therefore exceeds the simple sense of sharing a livelihood. These related concepts point to complex interactive relations that Durkheim's notion of collective consciousness helps to frame. For Durkheim, collective consciousness denotes the beliefs and sentiments shared by the members of a society, on which social cohesion depends (Durkheim, 1893). Applied to coexistence, the notion raises a specific question: which shared moral reference points can hold together people who differ in belief without erasing the difference? The values of freedom and recognition examined in Section 5 are offered as candidate answers.

A definition suited to the contemporary context should reflect the purpose of the concept, namely social integration and the building of cohesive societies that treat difference as a source of diversity. One such definition describes coexistence as a mutual interaction between two parties that differ in customs, belief, or religion, occurring within societies of diverse religions and cultures whose members come from different cultural, religious, or ethnic origins (al-Kaʿbī, 2014, p. 36).

4.2 Two conditions of coexistence

On this understanding, coexistence depends on two conditions, proposed here as an analytical framework.

The condition of will. The parties that differ in religion and belief act with sincere intention, and converge in working for security, peace, and the wellbeing of all. Intentions cannot be observed directly in historical sources. The study therefore treats will through observable proxies: voluntary, reciprocated, and repeated acts by members of different communities, such as mutual assistance, shared participation in occasions, and recourse by non-Muslims to Muslim courts and jurists.

The condition of recognition. Each party accepts the fact of religious plurality and recognises the other party's right to hold and practise a different belief, without either side being required to give up its own claim to truth.

Both conditions have an ethical basis that may be defended on grounds shared across traditions. The

condition of will draws support from the benevolent disposition of human nature (*fiṭra*), which Rousseau expressed in the principle of compassion or pity (*taḥannun*) as the wellspring of social virtues, since it "helps preserve the common survival of the entire human species" (Rousseau, 2009, p. 105). The condition of recognition draws support from appeal to reason, which Descartes described as the most equitably distributed of human faculties (Descartes, 1637, Part 1), and from Bayle's argument that, in a state of plurality, partiality toward a single religion is contrary to public peace (Bayle, 1737, p. 696). These philosophical references are offered as support for the ethical plausibility of the two conditions. They are not offered as evidence of historical practice, which is examined in Section 5.

*4.3 Coexistence, tolerance, peace, and *dhimma**

Coexistence is related to several other notions but is not identical with any of them. *Tolerance* is a moral attitude: it requires respect for another's right to believe and to practise what that belief requires, and so provides the intellectual framework that makes coexistence possible. *Peace* is the absence of violent conflict. It is a favourable condition for coexistence, but the two are not synonymous. Living together has historically occurred in the midst of recurring conflict, and the Medinan and Andalusi material examined below belongs to periods marked by it. *Dhimma* is a legal framework under which certain non-Muslim communities received protection in return for obligations, within an order that was hierarchical and not egalitarian. Much of the coexistence described in this article took place within that framework.

Two consequences follow. Coexistence, as used here, does not mean equality or pluralism in the modern sense. And an argument for a culture of coexistence must address, and not bypass, the legal inequalities of the *dhimma* regime (Section 5.4).

UNESCO's Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, proclaimed on 16 November 1995, defines tolerance as "respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human" (art. 1.1). The Declaration addresses tolerance, not taʿāyush or coexistence as such. It is therefore cited here only to clarify a related international normative concept, not as an authoritative definition of coexistence (UNESCO, 1995, art. 1.1; see also art. 1.4).

4.4 Characteristics of the concept

Three characteristics are relevant to the argument.

- **It is an ethical concept**, grounded in ethical dispositions that reason endorses.
- **It answers a social necessity.** Wherever diversity of belief exists, some way of managing shared life is required, and for that reason coexistence is not merely an occasional measure invoked when disputes arise. It is important to distinguish between the human fact of diversity, which is a given, and the *culture* that manages it, which is historically produced and can strengthen, weaken, or be neglected. This distinction explains why a culture of coexistence can be a matter of rebuilding even though diversity is constant.
- **It is oriented to benefit (*maṣlaḥa*).** It contributes to managing the theoretical and practical problems posed by religious plurality, opens paths to dialogue, and supports cooperation on commonalities alongside tolerance of differences.

4.5 Premodern vocabulary

Taʿāyush is a modern technical term, and the study does not claim that premodern authors theorised it under that name. It is used here as an analytical category that groups practices described in the sources by other terms. Chief among these are *ʿahd* (covenant), *amān* (safe-conduct), *dhimma* (protection), *jiwār* and *ḥusn al-jiwār* (neighbourly protection and good neighbourliness), *ṣulḥ* (settlement), and *muʿāmala* (dealings). Qurʾānic vocabulary also bears on the theme, including *taʿāruf*, mutual acquaintance among peoples (Qurʾān 49:13); *birr* and *qisṭ*, kindness and just dealing toward those who have not fought Muslims on account of religion (Qurʾān 60:8); and the language of non-compulsion in religion (Qurʾān 2:256). These terms are treated here as the conceptual setting of the practices examined in Section 5. A fuller lexical study is a task for further research.

4.6 From coexistence to culture: criteria

The linguistic senses of *thaqāfa* include sagacity, understanding, discipline, skill, mastery, competence, and assessment (al-Azharī, 2001, p. 81; al-Fārābī, 2003, p. 275; Ibn Fāris, 1979, p. 382; al-Zamakhsharī, 1998, p. 110). In the modern technical sense used by anthropologists and sociologists, culture denotes everything that defines the identity of a society and expresses its choices and convictions, in patterns of social behaviour and means of expression (al-Mālikī, 2015, p. 42). A "culture of coexistence" is accordingly the set of shared patterns of behaviour, expression, and value through which a society handled religious plurality.

The study does not adopt this as an unexamined premise. To distinguish a culture from isolated episodes, the following criteria are applied in Section 6:

1. **Recurrence across genres:** the practice is attested in sources of different kinds, not only in one.
2. **Breadth of participation:** it involves different social strata, including ordinary people as well as elites.
3. **Endorsement or tolerance by authorities:** judges, jurists, or rulers accepted it, or at least did not suppress it.
4. **Persistence across time and place:** it is attested in more than one period and region.

These criteria are modest. They allow a conclusion that a culture of coexistence existed in the places and periods studied, without implying that it was universal, uncontested, or egalitarian.

5. Evidence of Rooting

This section presents evidence from the sources in roughly chronological order. Each category of evidence is accompanied by its limits.

5.1 Religious plurality before Islam

Religious plurality was a familiar matter among the Arabs before Islam. Notable figures held distinct religious convictions and practised the rites these required. They included the ḥunafā', among them Zayd ibn ʿAmr ibn Nufayl, of whom the Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said that he would come on the Day of Resurrection as a nation unto himself (al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, n.d., Ḥadīth no. 4956; graded ṣaḥīḥ by al-Ḥākim with al-Dhahabī concurring). Others named in the earlier draft include Waraqa ibn Nawfal, Quss ibn Sāʿida al-Iyādī, Suḥna ibn Khalaf al-Jurhumī, al-Mutalammis ibn Umayya al-Kinānī, and ʿAbd al-Ṭābikha ibn Thaʿlab. The identification and religious affiliation of each figure require individual source verification; the authors should cite the earliest traceable biographical or historical reports for each name and remove any figure for whom adequate evidence cannot be supplied. For Zayd and the associated pre-Islamic monotheist reports, see Ibn Hishām as translated by Guillaume (1955, pp. 99–103), subject to checking against the Arabic edition used.

The evidence supports a more limited conclusion than the claim that no one was ever subjected to coercion. Ibn Isḥāq reports that al-Khaṭṭāb ibn Nufayl harassed Zayd and had him barred from Mecca; the episode is available in the English translation of Ibn Isḥāq's Sīra by Guillaume (1955, pp. 102–103), and should be checked against the Arabic edition selected for this article. The persecution of the Christians of Najrān under the Ḥimyarite king Dhū Nuwās in the early sixth century shows that religious difference could provoke violence. What the sources indicate is that plurality was familiar and, in many reported cases, accommodated within kinship, marriage, neighbourhood, and alliance. It was not uniformly free of coercion.

5.2 The Prophetic period

Moral solidarity across belief. The sources report several episodes in which people of a different belief acted on moral obligations toward Muslims. Abū Ṭālib defended his nephew Muḥammad ﷺ although he remained to the end attached to the religion of his forefathers. Ḥakīm ibn Ḥizām and Hishām ibn ʿAmr secretly sent food to the Banū Hāshim and Banū al-Muṭṭalib during their years of confinement in the mountain pass (al-Shiʿb), and Hishām then worked to annul the document that imposed it, although neither man had yet embraced Islam. On his return from Ṭā'if, after the ill-treatment he had received from Thaqīf, the Prophet ﷺ entered the protection (jiwār) of al-Muṭʿim ibn ʿAdī, who guaranteed his safety with his sons until he had circumambulated the Kaaba and entered his home. These reports are commonly located in the Meccan-period narrative of Ibn Isḥāq as transmitted by Ibn Hishām; however, exact volume and page references must be supplied from the specific

Arabic edition used by the authors. Do not retain a page citation from a different edition without checking it. These episodes operate within Arabian conventions of kinship and protection, and coexist with accounts of hostility, including the boycott and the events at Ṭā'if. They show that difference of belief did not cancel obligations of protection and decency in that society. They do not by themselves show an institutional culture of coexistence.

Common ground. The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have commended the pact of Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl, concluded in the house of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Judʿān to uphold justice, renounce oppression, and show mutual solidarity in livelihood. He is reported to have said:

> "I witnessed in the house of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Judʿān a covenant I would not exchange for the finest red camels; and were I to be invited to it now, in Islam, I would respond" (Ibn Hishām, 1995, p. 181).

The pact was concluded among Meccan clans before Islam. Its relevance is that the Prophet ﷺ endorsed an agreement not made by Muslims, on the basis of the justice it served.

The Prophet's direction of the earliest Muslims to Abyssinia is also relevant. He is reported to have said to them:

> "Were you to go forth to the land of Abyssinia, you would find a king under whom no one is wronged; it is a land of truthfulness, until God grants you relief from what you are suffering" (Ibn Kathīr, 1976, Vol. 2, p. 4).

The report shows that security and justice were the grounds of the direction. It is an inference, and not a statement in the report, that the Prophet ﷺ regarded the shared character of revealed religions as a basis for cooperation. The inference is plausible, but it should be held as an interpretation. The emigration itself also reflects the persecution that Muslims suffered in Mecca.

The community of Medina. After the Hijra the Prophet ﷺ found in Medina a society of several communities, including Jewish clans. The document known as the Constitution of Medina is preserved in the Sīra of Ibn Isḥāq as transmitted by Ibn Hishām and in other compilations. Its clauses should be cited by clause number as well as by the exact edition and page used. Among the relevant provisions are the statement that the Jews of Banū ʿAwf are a community (umma) with the believers and that the Jews have their religion while the Muslims have theirs (Ibn Isḥāq/Ibn Hishām, clause commonly numbered 25 or 28 depending on the edition and numbering; see Lecker, 2004, for a critical text and discussion). The document also contains provisions concerning mutual expenditure, assistance, and defence. Its dating, unity, wording, and recension are debated (Serjeant, 1978; Lecker, 2004; Arjomand, 2009). The term "citizenship" is a modern one, and the document is better understood as an agreement on mutual obligations and defence among parties whose precise political relationship remains a matter of scholarly interpretation.

The sources also record the later fate of three Jewish clans. According to the classical accounts, Banū Qaynuqāʿ and Banū al-Naḍīr were expelled from Medina, and the men of Banū Qurayẓa were executed, in each case after alleged breaches of the agreement. The interpretation of these events is a subject of scholarly dispute. For present purposes they show that the early arrangement did not endure unchanged, and that the early community was also a polity engaged in conflict. The Constitution therefore provides evidence of an early model of inclusion under agreed obligations. It is not evidence of a settled culture of coexistence.

The people of Najrān. The Prophet's ﷺ letter to the Christians of Najrān guaranteed their persons, property, land, and religious community:

> "To Najrān and its dependents belong the protection of God and the guarantee of Muḥammad the Prophet ﷺ, over their property, their persons, their land, their religious community, those absent and present among them, their kin, their places of trade, and all that is in their possession, be it little or much: no bishop shall be removed from his episcopate, no monk from his monastic order, and no priest from his priesthood" (Abū Yūsuf al-Qāḍī, 1420 AH, p. 85).

A report attributed to Ibn Isḥāq describes the delegation of Najrān entering the Prophet's mosque after the afternoon prayer. When the time of their own prayer came and they stood to pray, some wished to prevent them, and the Prophet ﷺ said, "Let them (worship)." The report is transmitted in the Ibn Isḥāq narrative through Muḥammad ibn Jaʿfar ibn al-Zubayr, who reports the episode without naming a Companion between himself and the event. It is therefore disconnected (mursal/munqaṭiʿ) as a report of the event, a limitation that should be stated rather than treating it as an established sound Prophetic report. The episode is reproduced in later works, including Ibn Kathīr's discussion, and is also identified in modern source discussion as part of the Ibn Hishām recension; the authors must nevertheless verify the exact page in the particular Ibn Hishām edition they cite. It may be used as evidence of a transmitted historical tradition, but not as conclusive proof of an authenticated Prophetic permission (see the transmission discussion in Ibn Kathīr, 1976; compare the source-critical discussion reported in Al-Nahee, 2017).

5.3 Later Muslim societies: freedom and recognition

From these early episodes the argument turns to later centuries and other regions. The sources discussed below suggest a shared commitment to two values in particular, freedom and recognition, to which others such as justice, kindness, and communication are related.

Freedom. Muslim jurists and societies recognised that protected non-Muslim communities had the right to practise their worship in places designated for that purpose, such as synagogues and churches, and to establish schools in which children were taught the teachings of their religion. This right was exercised within limits set by the juristic regime of *dhimma*, examined in Section 5.4. The Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela (d. c. 569 AH/1173 CE) recorded that when he inspected the condition of his own community in Baghdad he found forty thousand Jews, and quoted the community as living in security, honour, and prosperity, with ten important schools (al-Tuṭaylī, 2002, p. 299). The figure should not be taken literally, but the account is evidence of communal institutions under Muslim rule.

Religious freedom extended to the sphere of debate. Al-Ḥumaydī relates in *Jadhwat al-muqtabis* that the Andalusi jurist Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Saʿdī, Abū ʿUmar, who lived in the fourth century AH, was asked in Kairouan by Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386 AH) whether he had attended the sessions of the theologians in Baghdad. He replied:

> "I attended them twice. As for the first, I saw a gathering that brought together all the factions: Muslims of both the Sunna and heterodox sects, and unbelievers of the Magians, materialists, freethinkers, Jews, Christians, and every other kind of unbeliever; and each faction had a leader who would speak on its behalf and argue its case. Whenever a leader of any faction arrived, the assembly would rise to its feet for him until he was seated, and then sit down as he sat. When the assembly was full […] one of the unbelievers would say: You have gathered for debate — let not the Muslims argue against us from their Scripture, nor from the words of their Prophet, for we do not accept these; rather, let us debate only by the arguments of reason, and what deduction and analogy allow. And they would say: Yes, you may have that" (al-Ḥumaydī, 1966, pp. 109–110).

The account describes a setting in which communities met on agreed terms of reason and not of scripture, and it treats points of difference as a field for deliberation. It is a report relayed by a visitor and concerns one city, and should not be generalised without further evidence.

Recognition. Recognition is entailed by freedom, since freedom has no meaning unless the existence of the other and the other's right to be different are recognised. The Constitution of Medina, discussed above, is cited as showing that the earliest Muslim society recognised a plurality of religious and ethnic identities within a shared political belonging. The sources suggest three levels of recognition.

Emotional recognition refers to relations founded on sentiments such as love, friendship, and faithfulness. Al-Ṭurṭūshī relates in *Sirāj al-mulūk* that the jurist Abū al-Muṭarrif ibn al-Ḥiṣṣār had a Christian neighbour in Córdoba who ran errands for him, and to whom he used to say, as a blessing, "May God preserve you and watch over you," "May God delight your eye," and "By God, what pleases you pleases me", at which the neighbour rejoiced (al-Ṭurṭūshī, 1994, Vol. 2, pp. 589–590). The anecdote is an individual case, but it illustrates a type of relation that the sources treat as unremarkable.

Legal recognition refers to access to a hearing and the application of legal rules to claims, rather than modern equality before the law in its full constitutional sense. Collections of legal cases and rulings contain cases in which jurists ruled in favour of protected communities against Muslim adversaries. Ibn Sahl records a judge's ruling in a dispute over the custody of two Muslim girls whose mother had died, between their Christian maternal grandmother and their Muslim paternal grandmother. The ruling stated that custody belonged to the Christian maternal grandmother, who had a better right to it than the paternal grandmother although the latter was a Muslim (Ibn Sahl, 2007, p. 227). Before treating this as evidence of a general principle of interreligious legal recognition, the authors should verify the exact case, its legal rationale, and whether the outcome follows the applicable Mālikī custody doctrine. The separate incomplete reference to Ibn Sahl's al-Aḥkām al-kubrā must not be merged with the 2007 al-Iʿlām entry unless the authors establish that it is the same work or a distinct work by the same author. Other rulings in the nawāzil collections favoured protected communities on the basis of evidence alone (Ibn ʿAbd al-Raʾūf, 1955, p. 96; Ibn Sahl, n.d., p. 559; al-Wansharīsī, 1981, Vol. 5, p. 245, and Vol. 7, p. 439). The present study has not counted such cases, and the same collections also contain rulings that disadvantage non-Muslims, so the frequency of favourable rulings cannot be estimated from this selection.

Social recognition refers to practices through which members of society express esteem and respect for one another (Honneth, 2015, p. 236). Among these were the participation of Muslims in the festivals and social occasions of protected communities, such as the birth of Jesus on 25 December or the eve of 1 January. Questions put to jurists and muftis describe the forms this participation took, including the exchange of food and gifts. Muslims also took part in a midsummer celebration dated 24 June, associated in the passage under discussion with the nativity of John the Baptist, lighting candles, holding equestrian contests, sprinkling water in the markets, and accepting foods prepared by Christians and Jews (al-Wansharīsī, 1981, Vol. 11, p. 111). The earlier translation "Pentecost" should not be retained: Pentecost is a movable feast, whereas 24 June is conventionally associated with the Nativity of John the Baptist. The precise Arabic term in al-Wansharīsī must still be checked against the cited edition before the English translation is finalised.

> *Sweeter still are its offerings when served, its steam rising above the tables high;*
> *Though it burns to the touch, its heat within the depths brings a peace like the coolness of greeting.*

The statement of Ibn ʿAbdūn in his *ḥisba* treatise, that Muslim women should be prevented from entering churches (Ibn ʿAbdūn, 1955, p. 48), suggests that they did enter, perhaps to attend the weddings of acquaintances among the People of the Book. Further material of this kind occurs in the *ḥisba*, fatwa, and *nawāzil* literature (for example al-Ṭurṭūshī, 1990, pp. 140–141; al-Wansharīsī, 1981, Vol. 11, pp. 150–151).

Related values. Justice, kindness, and communication appear in the same evidence: justice in Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl, in the description of Abyssinia, and in the rulings of Ibn Sahl; kindness in the neighbourly exchanges and gifts; and communication in the debating assemblies. The study does not claim independent demonstration of compassion as a separate value, and the abstract has been limited accordingly.

*5.4 Limits: the *dhimma* framework and juristic objection*

The evidence above must be read together with the legal framework within which most of it arose. Classical juristic literature on non-Muslims includes the *jizya*, a tax on protected non-Muslims (Qurʾān 9:29); the body of conditions known as the Covenant or Pact of ʿUmar, whose attribution to ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb is widely questioned but whose provisions shaped juristic discussion; regulations on dress and on the construction and visibility of places of worship; and restrictions on testimony in some schools (Tritton, 1930; Fattal, 1958; Levy-Rubin, 2011; Friedmann, 2003; Emon, 2012). Accordingly the "right" of protected communities to freedom of worship described in Section 5.3 was a recognised right within limits, and not a right of the kind that modern pluralism implies. The study neither endorses nor denies the acceptability of such arrangements today. Its claim concerns the historical record.

Juristic objection to the practices described above is also part of the record. Jurists disagreed about the manifestation of non-Muslim rites outside designated places. Some treated the matter as a question of benefit and harm, in which there was wide scope for independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) and no explicit text that must necessarily be followed (see Ibn Qudāma, n.d., Vol. 8, p. 527; al-Kāsānī, n.d., Vol. 7, p. 113; al-Shaybānī, n.d.,

Vol. 1, p. 137). Ibn ʿAbdūn's treatise on *ḥisba* and al-Ṭurṭūshī's work on innovations belong to genres whose purpose is corrective, and they seek to restrict some of the very practices they describe. The recurrence of prohibitions is itself evidence that the practices were current, although prohibitions in these genres may also be conventional. Most juristic objections concerned the consequences of an expansion of social relations, such as participation in celebrations and conformity to customs, and not coexistence as a principle.

The question of why juristic rulings sometimes diverged from the practices described, and who produced them, when, and in what conditions, cannot be answered from the present selection. Three considerations may be noted as hypotheses for research. First, the genres differ in purpose, and *ḥisba* and innovation literature is concerned with correction and boundary maintenance. Second, jurists were concerned with the preservation of communal identity and religious boundaries. Third, scholars have linked changes in attitude in al-Andalus and the Maghrib to political and military conditions, including pressure from the Christian kingdoms and the Almoravid and Almohad periods (Cohen, 1994; Safran, 2013). These hypotheses require separate study.

6. Discussion

Table 1 summarises the evidence by source type, what each shows, and its limits.

Source type	Illustrative cases	What the evidence shows	Limits
Sīra	Abū Ṭālib; Ḥakīm ibn Ḥizām and Hishām ibn ʿAmr; al-Muṭʿim's *jiwār*; delegation of Najrān	Protection and decency across belief; recognition of Christian worship in the mosque	Tribal conventions of protection; chain of some reports to be examined; persecution also reported
Documents and covenants	Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl; Constitution of Medina; letter to Najrān	Agreements on justice and mutual obligation; inclusion in a shared political community	Authenticity and composition debated; political and military context; later conflicts
History and travel literature	Benjamin of Tudela; al-Ḥumaydī's account of Baghdad assemblies	Communal institutions; structured interfaith debate	Single observers; figures may be exaggerated
Nawāzil and *aqḍiya*	Ibn Sahl; al-Wansharīsī	Legal recognition; rulings for protected communities; descriptions of shared festivals	No count of cases; the collections also contain restrictive rulings
Ḥisba and innovation literature	Ibn ʿAbdūn; al-Ṭurṭūshī	Practices were current	Corrective genre; reflects objection
Biography and etiquette	Ibn al-Ḥiṣṣār; al-Dabbāj	Emotional recognition; scholars' participation	Anecdotal

Table 1. Summary of the evidence by source type.

Evaluated against the four criteria of Section 4.6, the evidence gives the following picture. On *recurrence across genres*, comparable practices of mutual assistance, shared occasions, and recourse to common courts are attested in biography, chronicle, travel literature, legal collections, and *ḥisba* treatises. On *breadth of participation*, the evidence includes jurists, poets, neighbours, women, and ordinary participants in festivals as well as rulers and scholars. On *endorsement or tolerance by authorities*, the record is mixed: some judges and jurists ruled for protected communities and some scholars took part in shared occasions, while others sought to restrict the same practices. On *persistence*, the practices are attested between the seventh and fifteenth centuries and in Arabia, Iraq, al-Andalus, and the Maghrib, though unevenly.

These results support a qualified version of the hypothesis. The sources justify the conclusion that practices of coexistence were widespread enough, in the regions and periods studied, to be described as a culture. They do not justify the stronger claims that this culture was universal, that it overcame all juristic objection, or that it was egalitarian. The record is better described as a culture that was contested and that operated within, and sometimes against, a hierarchical legal order.

This conclusion bears on the apparent tension between coexistence as a social necessity and the need to rebuild it. Diversity is constant, but the culture that manages it is historical and depends on how its sources are remembered, taught, and read. That is where the methodological principles of Section 7.2 become relevant.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Findings

The study reached the following findings.

1. Sources of several genres attest recurrent, everyday practices of mutual assistance, shared occasions, legal recourse, and disputation between Muslims and non-Muslims in Arabia, Iraq, al-Andalus, and the Maghrib between the seventh and fifteenth centuries.
2. Two values, freedom (in worship, education, and debate) and recognition (emotional, legal, and social), recur as the normative basis of these practices, with justice, kindness, and communication appearing as related values.
3. These practices existed alongside a hierarchical legal framework (*dhimma*) and juristic objection, and the record is of a contested culture and not a uniform one. The evidence does not support the claim that practice overrode all juristic opinion.
4. The selection of sources is illustrative. Claims about frequency, and about regions and periods outside the corpus, are not warranted by this study.

7.2 Methodological principles

The following principles are proposed for the contemporary reading of texts and opinions on relations with religious others. They are derived from methodological argument and not from the evidence of Section 5, and they draw on Ibn Bayyah (2017, 2018) and on the tradition of Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*).

1. **Texts in context.** Religious texts have contexts of revelation or occurrence, and a text should not be detached from its context in order to derive a ruling claimed to be absolute and perpetually binding (see Ibn Bayyah, 2017, pp. 32–33; for a related methodological study see Alsaied et al., 2025). Contextualisation is a way of clarifying the meaning of a text. It is not a licence to set a text aside.
2. Criteria for particular cases. A text may be treated as belonging to the category of particular cases (qaḍāyā al-aʿyān), whose ruling does not extend beyond the event that occasioned it, only where there is a reason to do so. A widely reported majority position in uṣūl al-fiqh is that a general expression is not restricted merely because it was occasioned by a particular event (al-ʿibra bi-ʿumūm al-lafẓ lā bi-khuṣūṣ al-sabab). Al-Zarkashī discusses the rule and its qualifications in al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ, in the section on a text occurring in response to a particular cause (vol. 4, discussion beginning at p. 269 in the online pagination; the authors must identify and cite the printed edition they actually consult). The rule is not mechanical: the wording, the structure of the response, and contextual indicators (qarā'in) may affect whether generality is established. Three criteria are proposed for further development: (a) the text itself names or implies a specific person, group, or event; (b) its wording lacks general terms or an operative cause (ʿilla) that extends beyond the case; and (c) other evidence on the same subject indicates a limited application.
3. **A symmetrical standard.** If juristic statements are matters of independent reasoning bound to their temporal and spatial contexts, this applies equally to statements that favour coexistence and to those that restrict it. Juristic statements are therefore treated in this study as reports of social practice, which is a descriptive use, and not as authorities for or against coexistence, which would be a normative use.
4. **Historical practice as a source of insight.** Historical practice is an important source for understanding how Muslim communities interpreted and lived their religious commitments. This study makes no claim that historical practice is the most authentic expression of religion, since that is a theological position that historical method alone cannot establish.

7.3 Recommendations

In light of the findings and principles, the study makes the following recommendations.

1. Projects on the proper placement of evidence (tabwī'a). The study recommends academic projects devoted to tabwī'a, understood provisionally here as arranging and classifying evidence under the appropriate headings so that each report is read in relation to the relevant subject and the other evidence on that subject. The authors must verify the technical use of this term and supply an exact attributable source before retaining the claim that Ibn Bayyah (2018, p. __) defines it in this way. Such work should proceed

at two levels. At the textual level, each piece of evidence is situated among all the evidence transmitted on its subject, since items of evidence are interdependent in interpretation and their totality may be regarded as a single discourse (al-Shāṭibī, n.d., Vol. 4, pp. 274–275). It has been said that whoever does not encompass it with knowledge, and does not bring together its various parts, cannot grasp its meanings (Ibn Bayyah, 2018, p. 28). At the contextual level, each item is traced to its original source, so that a verse is not cited as evidence without considering the occasion of its revelation, nor a hadith without recalling the occasion of its utterance. This approach helps to identify the underlying purpose and scope of the evidence.

2. **Critical studies of the juristic heritage.** The study recommends research that re-examines the juristic heritage on relations between followers of different religions in light of a present reality that differs from the periods in which that heritage was produced, since people, times, and circumstances are not all of one pattern (al-Qannūjī, 2002, p. 250). Four lines of work are suggested: (i) a systematic survey of *nawāzil* and *ḥisba* collections, with a stated sampling method, to estimate how rulings treated non-Muslims; (ii) studies of the regions and periods not covered here; (iii) analysis of the conditions that produced restrictive rulings; and (iv) an analysis of contemporary conditions, to identify real needs and order them by priority within the objectives of the Sharia (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*). Al-Juwaynī alluded to the value of this discipline when he said that by *uṣūl al-fiqh* "are made clear the ranks of the evidentiary proofs, and which of them take precedence and which are deferred" (al-Juwaynī, 2011, p. 481).
3. **Roles of the different actors.** The recommendations above are addressed to different groups. Scholars and researchers are invited to undertake the research programme just described. Teachers may use case studies drawn from primary sources, including those in which jurists and practice diverge, so that students learn to read texts in context. Preachers and muftis are encouraged to state the criteria by which they treat a text or opinion as general or particular. Media professionals are encouraged to present the historical record in its complexity and not as either a golden age or a history of persecution.

7.4 Limitations and future research

The study has four main limitations. Its evidence comes from selected regions and periods and is illustrative. It does not count cases and so cannot estimate frequency. It does not analyse contemporary conditions. And it only offers hypotheses about why juristic rulings sometimes diverged from the practices described. Each limitation corresponds to a line of work set out in Recommendation 2.

The rooting and rebuilding of a culture of coexistence is, in sum, a task that combines scholarly inquiry, education, and religious discourse. Its starting point is a record that is neither a golden age nor an unbroken history of conflict, and a method for reading texts that is applied consistently to opinions on every side.

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