

Islamic Teaching On *Dhimmi* Status Creates An Atmosphere Of Intolerance

Many of us are not aware that the widespread prejudice, discrimination and a legacy of intolerance, faced by Christian and Jewish minorities in Muslim countries is a result of the traditional Islamic teaching on *dhimmi* status.

In early Islam, Christians and Jews and several other non-Muslim groups were known as *dhimmi* (literally meaning “protected”). While they were permitted to live within the Muslim community and practice their own religion they were only protected in that they were not forced to convert, flee or be killed, unlike pagans. However, they were not given equal status with Muslims and were made to pay a special tax, they received less compensation for injury and were subject to many humiliating restrictions relating to their clothes, places of worship and transport, which reduced them to living as “second class citizens”.

While the full *dhimmi* system has not yet been formally implemented by any modern Muslim-majority state the legacy of hundreds of years of official discrimination has left its mark on most Muslim societies. This is the reason for much of the “institutional” discrimination, persecution and injustices faced by Christian and Jewish minorities. It is also the reason why so often the police, judiciary, media, employers and teachers, not to mention angry mobs, can get away with unofficial anti-Christian or anti-Jewish behavior, as the majority of society feels deep down that this is right and proper. Such prejudice is totally incompatible with international human rights standards such as Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Traditional Islamic teaching of *dhimmi* status is based on two important concepts:

1. Muslims are superior to any other religious group: “Ye are the best of peoples evolved for mankind enjoining what is right forbidding what is wrong and believing in Allah.” (Qur’an chapter 3 verse 110)
2. Christians and Jews (also Sabaeans and Zoroastrians) who had not accepted Islam should be conquered, humiliated and subjected to the payment of a poll tax, the *jizya*, not payable by Muslims.

Humiliation took the form of the following laws, amongst others:

- *Dhimmi* men could not marry Muslim women unless the *dhimmi* men converted to Islam. Muslim men could marry *dhimmi* women, but the children were considered to be Muslim;
- Legal cases involving *dhimmis* and Muslims must be tried in a Muslim Sharia court where the *dhimmi*'s testimony was worth less than a Muslim's. Non-Muslim courts were not allowed to bring a Muslim to trial;
- *Dhimmi* could not ride horses or camels and were limited to riding donkeys;

- *Dhimmi* houses had to be inferior to those of Muslims, meaning mainly lower in height;
- *Dhimmi* were excluded from public office;
- *Dhimmi* were forbidden from ringing church bells or displaying crosses. They could not recite the Bible aloud or make public displays of funerals and feastdays;
- *Dhimmi* had to wear a zunnar (a wide cloth belt) to distinguish them as non-Muslims and the colours and type of their clothing were restricted;
- *Dhimmi* were forbidden from openly displaying wine or pork;
- *Dhimmi* could not inherit from Muslims, but a Muslim could inherit from *dhimmis*;

The legacy of hundreds of years of official discrimination has left its mark on most Muslim societies. A number of Muslim countries still enforce some of these laws today. Even in those countries where they are not law they are often put into practice “unofficially”.