

Non-Muslim Minorities in a *Wasaṭī* Perspective

PAOLA PIZZO (University of Chieti–Pescara “Gabriele d’Annunzio”)

Abstract

Given the classical framework regulating the position of non-Muslims in Islamic States, this paper focuses on the evolution of the interpretations of those norms, following the thought of *wasatīyya* scholars. In contemporary Islamic thought, a balanced and moderate attitude is proposed by several authors as an attempt to oppose the extremist movements that claim to represent the true Islam. One of the areas in which the *wasatī* approach has found a way to express itself more effectively is in the status of minorities.

These thinkers consider that the birth of modern states has produced consequences in the application of the rules governing the relations between citizens of different religions. They have adopted a renewal in terminology that may prefigure a different application of classical Islamic rules.

Key words: *ḍimma*, *wasatīyya*, minorities’ rights, Islamic law, *ahl al-kitāb*, Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī.

1. Introduction

Given the classical framework regulating the position of non-Muslims in Islamic States, this paper intends to focus mainly on the evolution of the interpretations of those norms, following the thought of modern scholars of the *wasatīyya* school.¹ We will try to present and define the main characteristics of the major thinkers who belong to this new modern trend in Islamic thought. This aspect seems to be interesting in a time in which new tendencies are emerging in regard to addressing questions related to the modern application of principles of classical Islamic Law connected to the treatment of non-Muslims in a Muslim society or State (i.e. *ḥilāfa*, *takfīr*, *ḡihād*, *ḡizya*, and so on). One can refer to the newly self-proclaimed ‘Islamic State’ and to its attitude towards Christian and Yazidi minorities in Iraq and Syria.

As for a definition of ‘minority’ in the Arab world, we refer to the threefold typology defined by Ma’oz and Sheffer² and used cautiously by Kymlicka and Pföstl:

- a. Arab but not Muslim (Arab Christian communities, Muslim sects other than Sunni);
- b. Muslim but not Arab (Turks, Amazighs, etc.);
- c. Groups that are neither Arab nor Muslim (Jews, Armenians, Assyrians, etc.).³

This definition, like all definitions, should be carefully taken into account, considering its rigid schematic and the fact that it does not take into consideration the change that has

1 For an overview on these scholars, see BAKER 2003.

2 MA’OZ & SHEFFER 2002.

3 KYMLICKA & PFÖSTL 2014: 2.

occurred over time in the self-perceptions of the different minority groups. Nevertheless, we agree with Kymlicka and Pfössl in affirming that speaking of a group acting as a ‘minority’ is something that needs to be explained and should not be taken for granted.⁴

Furthermore, it is also interesting to deal with the acceptance/refutation of the concept of ‘minorities’ by minority groups themselves. In fact, this category is often rejected by those who belong to a non-dominant group—in a quantitative or qualitative way—as it suggests and takes for granted a separation of the ‘minority’ group from the dominant community at a social, cultural, and political level.⁵ Rather than stressing the opposition between majority/minority, some Christians in the Middle East insist on enacting a pact of citizenship that binds citizens regardless of their denominational affiliation.⁶

Our method in responding to these questions will start from an analysis of selected texts from *wasafī* thinkers exposing their reinterpretation of the classical norms on minorities in the context of a modern state. The approach will start from a philological perspective in order to retrace the terms used and their nuances in meaning. This philological and semantic analysis of the signifier and the signified will help to define whether a shift has occurred from the classical view on the position of non-Muslims minorities in an Islamic society to a new interpretation of their presence and role in a modern state, and if so, how it occurred. In this regard, it is helpful to recall Jacob Høigilt’s approach in studying the rhetoric and ideology of two eminent Egyptian *wasafī* thinkers, Fahmī Huwaydī and Muḥammad ‘Imāra, as he starts from the supposition that ‘the *form* of a text is as important as its content’.⁷

Following his rhetorical analysis, Høigilt concludes that this movement fails in an attempt to appease the ideological tensions in Egypt, opposing the views that considered the *wasafīyya* as an open-minded movement that could solve the contrast between an ‘extremist’ interpretation of Islam and ‘moderate’ or secular currents, including sectarian tensions that have always agitated the country.⁸

However, by analysing texts and terminology used by the *wasafī* intellectuals, one may conclude, in a more positive way, that this approach has at least produced a noteworthy development in the attitude of the movement towards non-Muslim minorities in an Islamic society. This development could be measured in terms of a change in terminology that results in a change in the very conception of the people involved. Referring to Christians and Jews as ‘*ḍimmiyyūn*’ (protected subjects) or as ‘citizens’ implies an evolution of historic proportions in the Islamic attitude towards religious minorities. Such recognition, in the opinion of Christians, should be automatic in the case of a modern state that wishes to call itself democratic, and it should result in the adoption of tangible measures to make it effective.

4 Ibid.

5 It is noteworthy that Islamist *wasafī* thinkers also refuse to use the term minority/majority in a quantitative way, and insist on a qualitative description: Muslim *versus* non-Muslim. See al-‘AWWĀ 2006:19-20 and FURMAN 2000: 2-3.

6 There are some interesting observations on this point in SHARP 2012: 109-118. The analysis of some Arab Christian intellectuals goes in the same directions, like Samir Franjeh (interview with the author, January 2013), Tarek Mitri (interview with the author, September 2014), Sameh Fawzy (interview with the author, December 2014).

7 HØIGILT 2010: 252 (italics original).

8 Ibid.: 252 and 265. A comprehensive account of *wasafīyya* is presented in KAMALI 2015.

The sources considered for this analysis are a selection of texts chosen from some of the major representatives of the *wasafī* trend in modern Islamic thought, integrated with interviews in the field. In particular, we will refer to the scripts of Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, with some remarks on the works of Fahmī Huwaydī, Ṭāriq al-Biṣrī, and Muḥammad Salīm al-‘Awwā. We will also refer to some recent publications and initiatives sponsored by al-Azhar and the Grand Imam there, Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib, aimed at evaluating a new approach in considering non-Muslim minorities (especially Copts) in the modern Egyptian state. In this overview, we will also take advantage of the methodology used by Shavit, who presented a study on the *wasafī* and *salafī* approaches to religious law regarding Muslim minorities in Western countries.⁹ This paper, in turn, intends to focus on modern attempts to reform (or *taḡdīd*) Islamic political and religious thought regarding the *aḥkām al-dīmma* without affecting the classical principles of the sharia.

2. *Wasafīyya*: a definition

The concept of *wasafīyya* has a Quranic origin in verse 2:143: ‘Thus We appointed you a midmost nation.’¹⁰ According to several exegetes, the cause of the revelation of this verse was the changing of the qibla from Jerusalem to Mecca, ‘because the Ka‘ba is the center of the world and its middle’, said the renowned Persian theologian Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209).¹¹ He explained the term as the ‘just’ and the ‘good’, all that is far from excess and exaggeration. According to the medieval exegete Ibn Kaṭīr (d. 774/1373) the meaning is ‘(just and best) nation’.¹²

The medieval Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), according to Quran 2:143, considers Islam as the religion of the *via media*, or golden mean, compared to other religions or Islamic sects.¹³ The *wasafīyya*, in its thinking, is a well-balanced position of the true Muslim community, that of the Sunna, in all aspects of religion. With prophets, they do not exaggerate as Christians do, nor maltreat them as Jews do.¹⁴ Regarding religious precepts, ethics, and the question of God’s attributes and acts, they also assume a moderate position.¹⁵

Thus the People of the Sunna become, by definition, the middle community. This notion also plays an important role in modern Islamic thinking.

9 SHAVIT 2012.

10 The Quran is quoted from the English translation by A. J. ARBERRY, *The Koran: Interpreted*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964 (first edition 1955).

11 Faḥr al-Dīn al-RAZĪ, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, IV: 106, quoted in TALBI 1996: 13.

12 <http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=294#3> (accessed 30 September 2015).

13 See HOOVER 2007: 173-176.

14 See IBN TAYMIYYAH, *Pages Spirituelles*: 22-23; 30. Here p. 22.

15 Ibid.: 23, 30.

As Shavit points out, one could refer to *wasatīyya* in opposition to *salafīyya* as a liberal and flexible approach to Islamic law, while the latter is a rigid and strict one.¹⁶ He suggests that the root of the *wasatī* approach could be traced back to the reform movement (*iṣlāḥ*) that started at the beginning of the 19th century in Egypt with Ḡamāl al-Dīn al-Afḡānī (d. 1897), Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and Rašīd Riḏā (d. 1935). In the *Tafsīr al-Manār*, the fathers of *iṣlāḥ* affirm that the Islamic *umma* is an exemplary community that stands in the middle (*wasat*) of two truths, a community in which ‘God united two truths, the truth of spirit and the truth of body. It is a spiritual and a corporal community’.¹⁷

One might agree with this observation, considering that those intellectuals are remembered as points of reference in the thought of contemporary *wasatī* thinkers. Nevertheless, according to the Pakistani theologian and activist Mawdūdī (d. 1979),

the word *ummatan wasaṭan* is so comprehensive in meaning that no English word can correctly convey its full sense. It is a righteous and noble community which does not go beyond proper limits, but follows the middle course and deals out justice evenly to the nations of the world as an impartial judge, and bases all its relations with other nations on truth and justice.¹⁸

In contemporary studies, the term *wasatī* has been translated differently, most of the time as ‘moderate’, ‘centrist’, sometimes ‘golden mean’.¹⁹ All these translations insist on the idea of balance, moderation, and distance from excesses.

In the language currently used in the media and in politics the concept of moderate, midstream, or centrist Islam (Islam *wasatī*) is emerging in opposition to the terrorism that claims to be for Islam. In the West, newspapers, opinion makers, and politicians are looking for an Islam that will dissociate itself from violent and sectarian attitudes. The term ‘moderate’ started to be used to define such an Islam, a procedure that implies, however, a definition *via negationis*: moderate Islam is all that is opposed to terrorism and fanaticism. In some Western languages, the corresponding term has a negative nuance of meaning that, if applied to religious faith, could imply a reduction of one’s own religious convictions. However, as we have verified in this paragraph, a definition of the authentic Islamic *wasatīyya* is anything but a moderate or less intense approach to faith, religious practice, and respect of its theological and scriptural sources. On the contrary, a Muslim *wasatī* is a believer who follows the correct path indicated by the Quran and the main Muslim theologians.

¹⁶ SHAVIT 2012: 419.

¹⁷ Quoted in TALBĪ 1996:16-17.

¹⁸ <<http://www.searchtruth.com/tafsir/tafsir.php?chapter=2>> (accessed on 30 September 2015).

¹⁹ See, for instance, referring to the Egyptian al-Wasat Party, HATINA 2005. The same author speaks of *wasatīyya* as ‘centrist Islamic discourse’. See HATINA 2007, especially 138-157. See also CLARCK 2006: 542. Jacob Høigilt refers to the *wasatīyya* as ‘centrism’, and defines it as ‘an open-minded Islamist culture, willing to engage in open discussion with people who hold a different world-view’. See HØIGILT 2010: 251, 254. Nathan J. Brown refers to *wasatīyya* as ‘moderation or centralism [...] often linked to calls for persuasion and dialog and against violence and what is perceived as extremism’. BROWN 2012: 11-12. Polka refers to *wasatīyya* as ‘centrist stream’ or ‘centrism’, POLKA 2003: 40-41. Islamic mainstream is the expression used in his important study of new Islamist thought by BAKER 2003: 39-40. See also BAKER 2005: 111.

Therefore, in Western as in Islamic political discourse, the idea of a ‘moderate’ Islam is gaining consensus as a reaction to the violent and ideological expression of contemporary militant groups claiming to represent the true Islamic interpretation.²⁰ Even in liberal or conservative Islamic circles, such as al-Azhar, an effort is being undertaken to show that the true face of Islam is a ‘*wasafī*’ one, *i.e.* a moderate one.²¹ Then, to be a ‘*wasafī*’ Muslim is simply to follow Islam, *tout court*, in its true essence, according to a vision clearly opposed to that proposed by the terrorist groups of IS and others. In Baker’s words, the contemporary *wasafīyya* is ‘the motivating force of the broad and varied Islamic Renewal. [...] The *wassatteyya* functions as a vital yet flexible midstream, a centrist river out of Islam’.²²

However, al-Azhar is not the only Islamic circle pretending to represent the Islamic *juste milieu*. A prominent scholar, himself an Egyptian Azharite now based in Qatar, Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī (b. 1926), put the concept of *wasafīyya* at the centre of his vision of contemporary Islam, long before the appearance of IS terrorism, but opposed to that of militant Islamists.²³ He is considered to be the founder of the school of new Islamists. Al-Qaradāwī started to use this concept in the early 1960s as a ‘method based on middle positioning (*tawassuṭ*) and moderation (*i’tidāl*), and distances itself from those who exaggerate and those who abbreviate, as well as from the rigorous and the indifferent’.²⁴ In his thought, a synonym of *wasafīyya* is equilibrium (*tawāzun*) between two opposites, such as the human and the divine, the spiritual and the material, and so on.²⁵ The realisation of this kind of balance is beyond human possibilities and it is a specific divine ability²⁶ and there is no wonder that one can find this balance in God’s creation. First of all, it can be found in Islam. He continues his argument by describing the characteristics of Islamic moderation in all sectors, following the approach of Ibn Taymiyya.

His perspective, however, seems innovative when, as we shall see in the case of the attitude towards non-Muslims, he proposes a balance between classical rules and the conditions of the modern world.

In summary, in the next paragraphs we will focus on one of the aspects of *wasafīyya* scholars, their attitude towards the ‘other’, in this case the *ahl al-dimma*, regardless of the current debate about whether or not there exists a ‘moderate’ Islam opposed to a fanatical one.²⁷ And we will not use the term ‘*wasafīyya*’ as just an opposite to political extremism, but will bear in mind all the Quranic and theological connotations of the term.

20 See, for instance, YUSIF 2015. The author is the Director of the International Institute of Wasatiyah, International Islamic University Malaysia.

21 During an international conference sponsored by al-Azhar in May 2010, the medieval theologian Abū al-Ḥasan al-Aṣṣārī (d. 936) was taken as an example and a champion of the moderate and balanced vision of Islam embodied by al-Azhar. See al-AZHAR 2014.

22 See BAKER 2015: 3.

23 See GRÄF 2007: 9 and GRÄF 2009.

24 Quoted *ibid.*: 218.

25 A summary of Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī’s idea of *wasafīyya* is available online at <<http://qaradawi.net/new/articles/6514-2015-09-03-06-45-10>> (accessed on 30 September 2015). See also the exhaustive presentation in al-ĠANNŪŠĪ 2003.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Another interesting field of application of the *wasafīyya* approach is represented by the *fiqh al-*

Moreover, it must be remembered that *wasatīyya* is not just a neutral word, but identifies a group or an innovative path on which some of the most eminent representatives of contemporary Islamic thought recognise themselves.²⁸ As Nathan J. Brown pointed out, *wasatīyya* indicates something beyond political moderation and has at least two connotations to be considered: the first implies a distance from extremism; the second is connected to interpretations of Islamic precepts more consistent and compatible within the context of modern societies.²⁹

For all these reasons, in these pages we will avoid translating the term ‘*wasatī*’, preferring to leave it in its original form with all its connotations.

3. Non-Muslims in *wasatīyya* texts

3.1 Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī

The first *wasatī* text that will be examined is an extract from a book written in 2004 by one of the prominent *wasatī* scholars, Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī.³⁰ Composed in a post-9/11 context, the book starts with a very important question: is it possible to change Islamic discourse? In that period, Islam started the new millennium facing one of the worst crises in its modern history when extremist and terroristic currents challenged the credibility of Islamic religious and political discourse, in the name of Islam. The need for change was shared in various Muslim circles all over the world. Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī tried to respond to this challenge by highlighting the necessity of reform that considers Islamic judicial and religious sources. For religious or Islamic discourse, he refers to the image of Islam offered to Muslims and everybody alike.³¹ He continues by posing the question of whether Islamic discourse should be open to change over time or whether it must remain fixed. This part of his reflection is very interesting because, opposing a worldwide opinion that attributes a static quality to Islam, he argues that ‘if religion with its fundamentals, all its creeds, devotions, morality, legal precepts, does not change, what changes is the ways in which we teach and call to it’.³² Religious discourse changes on the basis of the time and place, but also on the basis of the interlocutors. Therefore, it is consequential that Islamic discourse will develop according to the changes that occur in a time of globalisation. It is worth noting that here he introduces a sort of self-criticism, for he affirms that Muslim scholars in the recent past used to speak as if they were only addressing a Muslim public. In ecclesiastical terms, we could say that it was a discourse *ad intra*, for an internal audience. Now the time has come,

aqalliyyāt, i.e. the attempt to enhance a more modern approach to the Islamic legal system for Muslims living in non-Muslim states. For al-Qaradāwī’s contribution to this evolution, see HASSAN 2013. – Cf. also EDRES’ contribution in the present dossier, pp. 171 ff.

28 Rachel M. Scott spoke about *wasatīyya* intellectuals as points of reference for the reformist-minded members of the Muslim Brotherhood. See SCOTT 2012: 145-146.

29 BROWN 2012: 12.

30 al-QARADĀWĪ 2004.

31 Ibid.: 15.

32 Ibid.: 17.

al-Qaraḏāwī argues, in which others look and read what Islam says and who speaks in its name. Thus he seems to appeal to the impending responsibility Muslim scholars and preachers have for their teaching.

He continues his analysis giving a basis from the Quran and in the Sunna for the need for religious reform.³³ One of the examples of the application of this method in the renewal of Islamic discourse is devoted to Islamic-Christian relations. The religious reform he is looking for implies that the preacher should take into account the context in which he delivers his speech. It may be that he lives in a country in which, besides Muslims, Christians, and Jews, citizens live 'who share citizenship with Muslims'.³⁴ In this case, the preacher is invited not to use provocative tones in speeches; to avoid referring to Jews as 'usurpers and aggressors' or to Christians as 'haters and evil crusaders'.³⁵

In this regard, al-Qaraḏāwī recommends the use of a new terminology that could result in a renewed religious discourse, in which a new vision of the world and the 'others' is more decisive. This attitude becomes part of the method in the religious reform that he intends to realise. In this regard, al-Qaraḏāwī offers two significant examples.

The new era of globalisation pushes Islam to abandon old linguistic structures in the relationships with the 'other'. The change suggested is not only a superficial one, limited to an appellation. In fact, he argues that it is no longer appropriate to address non-Muslim believers as '*kuffār*', 'unbelievers', or '*ahl al-ḏimma*', 'People of the Pact', even though their unbelief is recognised, especially in the case of *ahl al-kitāb*.³⁶ In this way he questions the whole concept of '*kufr*' and '*ḏimma*', with its legal ramifications. He justifies this choice on the basis of the interpretation of some Quranic verses and major commentaries, but he goes further here than he did in his previous book dedicated to the same topic.³⁷ Differently from the 1970s, when he freely used the term '*ahl al-ḏimma*', here he avoids it and proposes a new designation following the need for religious reform: '*muwāṭinūn*', 'citizens'. The term that substitutes '*ahl al-ḏimma*' is relevant as it attributes the same rights of citizenship enjoyed by Muslims to non-Muslims. He justifies the dismissal of the old designation on the grounds that Christians in the Middle East object to the term as they feel it is offensive. He argues that the term 'citizen' is a modern expression of the concept on which all Muslim scholars agree, the fact that *ahl al-ḏimma* are part of the *dār al-islām* and for this reason they bear the title of citizens, like their fellow Muslims.³⁸ This principle, in his thought, does not contradict any shariatic obligation and it is in line with the Sunna of the rightly guided caliphs.

In the same book he identifies fifteen areas in which religious reform should be put into effect, including a chapter on 'the safeguard of minorities' rights without marginalisation of

33 Ibid.: 19-25.

34 It is interesting the stress on the fact that Muslims, Christians and Jews share the same quality of citizenship. Ibid.: 42.

35 Ibid.: 43.

36 This Quranic expression is admitted in his discourse.

37 al-QARADĀWĪ 1983: 9-42.

38 al-QARADĀWĪ 2004: 46.

the majority'.³⁹ In his teaching, religious minorities in the Arab and Islamic state should be safeguarded, their rights guaranteed, their existence defended, their religious personality and their places of worship preserved.⁴⁰ This is a major question in Islamic modern *iḡtihād*, he continues, and it is a sensitive issue on which the enemy of Islam relies in order to sow discord. If the change of terminology is clear, its consequences do not lead to a change in the characteristics of the state and society that remain linked to an Islamic *Weltanschauung*.

Indeed, Christians especially are invited to prefer an Islamic regime because it is based on religious and moral principles that are closer to Christian ethics and faith than the positive laws in force in Western countries. On the contrary, these countries, often dominated by secular or atheist regimes, relegate religion to a corner.⁴¹ In a polemic with the Coptic intellectual George Iṣḥāq, he insisted on the fact that *ahl al-dīmma* are: '*muwāḡinūna yan-tamūna ilā al-waḡan al-islāmī*',⁴² 'citizens belonging to the Islamic nation'; that is to say that the recognition of their citizenship does not produce an effect on the essence of the state and its connection with the Islamic religion. As support for his thesis he gives the example of the famous Coptic politician Makram Obeid, who said: 'As for religion, I am Copt, as for the nation, I am Muslim.'⁴³ In this regard, he intends to highlight that Arab Christians in the Middle East own a cultural citizenship that connect them to Islamic identity.

We stressed the shift in language as an example of renewal in Islamic *wasafī* discourse. But one should remember that the author himself warns that the emphasis is on purposes and meanings and not on words and constructions. The essence of his thought does not contradict Islamic precepts that govern the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims and the Islamic character of the state.

Although he does not want to deny the Islamic character of the state, at the same time he suggests ancient Islamic practices be reconsidered, as they were dictated by the conditions and situations of the past and are no longer justifiable. Among these, one can find the refusal to greet Christians or the custom of relegating them to walk along the margins of the streets, and other erroneous attitudes sponsored by narrow-minded Islamic preachers. On the contrary, he encourages the advancement of thought and the renewal of *iḡtihād*.⁴⁴

3.2 Other representatives of the *wasafīyya* school

In the opinion of Egyptian historian and jurist Tāriq al-Biṣrī (b. 1933), modern Islamic political thought has taken up the challenge of making an effort of interpretation (*iḡtihād*), using the principles of sharia to ensure full equality among citizens regardless of religious diversity.⁴⁵ At the same time, however, he admits that the Copts in Egypt believe that the Islamic sharia is incompatible with the principle of citizenship.⁴⁶ In the same essay, he tries

39 Ibid.: 184-194.

40 Ibid.: 184.

41 Ibid.: 184-185.

42 Ibid.: 190.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.: 192-193.

45 al-BIṢRĪ 2011: 56.

46 Ibid.

to prove that Islamic law is familiar to and accepted by Christians, especially Copts, and he uses as an argument the example of a famous medieval Coptic intellectual, Ibn al-ʿAssāl (d. 663/1265), who, in his legal work, freely used terms belonging to the Islamic *fiqh*.⁴⁷ For example, referring to the canon law of the Coptic Orthodox Church, he often borrows terms and concepts from Islamic law, like *iğmāʿ* (consensus) and *furūd* (religious duties).⁴⁸ Switching to modern history, he recalls several examples during the Napoleonic occupation and British rule in which the Egyptian notables, Muslims and Christians, refused to accept legal innovations that implied the separation between religion and state and preferred to maintain an Islamic-based legal system.⁴⁹ Turning to the contemporary age, Bīšrī tries to show how the content of Art. 2 of the Egyptian Constitution (which establishes Islam as the state religion) is not in contradiction with the principle of citizen equality.

He states that the principle of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims among the People of the Book (those belonging to other religions are excluded from this argumentation) is widely accepted by Islamic *fiqh*, but that a problem remains about whether non-Muslims should have the possibility of accessing government positions that involve decision-making power.⁵⁰

This new *iğtihād* is based on the principle that management functions that were previously acquitted by individuals are now acquitted by collective institutions. In judicial and legislative institutions, for example, it is no longer the single judge or the single legislator who acts but a collective entity. Such entities were declared Islamic because they act within the framework of the Constitution (which in Art. 2 declares Islam as the state religion). These institutions remain Islamic even though the decisions are taken by Muslims and non-Muslims together. In this way, the principle of Islamic *fiqh* is safeguarded and the right of non-Muslims to participate in collective decision-making bodies is guaranteed.⁵¹

In this field, he continues, a new *iğtihād fiqhī* is required that should take into consideration the principle of citizenship and political institutions that have emerged in society as a result of the national struggle led by Muslims and Christians together. This new effort of interpretation must comply with sharia law and, at the same time, with the reality of living together.⁵²

The *wasafī* thinker Muḥammad Salīm al-ʿAwwā (b. 1942), lawyer and intellectual, insists on the fact that, with the end of Western colonialism and the birth of modern states, the pact of *ḍimma* between Muslims and non-Muslims has ended. As a consequence, ancient obligations on minorities, such as the payment of *ğizya*, should fall under the general obligation imposed on all citizens of defending the nation and enrolling in military service.⁵³

47 Ibid.: 59.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.: 60-61.

50 Ibid.: 66.

51 Ibid.: 67.

52 Ibid.

53 See al-ʿAwwā 2006: 21-22.

In his argumentation, contemporary Islamic awakening, which started in Egypt in 1911, produced the substitution of the principle of *ḍimma* with that of citizenship, the principle of religious discrimination with that of equality.⁵⁴ He refers to this argumentation as '*iğtihād fiqhī*', which follows the line of a well-established reformist thought expressed by Rašīd Riḍā (d. 1935) and continued by illustrious scholars, such as Maḥmūd Šaltūt (d. 1963), Muḥammad al-Ġazālī (d. 1996), and Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (b. 1926).⁵⁵

The journalist and political commentator Fahmī Huwaydī (b. 1937) affirms that the definition of *ahl al-ḍimma*, formerly used to identify 'others' belonging to non-Muslim faiths, needs to be revised.⁵⁶ He starts his argumentation by pointing out that placing this expression in the context of sharia is necessary as a first step. The term is mentioned twice in the Quran 9:8-10 referring to the tribe of Qurayš. Huwaydī follows the interpretation of Ibn Kaḫīr (d. 1373) and says that the pact referred to in these verses is that of Ḥudaybiyya, a treaty signed by Muḥammad and the tribe of Qurayš in 628. In the Hadith, the term is used to identify the 'others' with whom a pact was signed, according to pre-Islamic custom.⁵⁷ As for the method, Huwaydī states that:

In the essay of evaluating the definition of *ahl al-ḍimma* and of the position of *ḍimmī* in contemporary Islamic society, we always need to bear in mind the difference between '*šar*', that is, revealed by God, and transmitted to his envoy, and '*fiqh*', that is, elaborated by the experts on the basis of their beliefs about the condition of time and place. The judgment and distinction always belong to *šar*' text, as for the interpretation (*iğtihād*) of the experts, we have only to find a guide in it, accepting or refusing it according to the interest (*mašlahā*) imposed by the changes in time and place.⁵⁸

In addressing this issue, he continues, all the Quranic verses in which the dignity and nobility of man is reaffirmed should be considered. After a careful examination of all the sacred texts, he affirms that claiming that non-Muslims cannot be considered as citizens has no basis in the sacred texts. On the contrary, they form, together with the Muslims, one national community (*umma wāḥida*).⁵⁹

3.3 Competing for *wasatīyya*: promoting an authentic interpretation of Islam

As we have mentioned above, al-Azhar, the most influential institution in the Sunni Arab world, especially under the leadership of its current Grand Imam, Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib, started a process to be recognised as the representative of an authentic Islamic interpretation: that of the golden mean. In this regard, al-Azhar is threatening to do what Bettina Gräf described as the automatic identification of al-Qaraḍāwī with *wasatīyya* and *wasatīyya* with

54 Ibid.: 14.

55 Ibid.: 22.

56 HUWAYDĪ 1985: 110.

57 Ibid.: 111.

58 Ibid.: 112.

59 Ibid.: 116; 123.

al-Qaraḏāwī, a process started by the use he made of the new media in order to become a ‘global mufti’.⁶⁰

This goes along with the decline of the attempt to relaunch a unified global entity representing the various Islamic currents, both Sunni and Shi’i, promoted since 2004 by al-Qaraḏāwī himself with the creation of the International Union of Muslim Scholars.

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Of the various initiatives undertaken to promote a balanced vision of Islam, one worthy of mention is the conference held in December 2014 in Cairo, where a clear final appeal was made for the total alienation of Islam from violence and extremism, showing a particular sensitivity towards murderous attacks committed against non-Muslim minorities.⁶¹ At this international conference the highest representatives of the Eastern Churches, including the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Tawadros II and other patriarchs and bishops of all Christian denominations were present, alongside Muslim leaders representing all denominations (Sunni, Shi’i, Ibāḏi) and geographical areas (Africa, Asia, Europe). The distinctive trait of the final document of the al-Azhar Conference consists in the very reaffirmation of the rights of non-Muslim minorities who have been living in the Middle East for thousands of years as citizens and not as tolerated guests. It is no coincidence that the document does not mention the Quranic category of *ahl al-ḏimma*. The aim of the document was to address both the militants of the IS and its supporters, and the majority of Muslims (Arab and non-Arab), of all denominations, in order to remove any claim to an Islamic legitimacy for the actions of the so-called ‘Islamic State’. Therefore, its aim was to launch a twofold message to Muslims: Islam condemns violence and terrorism and, in addition, reaffirms that al-Azhar, with its *wasafī* attitude, is the principal point of reference for the community of believers. This second message is in line with the politics the current Grand Imam has pursued since the beginning of the Arab revolts in 2011: to restore the authority and independence it enjoyed before the Nasserist reform. In the declaration, verses from the Quran are not explicitly cited, nor are the prophetic traditions or any other sources in support of the condemnation of violence and terror. The aim of the document was to address all Muslims, regardless of their confession. In fact, it was signed by the Sunni, Shi’i and Ibāḏi representatives. It also intended to send a clear message to Christian communities in the Middle East and reiterate the need for them to remain in their homelands alongside their Muslim compatriots. But, in a direct way, the signatories intend to press Islamic scholars to undertake a work of purification and renewal of religious discourse to correct the extremist proposal that attracts so many young Muslims. In summary, al-Azhar states that the ideology of extremist groups does not represent the true Islam, especially when it is directed against non-Muslim minorities. Religion has actually nothing to do with the actions of the various terrorist organisations.

As for the terminology introduced in the al-Azhar document, one can observe that there is no mention of traditional Quranic expressions (*ahl al-ḏimma*, *ahl al-kitāb*). When it mentions non-Muslims minorities, the text only uses the terms ‘Christians’: ‘*masīḥiyyūn*’ and ‘*abnā’ al-waṭan*’, ‘sons of the fatherland’, people who belong to the same ‘*umma*’

⁶⁰ See GRÄF 2009: 224.

⁶¹ al-AZHAR 2015a.

alongside Muslim citizens.⁶² The text also reaffirms that ‘ruling in Islam is based on the values of justice, equality, and guaranteeing rights of citizenship for all citizens, regardless of their colour, race or religion. A regime that realises these principal human values is legitimate according to Islamic sources’.⁶³ One can note that this shift in terminology in addressing minorities issues had already emerged in several al-Azhar documents published after the 2001 Arab uprisings,⁶⁴ in which the classical denomination of *ahl al-dimma*, *ahl al-kitāb* are substituted by the term ‘citizens’. According to the *wasatī* vision presented above, al-Azhar encourages the construction of a modern and democratic state in which citizenship is the basis of responsibility in society.⁶⁵

4. Conclusions

The *wasatī* approach is an instrument that is being employed by some contemporary Muslim thinkers to open a process of reform and renewal within Islam, which would otherwise be extremely difficult to achieve. In this way, they try to reconcile and find a balance between the immutable principles of Islam that are fixed in legal and theological sources, and the evolution of modern societies. This approach starts from the premise that sacred texts are fixed and immutable, but their interpretation is not, as it can be renewed depending on historical conditions. The thinkers examined here emphasise the need for an *iğtihād* and a renewal of religious discourse. The fields of application of this methodology may be manifold. One of the areas in which the *wasatī* approach has found a way to express itself more effectively is in the status of minorities. It has been applied in both senses: in the case of Muslim minorities in non-Muslim societies and in the case of non-Muslim minorities in Muslim-majority contexts. In the latter case, the *wasatī* thought initially operated a renewal in terminology that prefigures a shift or a different application of classical Islamic rules. Without denying the Islamic character of society, these thinkers consider that the birth of modern states has produced consequences in the field of application of the rules governing the relations between citizens of different religions. In modern societies, the relationship between citizens and the state is regulated on the basis of the principle of a shared citizenship regardless of confessional, ethnic, or racial affiliation. The principle of citizenship shared by all members of society, in a sense, makes the old covenant of *dimma*, which in the past regulated the relationships between the *ahl al-kitāb* and the Muslim state, obsolete. Duties and rights of citizenship, regardless of religious affiliation, are a modern variation of the pact of protection. However, it should once again be remembered that this premise does not necessarily lead to a change in the character of the state and to a separation between religious and secular spheres. The acceptance of the principle of citizenship does not re-

62 Ibid.: 340-341.

63 Ibid.: 341.

64 English translations of two of the main documents are available at <<http://www.sis.gov.eg/En/Templates/Articles/tmpArticles.aspx?ArtID=56424#.VgUM18vtHw>>; and <<https://danutm.files.wordpress.com/20-12/04/al-azhar-document-for-basic-freedoms.pdf>> (accessed 26 September 2015).

65 al-AZHAR 2015c.

quire the acceptance of a secular society in which religion is confined to private space. The public role of Islam is not denied. In the document of al-Azhar regarding the future of Egypt, for example, the aspiration to create a modern, civil, and democratic state is combined with the reaffirmation that Islam is the official religion and that Islamic principles are the main source of legislation. The same position is found in the thought of al-Qaraḍāwī, Fahmī Huwaydī, and other exponents of the *wasafī* trend.⁶⁶

It is on this aporia that non-Muslim minorities base their criticism and accuse this trend of ambiguity. Legal emancipation, in fact, does not imply cultural assimilation or full political integration.⁶⁷ Furthermore, one should make an in-depth examination of what significance is given to the term '*muwāṭin*' itself. As Krämer points out, is it referred to as 'citizen' or just 'compatriot'?⁶⁸

However, even within non-Muslim communities one can observe an oscillation between the nostalgia of the protection status and the claim for full rights of citizenship.

It is too early to assess the effects of this process of change in contemporary Islamic thought as it is still being subjected to new internal and external challenges. In fact, on the one hand, it has to deal with the process of globalisation and reaffirmation of identities, and, on the other, with the internal pressures imposed by the emergence of a violent interpretation of Islam that denies any room for diversity and otherness.

However, these shifts may leave room for cautious optimism, even in these dark times in Syria and Iraq, in regard to the possibility that a new trend of interpretation might develop and become stronger within Islamic political thought and thus lead to the creation of the premises for new practices and standards of coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims in countries with Islamic majorities.

The *wasafī* approach applied to the status of non-Muslim communities could lead to a twofold conclusion. First, the *wasafīyya* school led by Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī is not the only current in modern Islamic thought to rely on Quranic verse 2:143 in order to propose a new attitude towards the challenges of modern societies. *Wasafīyya* is becoming a disputed territory to which not only a purely legal question of interpretation of sacred texts is related, but one that mainly involves the cultural leadership (spiritual and religious together) on contemporary Islamic thought. This problem is made even more dramatic by the internal crisis to Islam that has arisen with the emergence of contemporary Islamic extremism, from al-Qaeda to IS.

Secondly, the modern Islamic world is facing a conflict involving different instances pretending to represent a true Islamic *wasafī Weltanschauung* opposed to the extremist one proposed from al-Qaeda to IS. In this conflict for leadership, the issue of non-Muslim minorities and, in general, the place of 'otherness' in Islamic thought, is emerging as a question of major relevance for the present and future of Muslim communities in the East and in the West.

⁶⁶ See footnote 52 and HUWAYDĪ 1990.

⁶⁷ See KRÄMER 1995: 581.

⁶⁸ Ibid.: 586-587.

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