Religious Pluralism in Muslim History

No civilization throughout the course of history has passed without having some dark episodes and Islamic civilization was not any different. Acts of intolerance, discrimination, suppression and sometimes persecution of non-Muslims did occur in some periods of Islamic history. However, looking at the earliest periods of Islamic history and what could be considered the foundational period for shaping relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, one finds that the "Constitution of Medina" and the "Pact of ?Umar" laid down the foundations which allowed for people with different traditions, cultures and following different religions to peacefully interact and coexist, acknowledging each other's differences while working together and positively contributing to their communities. Non-Muslims were part of the ummah and their rights of life and property and freedom to practice their religion protected and guaranteed by the Muslims state. These practices by the Prophet and the second Caliph ?Umar b. al-Kha???b fit well into our earlier definition of religious pluralism and clearly show that they were practicing religious pluralism at times when no other religion thought of even tolerating people of other faiths. These two examples were the models which later Muslim generations were to follow in their dealing with non-Muslims and history has shown us that whenever they were put in practice by Muslim rulers, non-Muslims fared well under Muslim rule.

Although there were periods, no doubt, when non-Muslims under Muslim rule were faced with hardships, suppressions and different kinds of, what can be considered in modern day context, discrimination, one, however, has to consider the context in which such episodes happened and be careful not to generalize and judge the whole history of Muslim non-Muslim relations from them. It is also important when judging how non-Muslims fared under Muslim rule not to judge using modern day contexts but to look at the historical context of that time. All religions during those periods were intolerant and considered adherents of other religions as inferior and had no rights. Islam, on the other hand, right from its inception recognized the people of the book and gave them a special status as protected people who lived under Muslim rule freely practicing their religion without interference or forcing them to convert to Islam. Non-Muslims enjoyed many rights and freedoms which could not be found under any other rule than that of Islam. Under traditional Islamic rule, non-Muslims were not prevented from practicing their religions neither were they prevented from living according to their own customs or from earning their livelihood.

In conclusion, to argue that the mistreatment of non-Muslims by some Muslim rulers in Islamic history arose from application of Islamic teachings which were anti-pluralist towards other religions would be, perhaps, an overstatement because it would lead one to wonder why, if such were the teachings of Islam towards non-Muslims, was such mistreatment not carried out against all non-Muslims, without discrimination, throughout the entire course of Islamic history and why we have accounts of non-Muslims flourishing under Muslim rule.