

The Quranic Concept of Religious Tolerance and its Manifestation in Islamic History

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Received: November 11, 2015

Accepted: January 29, 2016

ABSTRACT

Although Islam is 'the best religion', yet the holy Quran bestows freedom of religion on every individual and strongly disapproves of using force and pressure. The religious ascendancy of Islam is couched in a logical and persuasive manner in the holy Quran but one cannot find a single verse asking its adherents to use coercion to compel others to embrace Islam. On the contrary, compulsion in matters of religion runs counter the tolerant spirit of the holy Quran. The following research article describes the Qur'anic concept of religious tolerance, its materialization in the Islamic history and its recognition by the non-Muslim writers.

KEYWORDS: Freedom, Shari'a, Coercion, Tolerance, Orientalist, Jihad, Monasteries, Violence, Sunnah.

INTRODUCTION

Islam is a religion of compassion and preaches mercy for all, irrespective of their cast color and creed. Mercy and tolerance are manifest in every aspect of Islam as well as in every measure taken by the Messenger (peace be upon him). The Messenger (peace be upon him) extended compassionate treatment to the adherents of other faiths as cordially as to the followers of Islam. It is against the very spirit of Islam to impose its doctrines on unwilling minds and compel them to observe Islamic rites and rituals. The prophet of Islam is the embodiment of clemency as the holy Quran states: "And We have not sent you but as a mercy to all the worlds."¹ He treated the Jews of Madina in exactly the same way as he treated the adherents of Islam. He never inflicted pain on them with a view to converting them to the fold of Islam. It was the indelible influence of his teachings and practices that Muslim rulers allowed Jewish communities to flourish under their rule. Jews lived and practiced their religion in, North Africa, Spain, Syria, Iraq and later on in Turkey. In order to escape Christian persecution, they fled from Christian countries and sought refuge in Muslim states. Some of them willingly embraced Islam and some persevered in their Jewish creed as they were not persecuted in religious matters. Religious tolerance was common for all, Jews and Christians alike. In short, all minorities enjoyed religious freedom in accordance with the *Islamic Shari'a*.

The Qur'anic Emphasis on Tolerance

The holy Quran does not approve forceful conversion. God Almighty says: There is not compulsion in religion. Islam believes in nonviolent ways such as discussion and dialogue and gives paramount significance to cogent argumentation. The holy Quran instructs its followers:

"Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best. Indeed, your Lord is most knowing of who has strayed from His way, and He is most knowing of who is [rightly] guided."²

The holy Quran advocates religious freedom:

"I worship not that you worship. And nor you worship what I worship. And I shall not worship what you worshiped. And nor you shall worship what I worship. For you, your religion. And for me my religion."³

It further advises the prophet to stick to justice and leave the ultimate consequences to the God Almighty:

For this then, call you and remain steadfast as you have been commanded and follow not their desires and say, "I believe in whatever Book Allah has sent down and I have been commanded that I may do justice between you. Allah is our Lord and the Lord of you all. For us are our deeds and for you are your deeds. There is no argument between us and you. Allah will gather us together, and towards Him is the return."⁴

The holy Quran instructs Muslims to refrain from reviling the gods and deities of other religions:

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“And do not insult those they invoke other than Allah , lest they insult Allah in enmity without knowledge. Thus We have made pleasing to every community their deeds. Then to their Lord is their return and He will inform them about what they used to do.”⁵

The above verses from the holy Quran substantiate the claim that the tolerant attitude of Islam is deeply rooted in its scriptures. On the contrary, religious intolerance, extremism and violence run counter to the teachings of the holy Quran. But some modern writers forget this indubitable reality and portray Islam as an intolerant and violent religion. Robert Spencer, for instance, compares Muhammad and Jesus (peace be upon them) and presents the former as founder of the world’s most intolerant religion. He portrays Muhammad (peace be upon him) as warrior prophet, highly intolerant of other religions. On the other hand, Jesus (peace be upon is presented is a “prince of peace” who never taught violence. Comparing the holy Quran and the holy Bible, Spencer maintains that the former is replete with commands and instructions of war whereas the latter does not teach such war precepts. He concludes that regarding Islam as a religion of peace, tolerance and coexistence is a “polite fictions”.⁶

It is very unfortunate that such writers, deliberately or due to their ignorance, overlook the verses of the holy Quran which were revealed before jihad was formally permitted. The followers of Muhammad (peace be upon him) was tormented for a protracted span of time and were finally compelled to quit their home and hearth. Following are the few examples from those numerous verses which were revealed before formal permission and declaration of Jihad.

“So for their breaking of the covenant We cursed them and made their hearts hard. They distort words from their [proper] usages and have forgotten a portion of that of which they were reminded. And you will still observe deceit among them, except a few of them. But pardon them and overlook [their misdeeds]. Indeed, Allah loves the doers of good.”⁷

The holy Quran exhorts its followers to “ repel the evil with that which is best. We know well what they attribute”.⁸ It further adds that ‘if they argue with you, say, "I have submitted myself to Allah [in Islam], and [so have] those who follow me." And say to those who were given the Scripture and [to] the unlearned, "Have you submitted yourselves?" And if they submit [in Islam], they are rightly guided; but if they turn away - then upon you is only the [duty of] notification. And Allah is Seeing of [His] servants.”⁹

The same message is further emphasized in the following verse of the holy Quran:

“And the servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk upon the earth easily, and when the ignorant address them [harshly], they say [words of] peace.”¹⁰

A multitude of companions , including Abu Bakr (RA), Ibn Abbas, Saeed Ibn Jubair, maintain that the following verse is the first one revealed in permission of war¹¹:

“Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged. And indeed, Allah is competent to give them victory.”¹²

It is patently obvious that Muslims were permitted to initiate and wage war only when their persecution reached insufferable extreme. The very next verse of the same surah vividly describes the sublime purpose behind Islamic jihad. The purpose is not to convert adherents of other faiths to the fold of Islam, it is rather waged to safeguard and fortify monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques:

“[They are] those who have been evicted from their homes without right - only because they say, "Our Lord is Allah." And were it not that Allah checks the people, some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of Allah is much mentioned. And Allah will surely support those who support Him. Indeed, Allah is Powerful and Exalted in Might.”¹³

Islamic Jihad is a War against persecution, oppression and injustice, strictly prohibiting transgression of any sort. As stated in Surah Baqara: “Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed. Allah does not like transgressors”¹⁴

The Islamic tolerance and Muslims’ attitude towards other religious communities has been admired and appreciated by non-Muslims. Patriarch Ghaytho generously admits that the Arabs who wielded the political sway treated the Christian citizens of the state in a very friendly manner. He further remarks that the Arab rulers appreciated the Christian components of the society and held their priests and s saints in high esteem. Moreover, they offered financial aid for their monasteries and churches. ¹⁵Similarly, Karen Armstrong appreciates the tolerance and peace that Muhammad (peace be upon him) brought after the conquest of Mecca. She does not regard this conquest as a military victory. To her, the conquest of Mecca was a splendid dawn of a new era of peace, tolerance and love. She quotes Muhammad’s (peace be upon him) recitation of the following verse:

“Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most conscious of him.”¹⁶

Karen Armstrong believes that Muhammad (peace be upon) was a paradigmatic personality and being so he has significant lessons not only for his Muslim followers but also for the Western people. She glorifies his great “struggle” against intolerance, greed, injustice and ignorance. In her opinion, Muhammad (peace be upon him) “ literary sweated” with the struggle to establish pea in the war-wrecked Arabia.¹⁷

Manifestation of Tolerance in Islamic History

Will Durant makes a comparative judgment and concludes that Muslims exhibited and practiced greater tolerance than their Christian counterparts. He maintains that in the reign of the Umayyad Dynasty, the level of tolerance exhibited and maintained by the Muslim rulers towards non-Muslim subjects –namely Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and Sabians- is hard to find in the Christian world. In his view, substantial measures were taken to preserve and maintain their temples and churches. He further adds that the non-Muslim citizens of the state enjoyed plenty of freedom to practice their ritual in accordance with their religious doctrines. Moreover, they were declared autonomous in being subject to the religious laws of judges and scholars.¹⁸

Sir Thomas Arnold, an English Orientalist maintains that Muslims did not resort to policy of forceful conversion as some Christians did. Had Muslims been intolerant towards Christianity, they would have overpowered and obliterated Christianity. He remarks: “we never heard of a report of any planned attempt to compel non-Muslim minorities to accept Islam, or any organized persecution aimed at uprooting the Christian religion.”¹⁹ According to him, if any of the pious caliphs had resorted to a policy of religious persecution and eradication, he would have perfectly eradicated Christian faith as easily as Isabella and Ferdinand had wiped away Islam from Spain. They would have exiled Christianity with the same ease with which the Jews were banished from England for more than three centuries. At that time, a schism had emerged between the Eastern Churches and the rest of the Christian world. Consequently, the adherents of the former churches were treated as heretical factions of Christianity. Their existence itself is an indubitable proof of the religious tolerance practiced by the Islamic government.²⁰

Lothrop Stoddard admits Umar’s leniency and tolerance towards Christians and deference towards their holy shrines. He maintains the Umar meticulously preserved the sanctity of Christian holy shrines and monuments. And the succeeding caliphs persevered in their attempt to uphold the same policy of tolerance and coexistence. They did not make any hurdles for those Christian pilgrims who came annually from every nook and cranny of the Christendom to visit Jerusalem.²¹

Describing the Christian experience under the rule of the Turks, Richard Stebbins writes that the Turks bestowed freedom of religion and conscience on the Greek Orthodox as well as Roman Catholics. They were generously allowed to observe their religious rituals and practices in Constantinople as well as in several other places. Contrary to the above mentioned treatment, Richard Stebbins remarks that in Spain they were compelled to participate in their Papist celebrations and their grandchildren’s lives were in serious jeopardy.²²

Thomas Arnold states in his ‘Invitation to Islam’ that there was a legion of people in Italy who earnestly longed for Ottoman rule. They wished to be blessed with the same tolerance and religious freedom which the Ottomans rulers provided to their Christian subjects. In fact, the Christians for they had lost hope to regain the same freedom and tolerance under any Christian government. Arnold also mentions that a large number of Jews fled to Ottoman Turkey in order to avoid persecution in Spain at the end of the 15th century.²³

Conclusion

Islam puts great value on freedom of religion and conscience. It runs counter to the very principle of freedom to compel non-Muslims to embrace Islam. As described above in sufficient details, the use of sword and force is strictly prohibited in matters of religions. Neither the prophet of Islam nor his four rightly guided caliphs resorted to power to enforce the religion of Islam on unwilling minds and hearts. However, there are some examples in history, informing us that some Muslim officials have mistreated non-Muslim minorities but it should be born in mind that they have indeed violated the vital principles of Qur’an and *sunnah*.

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