

Ethics of Pluralism and Religious Tolerance in Quranic Perspective

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ABSTRACT: The advent of Islam as a universal religion guided people in all domains of life (social, economic and political). One of Islam's excellent aspects is its generality and applicability to all human beings. Islam stresses on the unity of humanity, it also identifies human diversity and gives valuable principles to deal with ethnic, racial and religious differences in society. There are several verses in the Quran that underlines human pluralities. The pluralistic dimension of Islamic teachings has gained worldwide attention in our time. According to the Quran, all human beings are from the same soul but they have been created with differences. Furthermore, the Quran stresses the significance of religious freedom. There should be no compulsion in religion (Quran, 2:257) Faith is an individual choice; it is something which a man wishes to get in touch, not what is forcibly rendered upon him. To you be your way, and to me be mine (Quran, 109:3) If someone is made to believe a faith by force, it becomes hollow and without true conviction. Religious tolerance is the most important aspect to survive a nonviolent life for both individuals and society. The following research paper describes the ethics of religious tolerance and pluralism throughout the verses of Quran, which will serve as a resolution to the misinterpreted verses of Quran that Islam does not tolerate believers in the other religions and deny socio-religious harmony.

KEYWORDS: Pluralism, religious tolerance, generality, Quranic perspective, socio-religious harmony.

Date of Submission: 25-08-2020

Date of Acceptance: 09-09-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

The Holy Quran frequently highlights the plurality of communities, if Allah had willed 'he would have made you [all] a single people'. Nonetheless, the Almighty has settled humankind into different nations and tribes so that they may come to know one another. Thus, the Quran encourages interactions and relationships between Muslims and Non-Muslims and vie with one another in good deeds. This fraternal ethic is rooted in the Quranic notion of a common humanity, which stresses that all humans irrespective of ideological persuasion are created from a single soul and possess the peak of the divine light.

Pluralism is a word that comprises multitude of meaning and implication. The holy Quran emphasizes the apt doctrine of pluralism which rejects predominant fallacies stuck in the minds of Muslims and Non-Muslims that Islam is an exclusivist religion.

The matter of tolerance among people of different faith is the key factor for national integration, international peace and security at all levels. The messenger (peace be upon him) extended empathetic treatment to the adherents of other faiths as genially as the followers of Islam. It is against the very spirit of Islam to impose its doctrines on disinclined minds and coerce them to observe Islamic rites and practices. The prophet of Islam is the personification of mercy as the holy Quran states; "And we have not sent you but as a mercy to all the worlds." He treated the adherents of Judaism of Madinah in the same way as he treated Muslims. The beloved prophet never inflicted pain on them with a view to converting them to the fold of Islam.

Islam condemns forceful conversion. It believes in nonviolent ways such as discussion and dialogue and gives importance to cogent argumentation. The holy Quran teaches its followers: "invite to the ways 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." 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 is worship. For you, your religion. And for me my religion." It further recommends the prophet to stick to justice and leave the ultimate consequences to the god almighty.

ETHIC OF PLURALISM AND ISLAM

Pluralism itself expresses the coexistence of different religious groups in one society under their own legal and theological circumstances, and that no group has domination over others. Pluralism is utterly different from inclusivism. The ethics of pluralism exist between humans as intrinsic, metaphysical units; that elucidate that there is within every human being a glimmer of divine fire, which links them both to the divine and to each other.

This idea of integrity propounds respect for others on the basis of kindness and humanity, where individuals can co-exist and revere each other's beliefs. The Quran maintains a unique standard among all the religious books of the world as it invites people from all ethnic groups to live together peacefully. It has given recognition to Judaism and Christianity and other major monotheistic religions.

The Quran shows religious pluralism as a divine mystery that must be accepted as a given tool to maintain smooth inter-communal relations in the public square. Besides, Quran presents its theology of 'other' in the form of an ethical model in developing a workable society. The unique characteristic of Islam is its conviction that there is no good except Allah which unites the Muslim community with entire humanity, because Allah is the creator of all humans irrespective of their affiliation to different faith communities. The Quran declares that on the Day of Judgment all human beings will be asked, regardless of their membership in a specific community, about their moral performance as citizens of the world community.

The Quran emphasizes that Allah has consciously created a world of diversity. Multiplicity of races, colours communities and religions are the signs of his forgiveness and glory demonstrated through his creatures. The Quran rather appears to be implying that pluralism is a sort of divine intent and purpose of creation. The Quran says; "O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you different nations and tribes that you may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct." (Quran, 49:13)^[1].

Furthermore, the Quran asserts that all mankind has been one single religious community, all mankind by virtue of their humanity shared in the 'Din-al-fitrah'. It undoubtedly represents Islam as the universal religion and its scripture as god's revelation. Allah as mentioned in the holy Quran He is not the God of Muslims only but of whole humanity. The Quran elucidates this point by asserting; "To Allah belong the east and west and whither so ever you turn, there is Allah's countenance. For Allah is all-embracing, all-knowing." (Quran, 2:115)^[2].

The divine message can be helpful in conducting their followers towards a pluralistic environment. The Quranic exegesis, tradition (sunnah) and Islamic jurisprudence have expanded this topic to a wide-ranging discussion on the religious traditions faced by Muslims in the budding stage of their history: Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. Islam restricts saying anything disparaging and inflammatory about the goddess and beliefs of other religions. It acknowledges the existence of the major religions based upon divine revelation and their modification resulted owing to the corruption by some human hands.

The Quran states: "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." (Quran, 6:108)^[3].

Islam identifies pluralism the most significant social, political and moral issue. Islam from the very beginning encouraged and responded to a pluralistic world because both the holy Quran and Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (peace be up on him) reveal pluralism that is fairly more advanced and practical when compared to other religious teachings and faiths.

HUMAN DIVERSITY IS DIVINELY PLANNED

The Quran clearly mentions that Allah has purposely created the world to be divided in and composed of plenty of nations, tribes, ethnicities and languages. The Quran declares:

"Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variation in your languages, and your colours; verily in that are signs for those who know." (Quran, 30:22)^[4].

The intention behind such differences is not to promote any sort of discord, detestation or conflict, but, rather, they are undeniably Allah's signs that mankind should endeavor to achieve a better mutual understanding. We live in the age where all of us are eager to know more and more about everything, about, religion, civilization, linguistic, ethic, etc. due to the large scale of immigration resulting from globalization, human societies are converting into more diversified necessitating the acknowledgment of pluralism, passive coexistence and dialogue.

Islam from the very beginning welcomes the process of dialogue to triumph over the variations and make a relaxing environment for mutual co-existence. The Quran says: "Say; O people of the scripture! Come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall ascribe no partner into Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto him)." (Quran, 3:64)^[5].

THE QUR'ANIC EMPHASIS ON RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

The holy Quran does not allow forceful conversion. God the al-mighty says: there is no compulsion in religion. Allah has not compelled anyone, so who are we to do so. Islam believes in peaceful ways such as discussion and dialogue and gives importance to logical argumentation. The holy Quran states; "Invite to the way of your lord with wisdom and good instruction." It further instructs its followers to stick to truth and justice and ask the Allah to guide those who disobey their callings. Tolerant attitude of Islam is deeply rooted in its scripture (the holy Quran). On the other hand, religious intolerance, fanaticism and aggression run against the teachings of the holy Quran. However, in the present time some renowned modern writers willing try to portray Islam as an intolerant and violent religion.

Robert Spencer compares the Prophet Muhammad and Prophet Jesus and describes Muhammad as a warrior prophet and founder of the world's most intolerant religion. On the contrary, he portrays Jesus, a prince of peace who never promoted violence. Moreover, he made a comparative study between the holy Quran and the Bible and declared that the former is replete with hatred and instructions of war whereas the latter presents such war perceptions. Spencer concludes that considering Islam as a religion of peace, tolerance and coexistence is nothing but a piece of fictions (Spencer, 2006)^[6].

It is a matter of great grievance that such egoistic writers, intentionally or due to lack of knowledge, underestimate the verses of the Quran which were sent down before Jihad was officially permitted. The companions of prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) within the compound of Makkah were tortured for a prolonged time and were eventually compelled to quit their hometown. Following verses were revealed prior to 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" (Quran 15:13)^[7].

According to Al-Qaradawi, religious tolerance in Islam is divided into three stages. The first stage is the lowest level, which allows people of different faiths to choose their belief (freedom of religion). This means that it does not force to worship a religion with various emphasis such as threats of killing, torture or deprivation of property. The second stage is a simple stage, giving the right to embrace religion or choosing the beliefs he loves, while not pushing for something he believes in whether it is obligatory or illegal. Furthermore, the third stage is the highest level of religious tolerance, which does not prohibit those who profess other religions in performing rituals that have been legalized by their religion, even though the matter is banned by other religions. In fact, it is understandable that Islam focuses on religious tolerance in social life, as well as Islam gives every man freedom to embrace religion and to choose his beliefs based on his own intension (Qaradawi, 1989)^[8].

The holy Quran asks its adherents to "repel the evil with that which is best. We know well what they attribute." (Quran, 23:96)^[9]. It further says that "if they argue with you, say, I have submitted myself to Allah [in Islam], and so have those who follow me." And it says to the people of the book "Have you submitted yourselves?" And if they submit in Islam, they are rightly guided; but if they turn away- the upon you is only the duty of notification. And Allah is seeing his servants (Quran 3:20)^[10].

The Holy Quran repeats the same messages in the following verses:

"And the servants of the most merciful are those who walked upon the earth easily, and when the ignorant address them [harshly], they say words of peace." A big number of the companions of the prophet Muhammad, including Abu Bakr, ibn Abbas, Saeed ibn Jubair, explained that the following verse is the first one giving the permission of war^[11]. "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." The earlier verse permitted Muslims to kick off and wage war only when their opponents exceeded an insufferable extreme. Furthermore, the very next verse of the same 'Surah' intensely elaborates the final purpose behind Islamic Jihad. The main intention is not to convert followers of other faiths and religions into Islam, it is rather waged to defend 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." (Quran, 22:40)^[12]. Jihad means a War to defend persecution, subjugation and injustice, as stated in Surah Baqarah; "Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors."

The ethics and principles of tolerance and justice towards other religious sects has been admired and cherished by non-Muslims. Patriarch Ghaytho big heartedly acknowledges that Arabs who exercised political sway treated the Christian citizens of the state in a very cordial manner. He further adds that the Arab leaders appreciated the Christian components of the society and offered complete protection to priests and saints along with financial aid for their monasteries and churches^[13].

Furthermore, Karen Armstrong admires the tolerance and peace that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) spread after the conquest of Mecca. She does not accept this conquest as a military victory. To Karen, the conquest of Mecca was a splendid dawn of a new era of peace, tolerance and brotherhood. She quotes a beautiful verse from the holy Quran: "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." (Quran, 49:13)^[14].

Karen Armstrong firmly believes that Muhammad (peace be upon him) was exemplary personality and being so his teachings are significant not only for his Muslims followers but also for the Western people. She praises his unusual "struggle" against violence, ignorance, injustice and animosity. In her view, Muhammad (peace be upon him) literary sweated with the struggle to establish harmony and peace in the war-wrecked Arabia.

II. CONCLUSION

Islam puts great importance on freedom of religion and conscience. It runs against to the very principle of freedom to compel non-Muslims to accept Islam. The Quran sets its principle as "no compulsion" in religion. As mentioned above in details, the use of force and sword is extremely prohibited in matters of religion. Neither the prophet of Islam nor his companions made use of power to enforce Islam on unwilling minds. One finds numerous examples of pluralism and religious freedom in the Muslim history such as Constitution of Medina (Sahifat Al-Madina), placing of black stone, Umar bin al-Khattab's (second caliphate of Islam) assurance of safety to the people of Aelia-Byzantine Jerusalem. It should be born in mind that whoever among Muslim officials mistreated non-Muslim minorities in any case they have indeed violated the very basic principles of Quran and Sunnah.

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Mohammad Hashim bin Mohammad Ezdani, et. al. "Ethics of Pluralism and Religious Tolerance in Quranic Perspective." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(9), 2020, pp. 23-26.