

Religious Tolerance in Islam

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One of the most important aspects of the Human Rights issue is the respect and tolerance which society must show towards the religions of other people; this, of course, includes the issue of freedom of religion. Tonight I would like to talk very briefly about the Islamic point of view on religious tolerance.

The Qur'anic Point of View

Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, believes in prophets and messengers of God— One interesting way of understanding the Islamic view on freedom of religion is to look at the role of the prophets and messengers.

Had they been sent to forcefully bring the people into their teachings? Were Moses, Jesus and Muhammad ordered by the Almighty to impose their teachings upon the people by sword? Absolutely not! Look at the Qur'an, the holy scripture of Islam; the revealed words of God where He clearly outlines the duty of his messengers by saying:

“(And as for My messenger,) there is no (obligation) on him except to deliver (the message). God knows what you expose and what conceal”. (5:99).

Once the people of Mecca said to Prophet Muhammad that if God did not want them to worship idols then why He does not forcefully prevent them from doing so. Then God sent the following message:

“(O Muhammad) This is not a new excuse; those who went before, them made, the same excuses. Is there anything upon the messengers except the duty of conveying of the message”. (16: 35).

So we see that from the Qur'anic point of view, the mission of the prophets and messengers of God was not to forcefully impose their teachings on the people but to guide them and ask them to accept God with their own will, in one revelation, God says to Prophet Muhammad:

"But if the people turn away (then do not be sad because) We did not send you to be a guardian over them. It is for you only to deliver the message." (42:43).

The Qur'an clearly says that religion cannot be forced on anyone. It says,

"There is no compulsion in (accepting) the religion (of Islam)..."

Why? Because:

"truly the right way has become clearly distinct from error." (2:256).

The Prophet's Example

The Prophet of Islam faced much difficulty and opposition in his own birth-place, the city of Mecca. He was eventually forced to migrate to Medina. But in spite of all the opposition and even physical torture that his followers suffered in Mecca, Prophet Muhammad always approached the unbelievers of Mecca with tolerance. At one stage of his mission, the Prophet read to them a short chapter from the revelation:

"O you who do not believe! I worship not what you worship, and you are not worshipping what I worship; nor am I worshipping what you worship; neither -art you worshipping what I worship. Therefore, to you your religion; and to me my religion!" (chap. 109)

When Prophet Muhammad migrated to Medina, he found that besides those who had accepted Islam, there was a large Jewish community in that city but this did not bother him. He did not contemplate on forcing them into the Fold of Islam, instead, he made a peace agreement with them and called them *ahlul kitab*—the people of the Scripture. This was indeed the supreme example of tolerance shown towards the followers of other religions.

The peace agreement between the Prophet and the Jews of Medina clearly guaranteed the physical safety and security of the Jewish community and also the freedom to practise their religion freely as long as that community also abided the terms of the treaty.

So we see that even historically, the Prophet of Islam was prepared to live in peace with the followers of other monotheistic religions, especially Judaism and Christianity.

Even the letters that the Prophet wrote to the rulers of various countries and nations around Arabia are interesting documents for our discussion. In none of the letters does the Prophet threaten them of a military aggression if they did not accept the message of Islam. The letter to the Christian King of Abyssinia ends with the words: "I have conveyed the message and now it is up to you to accept it. Once again,

peace be upon him who follows the true guidance."

We have an interesting historical document with us from our fourth Imam, 'Ali Zaynul Abidin (a.s.). This document is entitled as Risalatu 'l huquq which means "The Charter of Rights".

In this Risalah, the Imam has mentioned rights related to various issues and people in human society, the last part is on the rights of non-Muslims in a Muslim society. Among other things, it says: "And there must be a barrier keeping you from doing any injustice to them, from depriving them of the protection provided by God, and from flaunting the commitments of God and His Messenger concerning them.

Because we have been told that the Holy Prophet said, "Whosoever does injustice to a protected non-Muslim, then I will be his enemy (on the Day of Judgement)," In a letter which Imam 'Ali wrote for his governor in Egypt, he says, "Sensitive your heart to mercy for the subjects, and to affection and kindness for them. Do not stand over them like greedy beasts who feel it is enough to devour them, for they are of two kinds; either your brother in faith or like you in Creation." {Nahju 'l-Balagha, letter 53}.

The Muslim History

Unfortunately, the events after the First World War to the present time have created an atmosphere in the Western world where Islam is branded as a religion of terror and where Muslims are generally labelled as terrorists. History books, especially by the Orientalists, like to present the picture of the Muslims as holding the Qur'an in one hand and the sword in another—thus implying that wherever the Muslims went, they gave only two choices to the conquered people: Islam or death.

However, more serious historians would challenge this distorted picture of Muslims. There is no denying that Muslims in Middle East and Asia conquered lands of other peoples but they did not impose their religion over them. There is a clear distinction, in history, between, "the expansion of Muslim states" and "the expansion of Islam" as a religion.

For example, Muslims ruled India for many centuries, but majority of its citizens always remained non-Muslims. India came under Muslim rule by force, but Islam penetrated among the people of India by propagation and example of the Sufis. This is a fact which has been clearly elaborated by the famous journalist-writer of India, Khuswant Singh, in the first volume of his The History of Sikhs.

Time does not allow me to go into this discussion more than this, but let me say one thing about the issue of tolerance towards minorities and freedom of practicing religion; if we were to compare the attitude of the Muslim rulers towards the minorities living under their rule during the nineteenth century—with the attitude of the Europeans and the Americans towards their minorities, I dare to say that the record of the Muslims would be much better.

I think it would be sufficient to quote Roderic H- Davison, a prominent Western historian of the Ottoman Empire. On the issue of tolerance towards the minorities, Davison writes¹:

"It might in fact have been argued that the Turks were less oppressive of their subject people than were Prussians of the Poles, the English of the Irish, or the Americans of the Negroes – There is evidence to show that in this period {late 19th century}, there was emigration from independent Greece into the Ottoman Empire, since some Greeks found the Ottoman government s more indulgent master {than their own Greek government}."

1. Reform of the Ottoman Empire 1856–1876, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 116.

Publisher(s):

The Right Path (quarterly magazine of Ahlul Bayt Assembly of Canada) [4]

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