



Islam on Religious tolerance and Pluralism

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Abstract:

Due to 9/11 incident and lack of intensive knowledge of the Quran; Islam becomes the controversial religion throughout the world and particularly in the west. So, there is a notion that Islam is a religion of fundamentalism, promotes terror. We have to counter this argument by having a look on "Islam on religious tolerance and pluralism". Apparently, there seems a contradiction about "Islam on religious tolerance and pluralism", but if we go deep into this concern, we find many verses of the Quran which signifies that Islamic perspective on "religious tolerance and pluralism" is so vast will accommodate a universe in itself. The root word of Islam is "salima or salama", which implies peace, protection and safety etc., it denotes to seek peace, to promote peace and to live in peace. Islam does not discriminate people on the basis of colour, caste, sex, region and religion etc. Quran states:

*"O people! We created you from a male and a female and (divided) you into (large) peoples and tribes, so that you might recognize one another. Surely, the most honourable amongst you in the sight of Allah is he who fears Allah the most. Certainly Allah is All-knowing, All-aware."*¹

So Islam lays the foundations of unity in diversity. The Quran accepts plurality as a natural phenomenon. In this paper, my focus would be on, how the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ preached the message of "religious tolerance and pluralism" to mankind. He established a pluralistic society in Medina in which citizenship and equal rights were granted to all people despite their caste, colour, sex and religion etc. This ideal society was based on religious tolerance, peace, brotherhood and mercy etc. There were provision of political rights, freedom of expression (3:159) and right of will power (42:38), right of censorship (17:59).

Key words: The Quran, Human kind, Pluralism, Unity, diversity and co-existence.

Introduction:

Islam on religious tolerance and pluralism in its broader sense implies a system, where diverse practices and beliefs are accumulated within an integrated society by providing equality of citizenship to all people without any discrimination despite of religious and any other background. In this ideal society, every individual from any religion has a dignity of honour and respect. Islam provides this concept to humanity, beforehand 1435 years:

“And we have indeed the children of Adam and provided them with (means of transport) over the land in the sea (i.e., in the cities, deserts, rivers and oceans) and bestowed upon them sustenance out of clean and pure things and we have exalted them above most of our creation by conferring upon them superiority.”²

This type of Quranic injunctions has brought a revolution in the history of mankind, and provides a base on which the concept of religious tolerance and pluralistic society lies. Islam does not take sectarian view as some theologians tend to do, but it takes humanitarian basis, not on dogmas, but on good deeds. It condemns those deeds that are harmful to society and humanity at large. There is no distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims. Quran says:

(Allah’s promise of salvation) does not accord with what you desire, or with what People of the book aspire to Whoever does an evil deed will be punished for it, and he will not find for himself any supporter or helper apart from Allah.”³

Henceforth, it stresses upon the unity of mankind. This theme of oneness and tolerance for establishing the “pluralistic society” is repeated in the Quran at many other places. All human beings have been created from a single soul. Quran says:

“O mankind! Fear your Lord who (initiated) your creation from a single soul....”⁴

So, the whole humanity is descended from the same parents Adam and Hawa (A.S.) Quran says:

“And of His signs (too) is the creation of the heavens and the earth and also the diversity of your tongues and colours. Verily, in that are signs for men of knowledge (and research).”⁵

If Allah wills that human kind should live in diversity, then why and how we people intends to disrupt this natural process, we must accept it and follow the laws of Almighty. Thus, national and tribal or other identities are inevitable for knowing each other. This is a clear legitimacy of diversity from the Quran. So, Islam is the religion of peace and universal brotherhood. It emphasizes that the religious places of world religions must be respected and protected. It is inevitable, that whether a church or mosque. Where Allah’s names are much remembered should be protected. Quran says:

“...And had Allah not been repelling one (aggressive) class of human society by the other (through defensive struggle), the cloisters (temples), synagogues, churches and mosques (i.e., religious centers and places of worship of all religions) would have been ruined, where Allah’s Name is abundantly commemorated. And whoever helps (the Din [Religion] of Allah), Allah surely helps him. Allah is indeed All-Powerful, Ever-Dominant.”⁶

Thus, no single place is being privileged in this respect. Hence, again the bond of religious tolerance and pluralism gets more strengthened. It is the privileged distinction of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, who laid the foundation of a society, which was pluralistic in nature. There were people of different tribes, regions and religions etc. The Prophet ﷺ not only accepted them as citizens in Islamic state, but also legitimized by agreement with different groups of people on humanitarian basis, and accorded their dignified existence and rights of different religion and tribes. Let me elaborate it:

1. Honour of Human Beings:

The first and foremost thing on which Quran stresses is the dignity of the children of Adam and Hawa (A.S.). This universality of Quranic injunctions plays a significant role in understanding other religions of the world. The God of Quran is not only the God of Muslim community, but also the God of whole humanity. He did not leave any nation in the darkness, but He illumined them by sending messengers. The purpose of sending every nation a messenger is that people should not justify the rejection of the faith in God by arguing, that they did not receive any message. Islam is to eliminate discrimination based on race, sex, colour, region, religion, socio-economic status etc. It proposes a single Islamic brotherhood. In addition to it, Islam also managed to integrate people of all religions: Jews and Christians etc.

2. Religious freedom in pluralistic society:

It is the will of Almighty that paves a way for religious freedom to all human beings in a society of different religions. Quran says:

“And Allah had so willed, certainly all inhabitants on the earth would have believed (when your Lord has not made them believe by force,) will you coerce the people, until they become believers?”⁷

This verse signifies the universal truth that there is no coercion, to make anyone believe in one faith. Thus Islam guides Muslims to embrace diversity of religions; it is a part of the law of the nature, that God himself created, which is unchangeable. Quran says:

“And you will not find any amendment in Allah’s Sunna.”⁸

The concept of free will is again elaborated by Allah:

“Say: ‘O people, surely the truth has come to you from your Lord. So whoever adopts the path of guidance adopts it for his own good, and he who is misguided goes astray for his own destruction. And I am not a custodian over you (that I should bring you to the path of guidance coercively).”⁹

This is clear that people are bound to differ in respect of the religion they wish to follow. Religious tolerance and pluralism is corollary of the freedom in religion of Islam. This religious freedom starts with the freedom of consciousness. In Islamic state every individual has the right what is good or bad for him, state or social group have no right to impose their

religious or irreligious views on society. It is the rationality which makes human individual as the only authority who could make and choices and decision in the field of religion. Imam Tabari narrates, Two of qaynuqa and nadir were expelled from the medina, that they had in their charge the children of Ansar who had been placed with Jewish families. The biological parents asked the parents' permission to take their children back and raise them as Muslim, but the Prophet said: "there is no compulsion on Islam". This concept is more explicit in Surah al-baqarah.

*"There is no compulsion in Din (Religion). Surely, the guidance has been evidently distinguished from error...."*¹⁰

This emphasizes that there is no compulsion in Islam. This principle regulates the freedom of religious beliefs in Islam. This verse itself functions as a law by safeguarding the freedom of religious belief throughout Islamic history. It is such a Quranic injunction which provides a rationale for religious tolerance that has characterized Islamic history. Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri quotes from Imam Darmi and Ahmad ibn Hanbal that Abd Allah b. Masud said:

"I was in the presence of God's Messenger when this man [Abd Allah b. Nuwaha] and another man came as official representatives of Musaylama (the liar). The Messenger of God asked them, "Do you bear witness that I am the Messenger of God?" They said to him, "We bear witness that Musaylama is the Messenger of God!" The Messenger of God said to them, "I believe in God and His Messengers. Were I to execute ambassadors, I would have executed both of you."¹¹

3. Unity in Diversity: The Quran says:

*"And had your Lord so willed He would have made mankind one Ummah (Community). But He has not done so by force. On the contrary, He has given free choice to all, to adopt a religion.) And (now) these people will always hold divergent views."*¹²

Thus the Quran proclaims the difference among human beings will remain forever; because it is divergence of opinions among people, due to will of Allah. Islam is not totalitarian ideology; like fascism and communism which seeks to dominate the whole society. The Quran recognizes the diversity of human society and commands Muslims to be a part of this society. This fraternal ethic is rooted in the Quranic notion of humanity, which states all humans, regardless of ideological persuasion were created from a single soul. Thus, have within the spark of divinity in every human being. Islam decrees that human kinds of judgment depends upon its righteousness not its allegiance to this or that creed. Righteousness is not in the provision of religious obligations, but rather propagates through social activities; the best way to serve God is to serve humanity, to whom the rest of creation has been entrusted. This is the fundamental doctrine of Islam and is unparalleled in

any other faith that humans will be judged according to human values they possess, as the Quran mentions about the Prophet ﷺ of Islam:

“And O esteemed messenger, we have not sent you but as a mercy for all the worlds).”¹³

The Prophet ﷺ has the honour and eminence is that, he is a mercy for every creature of the universe. All the prophets who came before him were sent for a specific region and group of people, but the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was sent down for all people everywhere. His prophet hood is not limited to any specific area or time Quran says:

“And, (O Beloved,) We have sent you as a Messenger ﷺ to the whole mankind, and Allah is Sufficient as a witness (to your Messengership).”¹⁴

4. Iman is safety for humanity:

The Purpose of prophet hood is to preach Islam to whole humanity, but the point of discussion is that what is Islam and Iman? what is its purpose? Why people are conveyed to accept faith and be persistent on it? Hazrat Fuzala ibn Ubaid narrates that the Prophet ﷺ said: “The true believer is he whom the people trust with regard to their blood and properties.”¹⁵

It is the crux of Islamic society that the non-Muslims of an Islamic state enjoys the same rights and safeguards as their Muslim counterparts. The first right endowed upon them by the Islam of protection against external and aggression and domestic oppression and encroachments, so that they can live their lives peacefully. The Prophet ﷺ said:

“And Muslim who unjustly kills a non Muslim, with whom there is a peace treaty; God will make paradise forbidden for him.”¹⁶

The Prophet ﷺ during his last sermon said, guaranteeing the protection of life, property and honour of the whole humankind:

“Indeed your blood and your property and your honour are inviolable, like the inviolability of this day of yours and this month of yours and this land of yours until the day you meet your Lord.”¹⁷

Conclusion:

In summing up, we can infer that Islam not only endows Muslim citizens with the same rights as their Muslim counterparts, but also offers them equal protection. So, it is the responsibility of the Islamic state to protect the life, honor and property of its on Muslim citizens from any sort of internal and external aggression. In this state, Muslims and non-Muslims are equal with respect to blood, money and retribution. The sanctity of the blood of a Muslim and a non Muslim is the same. In it, Muslim and non Muslims enjoy same rights and responsibilities. Non-Muslims enjoy complete freedom to practise their faith and their places of worships must be protected. The distinction of Islam is that, it tolerates the

existence of other religions, besides being in power. This culture of tolerance, sympathy, empathy, fraternity and brotherhood etc is the basis on which pluralistic society lies. Henceforth, Islam has not confined its sphere of influence not only to Muslim community, but also without any differentiation to all the nations and the communities of the world. Quran is a book of guidance for all nations of the world (6:90). So, its main concern is to uplift the entire mankind.

References:

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