

# Tolerance in Islam

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## Introduction

Islam is a world religion that directs its message to all of humankind. It is a message that commends justice and forbids injustice and builds the pillars of peace on earth and calls for positive co-existence among all of humankind in an atmosphere of brotherhood and tolerance regardless of race, color and belief. All people spring from the same soul.<sup>(1)</sup>

Our world of today is in utmost need for active tolerance and positive co-existence among people more than ever because rapprochement among cultures and interaction among civilizations increase by the day because of the information and communication and technological revolutions that brought down the spatial and temporal borders among nations and peoples so that we all are living in a cosmic village.

Islam is a religion that seeks through its principles and teachings to teach its followers tolerance towards all religions and cultures. For God made all of people his successors on earth and made them partners in responsibility for the material and moral building of the earth. In the Qu'ran<sup>(2)</sup> God informs us of that, an action that leads to the urbanization and civilization. This is why God distinguished man with reason and armed him with knowledge so that he can perform his duty and carry out his responsibility in this life.

This is why the Glorious Qur'an directs its discourse to human reason

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that is considered to be the highest blessing that God bestowed on man. Therefore, man must employ his reason to do the best, and at the same time, the Qur'an asks man to exercise his freedom that God bestowed on him, which is a necessary condition to shoulder responsibility. For God does not accept involuntary worship that makes man incapable of free and responsible action. Man must then protect and not waste his freedom, otherwise, humankind would be damaged.

Concerning the practice of responsible freedom, it should make man aware of the necessity of giving others the chance to practice their freedom because they have the same right that man wants for himself. This means that human relation is among free agents that each give part of his freedom in order to establish a human society that bring the good for all.

In other words, this means that this human society will not be achieved in the correct manner unless tolerance spreads among its members, that is, every individual should wish the other what he wishes for himself.

### **Comprehensive positive tolerance**

No doubt that our awareness that we are sinners<sup>(3)</sup> is accompanied by our awareness of our responsibilities that our human dignity is based upon, a matter that permits us to follow the right tolerant path towards the others who share our humanity and that we are connected to through common human solidarity. Tolerance, as alluded to above, is based recognizing the freedom and dignity of the other. We are all required ethically and religiously to be tolerant with all humans regardless of its racial, cultural, religious, and ideological belongings.

Furthermore, Islam goes beyond making comprehensive tolerance as one of the conditions for the necessary peace of human society but also demand adherence to just behavior towards the other and respect for his civilization,

creeds, and cultural particularities. This could be best described as positive tolerance and not neutral tolerance. For the Qur'an commands us to be just with those who did not fight the Muslims.<sup>(4)</sup>

It should be noted that the Qur'an directs the human mind to think over such issues in a gradual manner that fits the culture of every individual. It does not command in a categorical manner but guides and warns to draw the attention to the issue of tolerance. Islam does not provide teaching so that people memorize them and act according in a mechanical manner. It wants to educate the self and realize its potential and act responsibly and out of conviction.

The Qur'anic text includes three matters on the issue of tolerance. First, that almighty God did not prohibit tolerance towards the others, second, tolerance towards the others that did not transgress against the Muslims who should become positively tolerant towards them along the lines of goodness and justice, and third, that following this path is rewarded by divine love.

In this convincing fashion that is free of compulsion to do or refrain from doing something, the Qur'anic message of tolerance reaches the human soul in an easy and simple way and realizes its objective, that is, tolerance among people to the largest extent.

### **Tolerance and pluralism**

Therefore, the human difference over races, beliefs, and languages should not be seen as a barrier to rapprochement, tolerance, positive co-existence among peoples. For God has created people to be different, and difference among peoples' races, languages and beliefs must not be a source of conflict or a justification for contestation and division among nations and peoples.<sup>(5)</sup> Rather, it should be a source of diversity that leads people to recognize and cooperate with each other in order to exchange their objectives

and mutual benefits and cooperation to achieve a fruitful and good life. For Gold tells us that he created humankind as peoples so that they recognize each other.<sup>(6)</sup> Recognition is the first step towards amicability and cooperation in all fields.

In order to arrive at this objective we must find a way for understanding and exchanging of feelings and ideas by people. Language is thus used by people to express their objectives, feelings, and ideas. Understanding through language is regarded as a refined style of communication among people and exchange of ideas that lead to mutual benefits among them.

Difference in opinion or thought or belief should not lead to spoiling relations among people. This is expressed in the saying that difference in opinion should not lead to spoiling good relations. If I give myself the right to have my own opinion and independent perspective, I should give the other the same right. The other has the same right. It is his right to have his own opinion and independent perspective as well as different belief. Every individual has his independent character. The symbol that God has given us for this independence is represented by the different fingerprints that people have. Thus, difference in opinion is natural and is not an abnormality.

Therefore people should be open to opposing opinions, not only in everyday matters but also in matters of religion, thought, and politics. No party has the right to claim that he alone possesses the absolute truth and that the other stands on the side that corresponds to evil. Imam al-Shafi'i expressed this meaning about tolerance in a magnificent saying: Our opinion is right that could be wrong and the other's opinion is wrong that could be right.

The Islamic scope of tolerance is limitless, which Shaykh Muhammad 'Abdu expressed in the following manner: If someone says something that could mean unbelief in one hundred ways and mean belief in only one way, we should not take it to mean belief. He comments on this by saying that

there was no more tolerance among philosophers and sages than this.<sup>(7)</sup>

### **Tolerance and Dialogue**

The real meaning of dialogue does not lead to its objective unless there is mutual respect among the parties of the dialogue and respect for the perspective of the other. In this sense, dialogue means tolerance and respect of the others' freedom. Respecting the other's opinion does not mean accepting it. The objective of the dialogue is not merely to diffuse tension between different opinions or neutralizing the opinion of the other. Its greater aim is to enrich thought and solidify the value of tolerance among people and pave the way for a fruitful cooperation that brings good to all involved. It also searches for common grounds that form the solid base for constructive cooperation among nations and peoples. Thus, dialogue is a value of civilization that must be maintained and spread at all levels.

Awareness about all of this must be taught to all new generations, especially through examples and not memorization. The painful reality is that there a lot of violent altercations that are not objective, which could turn to a serious conflict and even beating among those who have different opinions. For each party wants to impose his opinion at all costs. This applies not only to the lower classes but also to a large section of the intellectuals and educators. In this case, intellectual dialogues end up in swearing and insult and personal attacks that have nothing to do with the original topic to be discussed. This means the absence of objectivity and shallowness of thought that lacks logic and debating skills.

The lack of objectivity in dialogue in this fashion does not fit man who God has chosen over all created things and distinguished with reason and made him His successor on earth so that he fills it with goodness and knowledge and spreads justice, security, peace, and righteousness.



No doubt that dialogue in our age is more urgent than ever. Actually, it has become of the necessities of life, not only at an individual level but also at the level of different nations and peoples. If some states in the new century still prefer the law of the jungle instead of resorting to dialogue, the international community must correct this and bring back those states moved away from the values of civilization and humanity to what is correct so that they follow a civilized way in dealing with the others, that is dialogue. There is no better way to conflict resolution other than dialogue.

Because of the utmost importance that the Qur'an<sup>(8)</sup> attached to the recognition of nations, peoples, civilizations, and religions, Islam called for dialogue among religions because of their deep influence on souls. Islam is regarded as the first religion that invites other religions to dialogue. The Qur'an calls on the people of the book to a common ground, which is to worship no one but God and not to worship any partners that are added to him.<sup>(9)</sup>

Furthermore, the Qur'an did not just call for dialoge among religions but also put a method that must be followed by Muslims: it commands Muslims not to use polemics but to use good arguments except those who are unjust, for all of mankind has one creator.<sup>(10)</sup>

Judging others that share our humanity must be left to God. It is better for us to work hard to follow in our life just and tolerant behavior with the others who have not hurt us. Religion values only deeds that we are responsible for. This is why the Qur'an tells us that the Prophet is ordered to administer justice among all, and God will see the deeds of all. For God is our destiny.<sup>(11)</sup>

## **Religious Tolerance**

Because of the extensive depth of religion dialogue among religions cannot be successful except when the interlocutors are tolerant instead of being

bigot towards other religions. Islam has been very emphatic in stressing the value of tolerance among religions by making it an element of the Islamic creed.

All of the monotheistic religions, are, from an Islamic perspective, a series of connected chains of one message that the prophets and messengers have delivered from God. The Qur'an tells us that the Prophet has believed in what was revealed to him from God, and the believers believe in God, angels, prophets, books, messengers without any distinction.<sup>(12)</sup>

This is why the Islamic position is distinctive when it comes to religious dialogue, for it is very tolerant and open to the other to the largest extent. Islam has determined from the very beginning religious and cultural pluralism, and pluralism became a distinctive sign of its teachings. There are many and multiple examples for this. The Madina society after the migration of the Prophet to Yathrib was based on religious and cultural pluralism. The Muslims exercised that in its practical dimension in their long history.

This is evident from what is known in history where the Muslims never forced any one to convert to Islam. Religious freedom is guaranteed for all. This is one of the principles of Islam that the Qur'an affirmed, No Compulsion in religion.<sup>(13)</sup> And God said in another verse, "let those who want to believe do so and those who want to disbelieve to do so."<sup>(14)</sup>

## **Conclusion**

From what has been said, it is clear that positive tolerance, being comprehensive and religious, is a main element of Islamic teachings, and therefore, one of the objectives of Islamic education.

Consequently, Muslim adherence to tolerance and protection of the rights of the followers of other religions who live in Muslim societies is part of their religious commitment that requires protecting and defending general

human rights of all. Any transgression or aggression of these rights is a transgression and aggression against Islamic teachings. Such an act should be confronted by all means. In this context we should understand the Prophet's saying, "the person who sees wrong-doing, he should try to rectify it by all means."<sup>(15)</sup>

Therefore, it is not tolerance when we do nothing about injustice and harshness that any person is subjected to, regardless of his race, color or creed. In the end of our talk on tolerance I would like mention one known maxim about 'Umar Bin al-Khattab, which is considered to be a great example of positive Islamic tolerance. As one of his customs, Umar was roaming the streets of Madina checking on his population. He saw an old man begging on the street. Umar asked him about his situation and realized that he was a Jew. The Caliph was saddened by what happened to the old man, which forced him to beg. He ordered that the beggar should be given a fixed stipend from the Islamic funds that allow him to live a decent life. This caliph is also famous for his saying, "When did you enslave people, although God created them free!"<sup>(16)</sup>

Another example is the level of Muslim defense of human freedom, dignity, and rights, regardless of their racial, religious or cultural belongings. All of this cannot be given up, for Islamic tolerance is be a mark of this religion till the Day of Judgment.



## Endnotes:

- (1) See al-Nisa': 1
- (2) Hud: 62
- (3) As indicated by a Prophetic Hadith, every human falls into sin, and the best is the one who repents. See al-Manwai's *Fayd al-Qadir*, vol. 5, p. 61 (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1972).
- (4) Mumtahina: 8
- (5) Hud: 118-119
- (6) Hujurat: 13
- (7) See Al-Islam wa al-Nusraniyya
- (8) Hujurat:13
- (9) Al Imran: 64
- (10) 'Ankabut: 46
- (11) Shura: 15
- (12) Al-Baqara:285
- (13) Al-Bakara: 256
- (14) Al-Kahf: 29
- (15) narrated by Muslim and al-Hakim in al-Mustadrak, see Fayd al-Qadir, vol. 6, p. 130.
- (16) See 'Ali al-Tantawi, *Akhbar Umar*, p 182 (Damascus, 1959).