

Religious Forbearance In light of the Life of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم)

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Abstract

Today's world has become very complex and we are going through an age of information, geographical unification of countries and internationalization of learning and economics. Besides all this we do see aggression in the name of race, creed and religion. Religious forbearance and harmony is scarce in today's world. In fact religion is a very strong tool to overcome all such aggressions and lack of harmony.

Islam is a religion of peace which has preached tolerance and acceptance more than any other religion of the world. There are many verses of the Holy Quran and saying of the Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) which can be quoted in this regard.

The real inspiration in connection with religious harmony and forbearance is the life of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم). There are many events and incidents which can be quoted from the Seerah of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) and they are full of the lessons of religious harmony and forbearance. While in Makkah Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) had to deal with the people from various religious backgrounds including polytheists, Christians, Jews and hypocrites. After his migration to Madinah he had to live in even more diverse and much dimensional religious society. Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم), gave full protection to Christians of conquered territories in all religious, spiritual, social, cultural, economic and legal matters; he had warned that anyone who went against these provisions was an accursed offender on Islam. Non-Muslim citizens were treated as equals to Muslims.

In fact it was incumbent on the governments to protect their life and property so much so that they were exempt from military service. Islam strongly rejects fanaticism in any form. Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم), clearly distinguished fanaticism from loyalty. He legitimized loyalty by saying: To love one's people is not fanaticism but to wreak cruelty on other people is. He condemned those who facilitate such cruelty. From the life of Prophet it is understood that he is to attend feast of people of other faiths, visit their sick and welcome the delegations and honor them thus setting wonderful example to the world community.

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The Article:

The religious forbearance has got to play a vital role in global peace; one of the main reasons of the inadequacy of the peace in the world is religious intolerance. Religious intolerance is, in fact, a desire to prove your religion by overcoming on others' religions. After having a glimpse at the human history we can see that people have been killed and rituals have been demolished on religious grounds and all this has led to state of war. For instance, the bloodshed between Jews and Christians went on for years; in the fourth century AD Christianity had full control over Roman Empire and the Constantine ordered to burn any Jew who practiced worship and any Christian who embraced Judaism. ⁱ In sixth century AD *Thu Nuwas Al Hamiri* was leading all the movements against Christians who were thrown in ditches and all of their churches in Yemen were burnt. The Holy Qur'an refers to these incidents in the following words.

قِيلَ أَصْحَابُ الْأَخْضُدِ، النَّارِ ذَاتِ الْوُفُودِ

Woe to the makers of the pit (of fire), Fire supplied (abundantly) with fuel.ⁱⁱ

An effort to obliterate a religion forcefully always leads to a severe reaction. Thus, Christians longed to avenge for what had happened to them and for this they asked the assistance of Ethiopian kings just as Jews sought the support of Persian kings. As a result, Middle East entered into a massive war between the Romans and Persians - the super powers of that time.ⁱⁱⁱ

When Islam came to Arabia in these hostile conditions, not only Christians and Jews were unable to comprehend the real essence of religion but Polytheists of Makkah could also not apprehend the true meaning of religion. Consequently, Islam had to face opposition and hostility from everyone.

The Holy Qur'an refers to this at many places;

وَلَا تُطِيعُ كُلَّ حَالِفٍ مَّيِّينَ

Heed not the type of despicable men,- ready with oaths.^{iv}

وَلَقَدْ آسْتَهْزِئُوا بِرُسُلِكَ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ فَحَاقَ بِالَّذِينَ سَخِرُوا مِنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ

Mocked were (many) apostles before thee; but their scoffers were hemmed in by the thing that they mocked. ^v

لَوْ لَا أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْهِ مَلَكٌ

"Why is not an angel sent down to him?"^{vi}

وَقَالُوا لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ هَذَا الْقُرْآنُ عَلَىٰ رَجُلٍ مِّنَ الْاَقْرَبِينَ عَظِيمٍ

Also, they say: "Why is not this Qur'an sent down to some leading man in either of the two (chief) cities?"^{vii}

The Holy Qur'an elaborates on this bigotry at many places and a glimpse of this can be seen in the dialogue between *HazratJa'fer* and the Abyssinian king. *HazratJa'fer bin AbiTalib* said, "O King, we were an ignorant people. We used to worship idols and eat carrion. We used to commit any kind of wrong deed that comes to the mind. We would break off ties with our parents and relatives, harm our neighbors, and oppress the weak. While we were in this state, God sent us a Prophet from among ourselves. A prophet whose progeny, integrity, trustworthiness, honor, and purity we knew of. He called us to believe in the existence and oneness of God, to worship Him, and to abandon the idols that both we and our forefathers worshipped. He commanded us to be forthright, to deliver all that has been entrusted to us to their rightful places, to protect the rights of our relatives, to get along with our neighbors, and to avoid sins and bloodshed. He prohibited us from fornication, lies, encroaching upon the rights of orphans, and slandering honorable women. We have testified to him and his cause. We have submitted to what he brings from God and makes known to us. For that reason, our tribe has treated us like an enemy and has tortured us. They inflicted all kinds of torture and persecution to dissuade us from our religion, hinder us from worshipping God, and to make us worship their idols. Due to all of these reasons, we abandoned our homeland and homes and came to your country. We sought shelter from you and preferred you to others. We hope not to face torture and injustice in your presence."^{viii}

It was obvious from the words of *HazratJa'fer* that the Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) came with the teachings of the freedom of belief and religious forbearance. By no means were his teachings meant to suppress the followers of other religions; in fact, he prohibited to force anyone in the matters of religion.

The following verses of the Holy Quran elaborate this vital point by saying;

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ

Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error.^{ix}

Majority of the jurists are of the opinion that this verse is not abrogated and is one of the basic and fundamental verses of the Holy Qur'an.

وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَأَمَنَّ مِنَ فِي الْأَرْضِ كُلَّهُمْ جَمِيعًا أَفَأَنْتَ تُكْرَهُ النَّاسَ حَتَّىٰ يَكُونُوا مُؤْمِنِينَ

If it had been thy Lord's will, they would all have believed,- all who are on earth! wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe.^x

وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكَ فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ

Say, "The truth is from your Lord": Let him who will believe, and let him who will, reject (it).^{xi}

Rasheed Raza elaborates these verses by saying, "the verse *لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ* and other similar verses indicate that the religion is an optional guidance for the people which contains all the evidences and signs and compelling anyone for it is not allowed. The religion should be preached in a way that the truth and the falsehood are made clear for the people and they should be left with their free choice to accept it or reject it. As far as war is concerned, it is to safeguard the preaching of the religion and to protect the people of the faith from the persecution of pagans. It is to help the weak to follow his religion with his free will. In other words the principle of no compulsion in religion is one of the major principles of Islam.^{xii} Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) signed various treaties with people from different religious backgrounds. To further elaborate the Islamic concept of religious forbearance, two of Prophet's treaties are mentioned here;

Treaty of Madinah:

When Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) migrated to Madinah, there lived people from different religions and races, for instance, twelve tribes of *Ausand Khazraj*, twenty tribes of Jews^{xiii} and Muslim immigrants who belonged to different tribes. *Ausand Khazraj* had been fighting for years and the various Jewish tribes had had allies of either *Ausor Khazraj*. The people of Madinah were tired of these fights and wished peace. Every tribe was independent and resolved their issues independently. There was no central civic system. Religion was considered a personal matter of an individual and it had nothing to do with political matters.

Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) had to focus on quite a few urgent matters while signing the treaty with the people of Madinah, but he emphasized, in particular, the religious rights of the people. There were two major parts of this treaty; one was regarding the rights and duties of *Ansar* and Immigrants and the second was only about the rights and the duties of Jewish tribes. It was because of this treaty that people from every tribe and religion came to know about their religious rights which allowed them to practice their religions freely. This kind of an example of religious forbearance cannot be quoted elsewhere in human history.

Treaty with the people of Najran:

Najran was situated in the North East of Yemen. The Christians of *Hamdan* tribe used to live there and it was the centre of Christianity in Arabian Peninsula. Jewish king *Zuwanu* was killed them in multitude when they refused to embrace Christianity. Roman and Abyssinian kings fought against the Jewish king and killed him. ^{xiv} There were two groups living in *Najran* and one of these was *Bani Harith*. They were idolaters who embraced Islam at the hand of Khalid bin Waleed. A delegation of sixty people from the other group who were Christians came to Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم). They met the Prophet in his mosque and at the time for their worship, they prayed in the mosque facing east. They discussed different matters with the Prophet especially those regarding Prophet Esa. When Prophet asked them to embrace Islam, they said that they were already Muslims. The Holy Prophet denied that and when the arguments did not come to an end, these Qu'ranic verses were revealed and the Christians were invited for *Mubahala*:

إِنَّ مَثَلَ عِيسَىٰ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ آدَمَ خَلَقَهُ مِنْ تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ قَالَ لَهُ كُن فَيَكُونُ. الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكَ فَلَا تَكُن مِّنَ الْمُمْتَرِينَ .
فَمَنْ حَاجَّكَ فِيهِ مِن بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ فَقُلْ تَعَالَوْا نَدْعُ آبَاءَنَا وَأَبْنَاكُمْ وَنِسَاءَنَا وَنِسَاءَكُمْ وَأَنْفُسَنَا وَأَنْفُسَكُمْ ثُمَّ نَبْتَهِلْ فَنَجْعَل لَّعْنَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَى الْكَاذِبِينَ

The similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him: "Be". And he was. The Truth (comes) from Allah alone; so be not of those who doubt. If any one disputes in this matter with thee, now after (full)

knowledge Hath come to thee, say: "Come! let us gather together,- our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves: Then let us earnestly pray, and invoke the curse of Allah on those who lie."^{xv}

The Christians became worried when they were asked to invoke the curse of Allah and after consultation with each other they accepted the statute of Islamic State. As a result, a treaty was signed with them. The treaty gave them full freedom in their religious and administrative matters.^{xvi}

The Concept of *Jihad* in Islam:

The Islamic concept of Jihad is not based in religious wars or lack of tolerance. In other words, Islam does not promote religious wars; in fact, the war of Islam is against sedition and devil. The life history of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم shows such incidents in which he helped pagans who were needy and destitute. Two of these incidents are mentioned here as an example of the behavior of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم).

1. The people of Makkah who forced the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) to leave his homeland, were helped by him when they were suffering from famine. As a gesture of good behavior Prophet sent them five hundred dirhams.^{xvii}
2. *Thamama*, the chief of *Yamama*, after embracing Islam stopped the supplies of the pagans of Makkah. When the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) came to know about this, he asked for the restoration of the supplies.^{xviii}

If the Islamic concept of Jihad was to kill non-Muslims, these were the best occasions to do so. And on the day when Makkah was conquered, the Holy Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said;

المرحمة يوم اليوم

Today is the day of mercy.

He further said;

اذهبوا أنتم الطلقاء

Go! You are free today.

He proclaimed general amnesty for everyone and made history by setting a great example of religious forbearance and forgiveness.^{xix}

If Islam was meant to genocide non-Muslims, Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم would not have asked to protect women, children, the old and those who had nothing to do with the war.^{xx}

These arguments conclude that the war of Islam was not against the peaceful non-Muslim commonality but, in fact, it was against those who were instigators and a threat to the beliefs, properties and honors of others. Allowing such people to have their will unfair and harmful for others. The Holy Qur'an says;

وَقَاتِلُوهُمْ حَتَّىٰ لَا تَكُونَ فِتْنَةٌ

And fight them on until there is no more Tumult or oppression.^{xxi}

As far as those non-Muslims are concerned who were not involved in any mischievous acts and lived in peace with Muslims, Islam urged Muslims to be kind to them and to form good bilateral relations with them. The Holy Qur'an says;

لَا يَنْهَاكُمْ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ

Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them.^{xxii}

وَإِنْ أَحَدٌ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ اسْتَجَارَكَ فَأَجِرْهُ حَتَّىٰ يَسْمَعَ كَلَامَ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ أَبْلِغْهُ مَأْمَنَهُ

If one amongst the Pagans ask thee for asylum, grant it to him, so that he may hear the word of Allah. and then escort him to where he can be secure.^{xxiii}

وَإِنْ جَنَحُوا لِلسَّلْمِ فَاجْنَحْ لَهَا وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ

But if the enemy inclines towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace, and trust in Allah, for He is One that hears and knows (all things).^{xxiv}

Sanctity of the Religious Symbols:

When the wish to influence another religion is not based on preaching with love and compassion and on true knowledge, this desire takes people to extremism. As a result not only the people of other religions are persecuted but the sanctity of the religious symbols is also violated which eventually leads to a state of war. If we analyze the grounds of the wars fought in the history, we would observe that religious aspect was one of the main reasons of most of these wars and sanctity of the religious symbols was violated. The riots between Muslims and Hindus in India

are a very good example of this extremism where sanctity of the religious symbols was violated. In December 1992 Hindu extremists dilapidated Babari Masjid in Gujarat which resulted in deadly insurgence; more than one thousand people lost their lives. The aftermath of this is still there as the mosque has not been rebuilt. Similarly, in Germany a woman named Marwa was mocked for covering her face and then was killed in a court in the presence of a large number of people. In March 2010 a few Muslims attacked a church in Egypt which caused a tension between Muslims and Christians. Islamic point of view of jihad is very clear about the sanctity of the religious symbols. The Holy Qur'an says;

وَلَوْلَا دَفْعُ اللَّهِ الْإِنْسَانَ بَعْضَهُم بِبَعْضٍ لَهَدَمْتُ صَوَامِعُ وَبِيَعٌ وَصَلَوَاتٌ وَمَسَاجِدُ يُذْكَرُ فِيهَا اسْمُ اللَّهِ كَثِيرًا

Did not Allah check one set of people by means of another, there would surely have been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, in which the name of Allah is commemorated in abundant measure.^{xxv}

Interpreters of Qur'an say that the decree of jihad negates the repression in this regard and jihad protects the worship places of different religions.^{xxvi} Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) eradicated this very cause of state of war when he wrote to the Christians and other non-Muslims of Najran;

ان لهم ما تحت ايديهم من قليل و كثير من بيعهم و صلواتهم و رهبانيتهم و جوار الله و رسوله لا يغير اسقف من اسقفينه و لا راهب من رهبانيته و لا كاهن من كهانته.

Whatever monasteries, churches they possess will remain in their possession and no bishop, monk or priest should be stopped from his work.^{xxvii}

And the Holy Qur'an refers to the sanctity of the religious symbols by saying;

لَا تُحِلُّوا شَعَائِرَ اللَّهِ

Violate not the sanctity of the symbols of Allah.^{xxviii}

In connection with the sanctity of the religious symbols, there are two very significant events; one regarding Christianity and the other about Islam.^{xxix}

Dr. Israel, the author of *TareekhulYahood fi Bilaad Al Arab*, writes in his book that when Romans conquered Jerusalem in 70 BC, they destroyed the holy scriptures of Jews. The writer then mentions the Muslims who captured Holy Scriptures of Jews as booty in the battle of Khyber. The Jews requested the Holy

Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) for their scriptures to be returned to them. The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) ordered to return their holy scriptures.^{xxx} Dr. Israel refers to this incident by saying, "this incident of returning the Holy Scriptures reveals the reverence of the Prophet for them and he set a very good example of religious forbearance."

In connection with the treaty of Khalid bin Waleed with the people of *A'anaat*, Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) urged the sanctity of the religious symbols and allowed them to practice their religions freely. He said;

ولهم أن يضربوا نواقيسهم في أي ساعة شاءوا من ليل أو نهار، إلا في أوقات الصلاة، وأن يخرجوا الصليبان في أيام عيدهم

They are allowed to ring their bells at any time of the day or night, even if it is not the time of their prayers and to take out crucifixes on their festivals.^{xxxi}

Islam strongly condemns scorning of the religious figures and symbols of any other religion and refers to the outcomes of doing that with very logical reasons.

وَلَا تَسُبُّوا الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَيَسُبُّوا اللَّهَ عَدْوًا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ

Revile not those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance.^{xxxii}

This is an inevitable fact that scorning of the religious figures and symbols of other religions results in inadequacy of the peace. Today many events are happening in the west in regard with blasphemy and the insulting sketches are being published. People openly talk about the demolishing of the house of Allah and Bait ulMaqdas and Islamic rituals are ridiculed openly. It is very natural for such a situation to incite a reaction. The dream of complete peace in the world is unlikely to become a reality in these conditions. There is a dire need for the world to benefit from the Islamic concept of humanity so that people belonging to all religions acquire their religious rights. This vital aspect is needed to be understood and only this can assure peace in today's complex world.

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