

THE CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE LIGHT OF QURAN & SUNNAH

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Abstract:

The world has transformed into a global village and in this village people who belong to different religions live together. Religion necessarily influences our affairs and understandings. And the reality is that these religious differences lead us to religious pluralism. The teachings of these different religions are different from one another and there is a constant fear that these differences may breed contempt among their followers. Islamic teachings led us towards such a religious pluralism society as can provide security and safety to doctrines, teachings, sacred religious places of worship and the religious symbols of every individual without any religion based discrimination.

The importance of the religion cannot be denied in any period. In this world, the religion of every individual of society is the most important for him. Although, a person refuses to accept any religion and claims that he has no religion yet he has a religion and his religion can be safely termed as 'atheism'. The religion always has great effect on the every word, action, way of life, living style and the behavior of man. The religion also determines how to treat the other religions and spend life in the world. Only a religion can bring peace in the world and on the same time it can also cause wars in the world on the great scale. In this world, geographical and social contradictions have caused fewer wars as compared to large number of wars which were based on religious contradictions. As Huns writes:

“Peace is not possible in the world without maintaining peace among the religions.”¹

The peace among the religion is only possible if there will be tolerance and forbearance amongst the behaviors of human beings.

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Only on the base of tolerance, it is possible to establish such societies in which the followers of the different religions can live peacefully.

Religious Pluralism:

It is possible that this term seems to be new in this era but its practical concept can be traced back in the ancient history of many centuries. We all co-exist in an environment which has different religions. Now, the definitions of this term are analyzed below. The Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion defines “religious pluralism” as “the problem and opportunity of the simultaneous presence of different religious traditions within a single society.”²

Another definition is that: “Religious Pluralism means religious tolerance, the condition of harmonious co-existence between adherents of different religions or religious denominations.”³

It means, in any society, the followers of more than one religion and faiths can be found. Going beyond these religious contradictions among them and try to maintain peaceful and pleasant relations can be truly called religious pluralism.

Diana Eck defines this term as: “It require the cultivation of public space where we all encounter on another.”⁴

This definition means, the people who are living in the same society should accept other’s religions by giving them the right position in society so that the peace can be maintained.

M. Basye beautifully defines this term as below:

“Religious Pluralism...holds to one’s own faith, and at the same time, engages other faiths in learning about their path and how they want to be understood... Religious Pluralism and dialogue are the means for building bridges and relationships that create harmony and peace on our planet home.”⁵

It says that the religious pluralism introduces such a society in which any individual not only gives respect to his own faiths but also to the faith of other people. Through the dialogues, he builds a bridge to create harmony and good relations among the people. There are some other definitions of religious pluralism which are controversial and not acceptable to many scholars.

“Religious Pluralism teach multiple truth: the theory that there are more than one...[kind] ...of ultimate reality and/or truth-and that therefore more than one religion can be said to have the truth (way to God, salvation, etcetera).”⁶

This definition of Religious Pluralism is against Islam. According to Islamic concept, there is only one way which leads to the ultimate truth, and that is the Islam. In the same way, many Christians also deny this concept. As Randall Terry says:

“I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good...Our goal is Christian nation. We have a Biblical duty; we are called by God, to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism.”⁷

From the definitions of religious pluralism, following implications can be derived:

- i. All the religions should be given the similar or equal importance.
- ii. Tolerance and forbearance among the religions.
- iii. All religions are true and lead to the way of God.

The first two meanings are right in a sense that the followers of all the religions should exhibit forbearance and tolerance among themselves and should give respect to other religions. The faith of any other persons should not be ridiculed and insulted. Moreover, there is a question whether all the religions of the world are true and right and answer to this question is that if all the religions would have been true and right according to God why then He has sent the Prophets in this world. And why then the last Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) sent the letters to preach the king of Rome, Iran, and Abyssinia. Therefore, Islam accepts such religious pluralism that gives freedom to everyone to follow any religion without any kind of force. Everyone should have the right to accept or reject a religion and no one should be insulted on the basis of religious faiths and doctrines.

Religious Pluralism and Holy Quran:

The universal religion of Islam has demonstrated exemplary expression of tolerance and forbearance for the Non-Muslims and it is evident that no such example can be presented by any other

religion. Islam does not force to anyone to accept Islam as religion, but it leaves it on the man's choice. As Quran says: “

”لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ“⁸

“There is no compulsion in matter of religion.”

Ibn-e- Kathir describes this verse in the following:

”{لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ} أَي لَا تُكْرَهُوا أَحَدًا عَلَى الدُّخُولِ فِي دِينِ
الْإِسْلَامِ، فَإِنَّهُ بَيِّنٌ وَاضِحٌ، جَلِيٌّ دَلَالَتُهُ وَبَرَاهِينُهُ، لَا يَحْتَاجُ إِلَى
أَنْ يُكْرَهَ أَحَدٌ عَلَى الدُّخُولِ فِيهِ“⁹

“Do not force anyone to become a Muslim, for Islam is plain and clear and its proofs and evidence. Therefore, there is no need to force anyone to embrace Islam.”

None has a right to force the people to accept any particular religion. It is a matter of heart. It depends on the free will a person if he wants to accept any religion, he should accept it. And if he does not want to accept any religion, he should not accept it. In Islam, Religious pluralism is an outcome of the freedom in choice of religion, as the Quran proclaims:

”قُلِ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِرْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفِرْ“¹⁰

“This is the truth from your Lord. Now let him who will, believe; and let him who will, disbelieve”

Islam is the only religion of the world that presents the principle of religious freedom and tolerance. It presents the broader concept of interreligious dialogue, harmony, co-existence, peace and freedom of choice for religion and the religious faith and doctrines. It is described in the Quran in the following words:

”لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ“¹¹

“To you is your religion, and to me, my religion.”

According to Ibn-e- Kathir:

”الْمُشْرِكُونَ يَعْبُدُونَ غَيْرَ اللَّهِ عِبَادَةً لَمْ يَأْذَنَ اللَّهُ بِهَا، وَلِهَذَا

قال: {لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ}“¹²

“The idolaters worship other than Allah, with acts of worship that Allah has not allowed. This is why the Messenger (PBUH) said to them “To you be your religion and to me my religion.”

It is a clear and perfect acceptance of religious pluralism in Islam.

The Holy Quran presents such concept of freedom of the choice of faith and religion as is not possible to be found in any other religion. Dr. Hameed-ul-Allah writes:

“In the Holy Quran, we find the instruction that the community of every religion should be given complete internal authority. They have not only the freedom to believe in any faith but they should also have the freedom to worship according to their own religious traditions. Even they should have their own laws and judges to solve their cases. In this respect, the concept of complete internal authority is mentioned in many verses of the Holy Quran. One of these verses is very much clear:¹³

”وَلْيَحْكُمْ أَهْلُ الْإِنجِيلِ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فِيهِ“¹⁴

“And let the People of the Gospel judge by what Allah has revealed therein.”

In the same way, the Holy Quran not only gives the freedom to believe in any faith but it also takes care of respect of their doctrines. As described in the following:

”وَلَا تَسُبُّوا الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَيَسُبُّوا اللَّهَ عَدْوًا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ“¹⁵

“And do not insult those they invoke other than Allah, lest they insult Allah in enmity without knowledge.”

One of the scholars of Mah-Namah Muhaddus writes:

“In fact, the main purpose of this saying was to protect the human respect. When man considers a thing sacred, respect for his feelings is in fact considered the respect for the same thing.”¹⁶

And Imam Qurtabi also says about above mentioned verse:

“No Muslim has a right to say unreceptive words about the Christian’s Cross their religion and Churches, and even no one should commit an action that cause their insult. If we commit such acts this, it will flare them to disobey and refute.”¹⁷

And on the basis of this principle, the Muslims are forbidden to curse not only the Christians but they are also forbidden to abuse other's religious doctrines and religious places. The Muslims believe in all the Prophets simultaneously, therefore Islam does not give any idea to disrespect and disgrace any of the Prophets. Rather, Islam does not consider him a Muslim who thinks to commit this sin; even Islam considers him worth a severe punishment. The Holy Quran says about the respect of all the Prophets:

”قُولُوا آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ
وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ
وَمَا أُوتِيَ النَّبِيُّونَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ
مُسْلِمُونَ“^{١٨}

“Say: We have faith in God, and in that which has been sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Tribes, and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and the prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and to Him we have submitted.”

The Holy Quran even invites the People of the Book to have a dialogue on the similar things, so that they should agree on the similar things and as a result the disputes should be resolved. For this purpose, the Holy Quran has given a universal law i.e. “Agreement on the similar things”. The Holy Quran says:

”قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَىٰ كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ“^{١٩}

“Say: ‘People of the Book’! Come to common terms which are between us.”

And for this dialogue, Islam gives a rule that is called “The Best Way”. It means a person should conduct the dialogue in ‘the best way’ otherwise there is no alternative way for this purpose.

”وَلَا تُجَادِلُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ“^{٢٠}

“And do not argue with the People of the Book except in a way that is best.”

Qardawi comments: “There should be diverse approaches to disputation, the one to choose must, in other words, be the best in all respects: courtesy, reason, standards and sincerity. It does not mean a refusal to differ. It means to differ with respect and dignity

and it also means recognition of all that is best in the discourse of the different other”²¹

Here a question arises i.e. why all these concessions are given? The Holy Quran argues:

”وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ“²²

“And we have certainly honored the children of Adam.”

When Allah gave respect to Bani-Adam, he gave respect even to his personality, likings, disliking, faiths, religion and each and every thing related to him. Allah has also established some rules to save a man from insult and criticism of others. No such example of freedom of faith, safety from insult and freedom to act upon the religious doctrines is found in any other religion as is found in the Holy Quran. Allah Almighty says:

”وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَآمَنَ مَن فِي الْأَرْضِ كُلُّهُم جُبَيْعًا أَفَأَنْتَ تُكْرِهُ

النَّاسَ حَتَّىٰ يَكُونُوا مُؤْمِنِينَ“²³

“Had thy Lord so willed, all those who are on earth would have believed. Will you then force people into believing?”

If Allah wanted, He could have created all human beings on the same religion forcefully as He has created all angels on the same faith and religion. And if He would have created all human beings on the same faith and religion, then there will be no choice for human beings and in the same way if there is no choice, there will be no concept of punishment and reward. The beliefs and doctrines are made in order to examine the capacity of man’s goodness and evil. Allah says, in spite of having the power, He did not create man on the same religion forcefully. Then why should man force all of them to become Muslim? It means we should have to accept all the people as they are and whatever their religion is because it is also the law of nature.

Religious Pluralism According to the Teachings of Holy Prophet (PBUH):

The whole life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) is a great example of respect for other’s faith and religion. In every Hadith, deeds and agreements, He (PBUH) gave importance and respect to others’ faiths in order to develop peace and harmony. Some

examples of religious pluralism from the life of Holy Prophet (PBUH) are mentioned in the following lines.

When Holy Prophet (PBUH) came to Madinah, tribal system was also present there according to customs and traditions of the Arabs. Every tribe was responsible to establish peace for them and to resolve other matters. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) established a system of state and all the tribes of the state were the joint partners in term of common benefits and damages. Therefore, it is a great achievement of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) that He (PBUH) collected the people who have different religions in a common society. For this purpose, He (PBUH) inscribed a well-organized agreement that is called Misaq-e-Madinah.

”و أن يهود بني عوف أمة مع المؤمنين، لليهود دينهم،
وللمسلمين دينهم، مواليتهم و أنفُسهم إلا من ظلم و أثم،
فإنه لا يوتغ إلا نفسه و أهل بيته“²⁴

“The Jews of Banu 'Awf are a community (ummah) along with the believers. To the Jews their religion (din) and to the Muslims their religion. (This applies) both to their clients and to themselves, with the exception of anyone who has done wrong or acted treacherously; he brings evil on himself and on his household”.

In the way, the Jews were given the guarantee of the safety of lives & wealth and freedom to act upon their faiths was the great example of religious pluralism. A famous Arabian thinker gives his views about Misaq-e-Madinah:

“It is the inscribed agreement because of which 1400 years ago, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) introduced a law in the human society. On the basis of this law, every joint partner of the agreement has freedom of faith and religion and it maintained respect for the human life.”²⁵

William Muir also appreciates the wonderful agreement of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). He has declared this agreement a point of universality and unity for human beings. He writes:

“The Holy Prophet (PBUH), like a great logician and politician, very technically united the people who were distorted and have different thoughts. The Holy Prophet

(PBUH) successfully established such a state as was based on of the principles of internationalism.”²⁶

Fourteen years ago, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) gave the practical proof of the religious pluralism when this term was not familiar. All men were called equal in respect of rank and status. Rights and duties are equal to everyone and no one is greater on the basis of colour and caste. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) said: “

”كلكم لأدم وأدم من تراب“²⁷

“You are children of Adam and Adam was created out of clay.”

If anybody has pride in his colour or caste, it should be finished with the above mentioned sentence that all men are equally the children of Adam (A. S) and Adam was created out of clay. So when the family system of all people belongs to the same predecessor then there is no need to feel proud on the basis of caste and colour. So if anybody should be considered greater, it is should be on the basis of Taqwa (fear of God).

The Prophet (PBUH) not only used to remain worry about the Muslims but also about all the people beyond the religious differences. Oppressed person could freely come to the Prophet (PBUH) to seek justice and definitely he would get justice whatever his religion was. In order to stop the cruelty on the Non-Muslim, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) said:

”مَنْ قَتَلَ مُعَاهِدًا لَمْ يَرِحْ رَائِحَةَ الْجَنَّةِ، وَإِنَّ رِيحَهَا تُوجَدُ مِنْ

مَسِيرَةِ أَرْبَعِينَ عَامًا“²⁸

“Whoever killed a person having a treaty with the Muslims, shall not smell the fragrance of Paradise though its smell is perceived from a distance of forty years.”

It means such person would not be able to enter the paradise. Although the aroma of paradise can be smelled at a distance equal to the journey of forty years yet such a person will be deprived of paradise and he will be kept far away from the paradise so that he would neither enter the paradise nor will smell its fragrance. Islam has given equal rights to all the human beings and there is reason behind this which is stated below:

”الخلق عيال الله واحب خلقه اليه انفعهم لعياله“²⁹

“All mankind is Allah’s family; the best among you in the sight of Allah is he who is human towards his family.”

All mankind is Allah’s family. Here, relation with any specific religion is not mentioned rather it has been collectively stated that all the creatures are family of God. Whosoever works for the welfare and betterment of Allah’s family is the dear to God. Therefore, only Islam can fulfill the all the demands of religious pluralism. Besides the teachings of Islam, no other religion has such a broader outlook that can absorb all the human beings in it.

The Holy Prophet (PBUH) was so kind to the Non-Muslims that He (PBUH) even offered them his own mosque to perform their religious rites. The co-operation with delegation of Najran is a living example of it. As William Muir says:

“The Prophet (PBUH) extended the act of co-operation to the Christians of Najran which was situated in the North East of Yemen. Once, a delegation of sixty people who were Christians came to Madinah from the region of Najran. They met the Prophet in his mosque and as the prayer time came, there is no place for their worship. Then Prophet (PBUH) invites them to offer their prayers at Masjid-e-Nabawi. They prayed in the mosque facing east.”³⁰

And when the treaty was signed with the people of Najran, all of their belongings were kept as it is. William Muir, a prejudiced orientalist, was also much impressed by this kind behaviour and tolerance. This agreement is stated in the following:

“This is a letter from Muhammad the prophet, the Messenger of God, to the people of Najran. Najran and their followers have protection (jiwar) of God and the dhimmah of Muhammad the Prophet, the Messenger of God, for themselves, their community, their land, and their goods both those who are absent and those who are present, and for their churches and services (no bishop will be moved from his episcopate, and no monk from his monastic position, and no church-warden from his church-wardenship) and for all, great or little, that is under their hands.”³¹

William Muir comments on this agreement:

“The Prophet (PBUH) gave a written agreement to the Bishops, clergies and monks that teach and everything in their Churches and monasteries would be kept as it is and on the same place and position. The Prophet of Allah PBUH promised that neither any bishop from his episcopate nor any monk from his monastic position nor any church-warden from his church wardenship would be terminated. And there would be no change in their liabilities, rights and routine. If they would live with peace and truthfulness, they will not be oppressed or ill-treated and they would also not oppress or ill-treat anybody.”³²

The Holy Prophet (PBUH) not only respected their churches but also did not change the statues of their monks and bishops because all of these things belong to the respect of faith and if anyone of them is not respected, there will be greater chance of clash and dispute. When the Holy Prophet (PBUH) conquered any area, He PBUH did not force anyone to embrace Islam rather He (PBUH) accepted ransom and allowed them to live there. He PBUH forbade the Muslims to inflict any harm to them and announced a strong punishment for them who would give them any harm or trouble. He (PBUH) made many agreements with the Non-Muslims and the safety of their faith was top priority in these agreements.

These teachings of Holy Prophet (PBUH) had great contribution to bring peace in the world and to create religious tolerance among the Muslims. In spite of strict pursuance of their own faiths and Sharia by the Muslims, this ideology urged them to have relationships and dealings with other nations of the world. On the basis of this ideology, the Muslims along with the Majoosis, Sabies, Jews, Christians and Hindus found an opportunity and power to introduce their civilization in different countries. Even if the Holy Prophet (PBUH) sent the army to any tribe, He (PBUH) would give them proper guidance and advice. As Hazrat Ibn-e-Abbas (R. A) says:

”كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَآلِهِ وَسَلَّمَ إِذَا بَعَثَ جَيْوشَهُ قَالَ:
لَا تَغْدِرُوا وَلَا تَغْلُوا وَلَا تُبَيِّتُوا وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا الْوِلْدَانَ وَلَا أَصْحَابَ
الصَّوَامِعِ“³³

“When Holy Prophet (PBUH) sent his companion, then advised them that: “Do not betrayal, do not cheat, do not desecration of dead bodies and don’t kill the children and priests.”

During battle, no one cares for the enemies but everyone tries to shows as much enmity as he can and feel pleasure in harming the enemy. But He (PBUH) is the Prophet of Mercy and has advised his soldiers not to harm the women, the children, the old and the religious people. At the occasion of Conquest of Makkah, when his enemies who tried to take his life, abused him, threw stones at him, placed thorns in his way, attacked him with their armies, conspired to take his life and stopped him to enter Ka’aba, were standing in front of him helplessly and powerlessly. The Prophet of Mercy (PBUH) said:

“لَا تُثْرِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْيَوْمَ”³⁴

“No blame will there be upon you today”.

While analyzing this event Armstrong said:

“He (PBUH) had no desire for bloody reprisal. Nobody was made to accept Islam nor do they seem to have felt any pressure to do so. Reconciliation was still Muhammad’s objective”.³⁵

Like the enmity of the people of Makkah, the enmity of the Jews was not a secret to anybody. When the Prophet (PBUH) got victory against them in the battle field of Khyber, along with (Mal-e-Ghaneemat) He (PBUH) also received the scripts of the Bible and other religious books but He returned them to the Jews on their request in spite of their worst enmity.³⁶

The practical life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) is a splendid example of respect for others’ faith and religion. Whether it is for the Christians of Saint Katherine or polytheist of Hudabia Pact or the Jews of Medina Pact or it may be any other occasion, He (PBUH) always respected the faith of others in order to establish peace and security in society. He ordered for the Christians of Saint Katherine not to oppress or pressurize them to change their religion.³⁷

In Hudabia, He (PBUH) respected the doctrine of the Jews that they did not know ‘In the name of Allah, the most Beneficent

the most Merciful (Bismillah)' and did not recognize the Prophet-hood of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). He ordered Hazrat Ali (R.A) to disperse them.³⁸

And the occasion of Madina Pact, He (PBUH) advised not to force the Jews to accept Islam.³⁹

When Anthony Kennedy, Judge of American Supreme Court, saw this example of Islamic enlightenment and the principle of universality of humanity, he said:

“I hope, we will come out of the circles of our deepest ignorance about the Muslim World during the next century. The Muslims are not a group of imprudent or eccentric people rather they are decent, rational and genius people who have their own traditions along with their lawful traditions and they have a great civilization. The American does not know anything about them. We do not have any contact with them in that part of the world and this is a great challenge for the coming century.”⁴⁰

Kennedy's confession has proved him a realist because whole of the Islamic history is replete with the examples of their rationalism, enlightenment, justice and forbearance.

These are the examples of Holy Quran and Sunnah which gives the human beings complete opportunity to live with liberty and allowed them to act upon their religious doctrines and faith. So this behavior with all other religions is the splendid examples of religious pluralism.

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