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Does Islam Practice Tolerance? Some Notes from Quranic Perspective

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Abstract: This paper investigates how Islamic tolerance contributes to solve religious conflict today that has impacted on various aspects such as economic collapse, insecurity in life, lack of professional society, academic retrogressions, and so on. Knowledge of these issues has become an urgent to build a community that is full of peace, harmony and unity. The paper suggests that Quranic views on tolerance should be understood and practiced in order to avoid disunity in society which is due to failure to appreciate tolerance values in association. The paper concludes problems or misunderstandings always occur in different religious societies, since every religion has its own teachings and principles, as well as each of them is interpreted in different ways.

Keywords: Tolerance; Religion; Islam; Society; Diversity.

1. What Tolerance Tends to? A Preliminary Report

In the Quran tolerance is viewed a necessary prerequisite for coexistence. It assumes social, cultural and religious differences that require toleration, even if these differences do not meet with the approval of the parties involved. Tolerance without greater acceptance indicates a sense of conditioned approval. However, the Quran views the tolerance as an important starting point in establishing greater peace. The Quran seeks to establish peace between various religious communities and acknowledges differences of belief and cultures. It places great emphasis in maintaining good relations between adherents of various religions [1, 2] because according to the Quran, religious freedom is an important basis for sustainable peace. The Quran calls all believers to '*enter into complete peace and follow not the footsteps of devil*' (*al-Baqarah* verse 208). This aspect is highlighted in the Quranic discourse on tolerance.

Literally the word tolerance means 'to bear', as a concept, it means respect, acceptance [3]. In Arabic refers to *tasāmuḥ* which means soften and easiness [4]. Hence, tolerance means a deliberate decision to refrain from prohibiting, hindering or otherwise coercively interfering with conduct of which one disapproves, although one has power to do so [5, 6, 7, 8].

Based on the sense of the language, the scope of tolerance itself has four main components. Firstly, which related to the subject of tolerance and types of matter that need to be tolerated. Secondly, the object of tolerance that is associated with treatment, action or belief that can be analysed from two approaches, namely avoiding profit seeking for himself and any actions that cause others to dislike or disturb. Thirdly, which is related to the existence of negative attitudes towards tolerance objects either in the form of disliking or rejecting, and fourthly, component of being patience and avoiding the opposing object of tolerance. This means tolerance is not merely based on thought, insight or understanding, but more important is the treatment of individual, organization or group in relation to what is thought to be tolerated [9].

The tolerance attitude can be regarded as a way of managing conflicts in a society of diverse differences. These differences, whether from religious, ethnic, cultural, or moral differences are unlikely that everyone is willing to accept the difference that exists in life. Hence, conflicts or crises in life can occur when coercion arises from one group to another. In addition, tolerance is also a

prerequisite for anyone who wants a safe and peaceful [10]. With that, there will be good interactions and understanding among religious communities.

The definition of tolerance in respect and willingness to accept different views may be appropriate in the context of interaction between multi-religious communities. Due to religious tolerance does not mean that one should be subject to other religious claims or force other believers to accept any specific religion. But religious tolerance is an attitude of respect for other religions, and is ready to hear and try to understand other religious teachings or principles that can be formed through discussions, dialogues and reading. With the hope that through this understanding and attitude, it is able to form ethical relationships between different religions as in Malaysia [11].

In summary, tolerance contains compelling, balanced, gentle, alert and thoughtful traits. It is an attitude of openness that can be done in various forms, such as reforming the education of its leaders to guide of the community by respecting the diversity of ideas, cultures and religions, being generous and open to hearing different views [12]. In the other words, accepting attitude towards a plurality of viewpoints and avoid the use of force to influence behaviour or beliefs.

2. Diversity in Islam: Identity and Influence

From acknowledging differences in promoting Islamic ethos the Quran outlines a firm standard for all, Muslim and non-Muslims alike, based on the universal values of justice and equality. For the Quran, peace is the ultimate goal, and if there is to be peace, there must first be tolerance [13, 14]. Diversity not only extends to physical features and social and cultural phenomena, but also to the extent of choosing one's religion.

Diversity is recognized and highly praised in the Quran. Thus *al-Rum* verse 22 asserts that in diversity and variations are the signs of God for those with vision and those who are wise. This implies that differences must not only be expected, but be tolerated [15]. They are viewed as a cause for celebration, hence *al-Hujurat* verse 13 recognizes diversity and difference in term of gender, skin, color, language and belief, as well as of that rank, and it asserts that differences are not only inherent and will always be there but they are a blessing from God as the Quran asserts in *Hud* verse 118.

Quranic vocabulary has a specific term to express the idea of tolerance, but several verses explicitly state that religious coercion is either unfeasible or forbidden; other verses may be interpreted as expressing the same notion. Pertinent Quranic attitudes underwent substantial development during Muhammad's prophetic career. The earliest reference to religious tolerance seems to be included in *al-Kafirun* verse 6, a *sura* that recognizes the unbridgeable gap between Islam and the religion of Meccans and concludes by saying 'You shall have your religion and I shall have my religion'. This is best interpreted as a plea to the Meccans to refrain from practicing religious coercion against the Muslim of Mecca before the *hijra* [16], but since it does not demand any action to suppress Meccan polytheism, it has sometimes been understood as reflecting an attitude of religious tolerance on the part of Muslims. Again, as Quran asserts in *al-Qasas* verse 55 'We shall have our deeds and you shall have your deeds; peace be on you, we do not desire the ignorant'.

Sura al-Hijr verse 85 and *al-Zukhruf* verse 89 are also relevant. These verses clearly address the Prophet and enjoin him to turn away from those who do not believe. The injunction '*fasfah safh al-jamil*/so turn away with kindly forgiveness' in *sura al-Hijr* verse 85 is related to the imminent approach of the last day. The verse seems to mean that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) may leave the unbelievers alone because God will soon sit in judgment and inflict on them the just punishment. That it will be the faults of the idolators when they insult him and reject the message that he brings to them [17].

Then there is *Yunus* verses 99 and 100 which seek to convince the Prophet that matters of religious belief are in the hands of God and that any attempt to spread his faith by coercion would be an exercise in futility. It also sounds as though it were an attempt to allay the prophet's distress as his initial failure to attract most Meccan to Islam; people believe only as a result of divine permission and the Prophet should not blame himself for their rejection of the truth faith. Despite prophetic efforts to the contrary, most people opt for unbelief (*Yusuf*: 103; *al-Nahl*: 37). The Quran declares in numerous passages that prophets can only deliver the divine message; it is not within their power

to assure its acceptance or implementation (*al-Nahl*: 35 & 82; *al-Qasas*: 56; *al-Ankabut*: 18). This argument may be seen as compatible with the idea of predestination.

Moving to the period immediately following the *hijra*, we should consider the famous document known as the Constitution of Medina which included a clause recognizing the fact that the Jews have a distinct and legitimate religion of their own, 'the Jews have their religion and the believers have theirs' [18]. It accepts the existence of religions other than Islam in the Arabian peninsula. It stands to reason that this passage reflects very early attitudes of nascent Islam, which had been willing, at that time, to tolerate the existence of other religions in the peninsula.

In *sura al-Baqarah* verse 256 'there is no compulsion in religion' has become evidence for discussions of religious tolerance in Islam. Surprisingly enough, according to the occasions of revelation literature, it was revealed in connection with the expulsion of the Jewish tribe of Banu Nadir from Medina [19]. In the earliest work of exegesis, the verse is understood as an injunction to refrain from the forcible imposition of Islam, though there is no unanimity of opinion regarding the precise group of infidels to which the injunction has initially applied. Commentators who maintain that the verse was originally meant as applicable to all people consider it as abrogated by *al-Tawbah* verse 73 [20]. Viewing in this way is necessary in order to avoid the glaring contradiction between the idea of tolerance and the policies of early Islam, which did not allow the existence of polytheism- or any other religion- in a major part of Arabian peninsula [21]. Those who think that the verse was intended, from the very beginning, only for the People of the Book, need to consider it as abrogated: though Islam did not allow the existence of any religion other than Islam in most of the peninsula, the purpose of jihad, against them according to *sura al-Tawbah* verse 29 is their submission and humiliation rather than their forcible conversion to Islam [22]. As is well known, Islam normally did not practice religious coercion against Jews and Christians outside the Arabian peninsula [23], though substantial limitations were placed in various periods on the public aspects of their worship.

Later commentators, some of whom are characterized by a pronounced theological bent of thought, treat the verse in a totally different manner. According to them, *sura al-Baqarah* verse is not a command at all. Rather, it ought to be understood as a piece of information or to put it differently, a description of the human condition: it conveys the idea that embracing a religious faith can only be the result of empowerment and free choice. It cannot be the outcome of constraint and coercion. Religious coercion would also create a theologically unacceptable situation: if people were coerced into true belief, their positive response to prophetic teaching would become devoid of value, the world would cease to be 'an abode of trial' [24] and, consequently, the moral basis for the idea of reward and punishment would be destroyed. This argumentation uses the verse in support of the idea of free will.

These tolerant attitudes toward the non-Muslims of Arabia were not destined to last. After the Muslim victory in the battle of Badr, the Quran started to promote the idea of religious uniformity in the Arabian peninsula. *Sura al-Anfal* verse 39 enjoins the Muslim to fight with them until there is no more persecution and religion should be only for Allah. Once this development took place, the clauses in the Constitution of Medina bestowing legitimacy on the existence of the Jewish religion in Medina had to undergo substantial reinterpretation. The clause stipulating that 'the Jews have their religion and the believers have theirs' was now taken to mean that the Jewish religion is worth [25, 26, 27]. Thus, despite the differences, various ethnic and religious groups are urged to see the bigger picture and rise above the 'tribal' loyalties that divide them. The Quran also notes blessings of diversity [28]; in *al-Baqarah* verse 136 and *al-Shura* verse 13, it specifically acknowledges other religions, such as that of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

3. Islamic Tolerance: Practices From Quranic Perspective

The Quran recognizes various religious communities and a strong foundation for Quranic tolerance can be seen in the following verses. *Sura al-Isra* verse 70 speaks of human beings as being given and honourable position among all of creation. This is followed by the responsibility to care for all creation in mankind's role as *khalifa* (vicegerent) of God on earth [29]. Similarly, *al-Ma'idah*

verse 32 and *al-An'am* verse 98 speak about the common origins of humanity which makes all human beings related to each other [30].

Tolerance is linked with justice and equality [31]. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was commanded by the Quran to be just among people and his example is upheld and is to be imitated and followed faithfully by Muslims [32]. Thus, *al-Nisa* verse 135 emphasizes that justice and equality are a must for Muslims. However, no single human being is capable of and is in a position to judge others. *Al-Nahl* verse 124 addresses the fact that judgment belongs to God alone and each person will receive their reward from the Lord based on their works. The emphasis on justice does not place limits on tolerance of others' rights. Tolerance can be seen in the life of Prophet Muhammad, who is referred to in the Quran as a model example for humanity [33]. His many policies reflect the Quranic view of tolerance of others. An example of this the story of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) about his years in Medina. One day he was sitting with some of his companions and funeral passed by. The prophet stood up as a sign of respect. When one companion remarked, 'O prophet of God, this was a Jewish person's funeral! The Prophet replied, 'Was he not a human being?' [34]. Another example of this may be the crafting and implementation of the so-called Constitution of Medina, which regarded Muslim, Jewish and pagan groups as one community sharing in the task of protecting one another from outside aggression, while each group retains their right to freedom of religion [35].

Tolerance in the Quran is viewed as only the beginning in a realization of a sustained peace between communities [36]. Thus, the Quran asks Muslims to engage in dialogue with others, especially the *ahl al-kitab* (people of the Book). *Sura Ali Imran* verse 64 instructs Muslims to 'come to an equitable proposition between us and you that we shall not serve any but Allah and (that) we shall not associate aught with Him'.

Tolerance of others who are different in culture, language and/or belief is greatly emphasized in the Quran [37]. In its early years Islam's popularity and survival depended on the flexibility is displayed to the peoples of various regions that came under Muslim rule. Historians point to one example of such an approach in the eighth and ninth centuries when the vast majority of non-Muslims retained their religious, cultural as well as ethnic privileges for centuries without feeling the need to convert to the religion of their rules. In view of general body of Islamic Jurists the tax of *jizya* imposed upon the non-Muslims as a badge of humiliation for their unbelief, or by way of mercy for protection given to them by the Muslims. Some Jurists consider this tax as punishment for their unbelief, there being no economic motive behind its imposition, because their continued stay in a Muslim land, is a crime, hence they have no escape from being humiliated [38]. It is beyond doubt that Islam would never impose *jizya* (head tax) as a punishment or compensation from non-Muslims for their lack of belief in God [39].

Another group against whom religious coercion may be practiced are apostates from Islam. As a rule, the classical Muslim law demands that apostates be asked to repent and be put to death if they refuse [40]. It has to be pointed out, Quran includes references to capital punishments for apostasy as in *sura al-Baqarah* verses 217 & 221. In another formulation, taking into account the idea that a person forced to abandon Islam is not considered an apostate as in *al-Nahl* verse 106. Most jurist maintain that the apostate should be given the opportunity to repent [41]; there is a great variety of views concerning the time allowed for this purpose.

Hence, the ideas of tolerance and coercion have undergone substantial development in the Quran and are characterized by a great deal of variety in the literature of tradition and jurisprudence. Yet whatever the original meaning of *al-Baqarah* verse 256 may have been, it is more compatible with the idea of religious tolerance than with any other approach. Any Muslim who wanted to practice religious toleration throughout the centuries of Islamic history could use *al-Baqarah* verse 256, and *al-Kafirun* verse 6 as a divine sanction in support of his stance.

4. Religious Tolerance According to Islam: The Conclusion

Islam as a living religion that is parallel to human nature. Hence, Islam teaches its followers to preserve human life comprehensively regardless of religion, race and ancestry. At the same time,

Islam teaches its people to be ready to defend any threat, tyranny and persecution that endanger human security [42]. Such a situation, commonly referred to as the term religious tolerance.

Islam practices tolerance that is forgiving, and generous. This does not mean that Islam accepts all, but Islam accepts only things that do not conflict with religion. While the matter is contrary to religion, it must be abandoned. Likewise, Islam does not mean defeat to its enemies or opponents, but values of forgiveness and generosity proves that Islam has the inner strength (soul) that can control his passion that can negatively affect his actions. The peace of the soul, is the power that can subdue and defeat the enemy with wisdom and as a fortress that can withstand Satan's sedition. Thus, Islamic tolerance of non-Muslims in matters of religion is that non-Muslims are allowed to perform their beliefs and religious duties, and live according to their customs, even if they are forbidden in Islam [43].

According to al-Qaradawi [44], religious tolerance in Islam is divided into three stages. The first stage is the lowest level, which allows people of different faiths to choose their religion or belief (freedom of religion). This means that it does not force to worship a religion with various emphasis such as threats of killing, torture or deprivation of property. The second stage is a simple stage, giving the right to embrace religion or choosing the beliefs he loves, while not pushing for something he believes in whether it is obligatory or illegal. Furthermore, the third stage is the highest level of religious tolerance, which does not prohibit those who profess other religions in performing rituals that have been legalized by their religion, even though the matter is banned by other religions. In fact, it is understandable that Islam focuses on religious tolerance in social life, as well as Islam gives every man freedom to embrace religion and to choose his beliefs based on his own belief that there is no emphasis.

Islam strictly admits that it is the true religion (which is assumed by Allah), as the word of Allah in *Sura Ali Imran* verse 19. Although Islam claims that only true Islam, but in the same condition Islam accepts the diverse religion in the world as a reality [45]. This is explained in *sura al-Hujurat* verse 10. Qutb [46] interpreted this verse, indeed, Allah made many peoples, colors, and tribes among men not to shun and to boast of their offspring, but to love and to love each others. Since human is actually one, derived from one source, human beings are the most noble creatures of God compared to other beings, human beings are born with innocent sin, created with the best form, complemented by various advantages and potentials, supplied with intellectual power, intellect and wisdom and be grateful with various emotional mobility [47]. This means the differences in race, color and offspring are not a barrier to living together as a family. In this regard, every human being has the same human rights as entitled to good service and association, is entitled to live and achieve what is possible by his or her potential personal ability, but every movement must be responsible and always guided by the values or norms has been set together.

Referring to the basic aspects of tolerance in Islam, that a Muslim is in intercourse with non-Muslims is to refer to the fact that Islam is founded on its own, among which is the belief that God instructs his servant to be fair, the belief that every human being has a similarity to human self glory (irrespective of religion, color and heredity), the belief that Islam gives freedom to all men to embrace religion and to choose their beliefs [44]. While between the basis of tolerance in Islam is a belief in the goodness of the evil of something committed by other faiths. Therefore, Islam often teaches its adherents to be forgiving in the life of other religions, the forgiving attitude of the noble mind and humanity and respect the rights of others. The politics of tolerating difference in Islam require reconciliation with history as well as a reconciliation (as in the relationship between Islam and modernity) that must first come from within Islam [48].

The tolerance attitude demands that the differences that exist in terms of religion, beliefs, stance and understanding do not serve as a separating line in a good relationship between people in all areas of life. On the contrary, the human soul needs to be nurtured in order to be inclined towards building a harmonious relationship in life as opposed to a confrontational attitude that can lead to disunity. By being tolerant of human character can be formed to be self-restraint, and toughness [49].

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