

Tolerance in Islam

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Introduction

Islam is a missionary faith, a faith that holds its followers are obliged to carry its message to all humanity till what it believes to be true is accepted as such by all mankind. This mission was enjoined on the believers from the very beginning of Islam. Since Islam was to be meant for all mankind its adherents spared no pains to ensure that all humanity attained salvation through it. However, the truth is that Islamic missionary zeal stopped short of the sword, for as the Muslim holy book, the Qur'an clearly states: "*Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error*" (Surah al Baqarah. Verse 256).

It has often been argued by non-Muslims that Islam is not a tolerant faith and that it has been propagated by force of arms rather than by peaceful means; by compulsion rather than through conviction. This perception has been widely propagated in the writings of certain biased Western scholars who left no stone unturned to portray Islam as a fanatical faith spread by the sword. It is to them that the myth of the holy warrior with sword in one hand and the Qur'an in the other, imposing Islam on the conquered peoples owes its ignoble origins. Secondly, it is the result of the inconsiderate behaviour of certain Muslim states, groups and individuals whose misunderstanding and ignorance of the principles governing relations between Muslims and non-Muslims has led to considerable acts of intolerance against religious minorities, despite the fact that they have no grounding in the true teachings of Islam.

Muslims are supposed to invite non-believers to Islam in a manner that will convince them of the truth of the message rather than through vain arguments ridiculing their divinities or by means of brute force which could only be counter-productive.

As the Qur'an very beautifully puts it:

God is our Lord and your Lord. For us our deeds and to you yours. Between us and you let there be no strife. God will bring us together. And to Him shall we return

(Surah Al-Shura: Verse 15)

Every endeavour except force should be resorted to in order to attract persons to Islam, so much so that even worldly inducements may be used since the underlying intention is a noble one. In fact, one of the areas in which Zakat or the Alms tax collected from Muslims could be used is *to attract the hearts of those who have been inclined (towards Islam)* (Surah Al Tawbah. Verse 60).

In this work we will avail ourselves of four main sources to establish the truth that Islam is a religion of tolerance and that compelling people to believe against their will has no place in it. They are:

- 1) The Qur'an, which Muslims believe to be the Word of God and the primary source of Islamic Law
- 2) The Sunnah, the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), the secondary source of Islamic Law
- 3) The practice of the rightly guided caliphs who could be expected to implement the law of Islam to the fullest
- 4) Historical evidence of tolerance in Islamic lands gleaned from the writings of both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars

1) The evidence from the Qur'an

There are at least seven verses of the Qur'an which explicitly state or clearly imply that Islam was not to be compelled on people and that they were to adopt it of their free will and accord without any compulsion being brought upon them.

The seven verses, whose authority we cannot dispute, being the Words of God Almighty Himself, are:

Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious. For thy Lord knoweth best who have strayed from His Path and who receive guidance

(Surah Al-Nahl: Verse 125)

And say to the People of the Book, and to those who are unlearned "Do ye submit yourselves?". If they do, they are in right guidance. But if they turn back, thy duty is to convey the Message. And God's Sight is on His servants

(Surah Ali Imran. Verse 20)

Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error. Whoever rejects evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy handhold that never breaks

(Surah Al Baqarah. Verse 256)

If one amongst the pagans ask thee for asylum, grant it to him so that he may hear the Word of God. And then escort him to where he can be secure

(Surah Al Tawbah. Verse 6)

*If it had been the Lord's Will, they would all have believed-
All who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind, against
their will, to believe?*

(Surah Yunus. Verse 99)

*Tell those who believe to forgive those who do not look
forward to the Days of God. It is for Him to recompense each
people according to what they have earned*

(Surah Al Jathiyah. Verse 14)

*Obey God, and obey the Messenger. But if ye turn away, the
duty placed on him is on him and the duty placed upon you on
you. If ye obey him, ye shall have guidance. To preach clearly
only is the Messenger's duty*

(Surah Al Nur. Verse 54)

2) The evidence from the Sunnah

Besides the Qur'an or the Word of God, Muslims are also obliged to follow the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), the Apostle of Islam. This is known as the Sunnah or Prophetic tradition. This includes his sayings and doings as well as the example or precedent set by him contained in the canonical literature known as ahadith. As the Prophet declared in no uncertain terms: *"Keep to my Sunnah and that of the rightly guided caliphs. Bite on to it with your molars. And beware of innovations, for verily they are all heresy and heresy is misguidance which leads to the hell fire"*¹. Here too we will find a confirmation of the Qur'anic precepts on religious tolerance. A saying of the Prophet has it: *"Let the Jews know that in our religion there is latitude. I was*

¹ Abu Dāwūd

*sent with the kindly Hanifiyyah”*². Interestingly, the word for ‘kindly’ *samha* used here in association with *hanifiyyah* (the natural religion, i.e. Islam) is related to the modern Arabic term for tolerance *samaha* or *tasamuh*.

And all this for a faith that in its nascent period faced so much intolerance that its adherents had to migrate to save themselves from persecution and in some instances even attain martyrdom for the sake of their faith. When Muhammad began his mission in Mecca in 613 AC, his own tribe, the Quraysh vociferously opposed him except for a very few persons. The leading men of the tribe did all they could to stamp out the new faith which was fast gaining the adherence of the poor and other oppressed sections such as women and slaves. When they could not oppose its followers with their tongues, they resorted to their swords. The more helpless among them, the slaves owned by oppressive masters were subject to terrible tortures to compel them to forsake their faith. Rather than relent they stood strong. One such was the slave girl Sumayyah who became the first martyr in Islam. So vehement was the opposition of the Meccans to the new faith that the Prophet and his band of followers migrated to Medina in 622 AC where they were warmly received by its inhabitants, the Arab tribes of Aws and Khazraj, collectively known as the Ansar or ‘Helpers’, leading to the establishment in that city of the first Islamic state in the world.

The Meccans could however not hold out for long against the Muslim army formed of the Ansar and others who had embraced Islam with a zeal never seen in the history of the world. When Mecca ultimately fell to the Prophet and his 10,000-strong army in 630 AC, the leading men of the town assembled in the courtyard of the Ka’ba and stood for his verdict. They were no ordinary citizens, but sworn enemies of the Prophet and his mission. Not only had they mocked the Prophet but they had also martyred many of his followers.

² Musnad. Ibn Hanbal

And here they stood, surrounded by ten thousand armed warriors ever ready to settle past scores with them. The Prophet asked them: “*O Quraysh, what do you think that I am about to do with you?*”. “*Good Muhammad*”, they said, entreating his forgiveness “*You are a noble brother, son of a noble brother*”. “*Go your way*” replied the Prophet “*for you are free*”³. Needless to say, the Quraysh embraced Islam of their own accord, with neither force nor coercion being exerted on them to do so.

Inviting people to Islam took place not only through plain preaching of the faith, but also by dispatching emissaries to rulers of other nations with letters written by the Prophet himself. The Prophet sent letters to a number of national leaders of his time inviting them to embrace Islam, among them, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, the Persian emperor Kisrau and the Negus of Abyssinia. The letter he sent Heraclius runs as follows:

*In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. From Muhammad, the messenger of God to Hiraql, the emperor of Rum. Peace be on whoever follows the true guidance. Embrace Islam and you shall be saved. Embrace Islam and God will reward you twofold. If you turn away, then the sins of the wicked ploughmen be upon you*⁴

The letter to Negus of Abyssinia went as follows:

In the name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful. From Muhammad, the Messenger of God, to the Negus Al-Asham. King of Abyssinia. Peace Be with you. I Praise before you God, the Most Holy, the King, the Peace, the Keeper of Faith, the

³ Sirat Rasul Allah, Ibn Ishaq

⁴ Tarikh Al Rasul Wal Muluk of Tabari

*Watcher, and bear witness that Jesus the son of Mary is the spirit of God and Word from Him that he cast into Mary, the chaste, goodly and virgin, so that she conceived him. For God has created him from his spirit and breathed into him, similar to the way he created Adam by His Hand and breathed into him. I call you to God, the one with no partners, and to persist in His obedience. I also call you to follow me and believe in what has been revealed to me. For I am the Messenger of God*⁵

Also very pertinent is the treaty the Prophet entered into with the Christians of Najran in Southern Arabia near Yemen. When the delegation arrived at Medina the Prophet permitted them to pray in his mosque and gave them the following accord:

*The people of Najran and their dependents shall remain under the protection of God, and Muhammad the Prophet, the Messenger of God. Their persons, their religion, their lands, their possessions and their churches shall remain safe. This treaty holds good for all people of Najran, whether present or not. No bishop shall be removed from his bishopric, no monk from his monasticism and no devotee from his devotions*⁶

The Christians of Najran had many years earlier suffered a terrible persecution by the Himyarite King Dhu Nuwas, a convert to the Jewish faith. As they refused to convert to Judaism, the King had them thrown into burning ditches. It is this incident that is thought to be referred to in the Qur'an (Surah Al-Buruj 4-8) where the makers of the pit are condemned in no uncertain terms.

⁵ Tabari

⁶ Tabaqat al Kubra, Ibn Sa'd

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We also find the Caliph Umar entering into the following covenant with the Christians of Jerusalem following the capitulation of the city in 637 AC:

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. This is the security which Umar, the servant of God, the commander of the faithful, grants to the people of Aelia (Jerusalem). He grants to all, whether sick or sound, security for their lives, their possessions, their churches and their crosses, and all that concerns their religion. Their churches shall not be changed into dwelling places, nor destroyed. Neither shall they or their appurtenances be in any way diminished.

When Umar visited the Christian holy sites, the patriarch Sophronius accompanied him to the Church of the Resurrection and as it was the appointed time for prayer, he bade the Caliph offer his prayers there. Umar thoughtfully refused and disclosed his honourable motive: “*Had I yielded to your request*” said the Caliph “*the Muslims of a future age would have infringed the treaty under the colour of imitating my example*”⁷.

In like manner, we find Khalid bin Walid, the Muslim general in the days of the caliphate of Umar offering the following terms to the inhabitants of Damascus: “*In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. This is what Khalid Ibn Al Walid would grant to the inhabitants of Damascus if he enters therein. He promises to give them security for their lives, property and churches. Their city wall shall not be demolished; neither shall any Muslim be quartered in their houses. Thereunto we give to them the Pact of God and the Protection of His Prophet, the Caliphs and the Believers. So long as they pay the poll-tax, nothing but good shall befall them*”⁸.

⁷ Tabari

⁸ Futuh Al Buldan. Al-Baladhuri

We also learn from Tabari, the 9th century Arab historian, how during the caliphate of Umar, the Christian prisoners of war in Egypt were given the choice of embracing Islam or retaining their faith by paying the poll tax. When one chose to be a Muslim, the Arabs “cheered louder than they captured the city of Alexandria” and when they chose to keep their Christianity they became as gloomy as if one of their own men had deserted to the enemy camp.

That Islam was freely chosen by those who wished to embrace it is evident in the following tradition related by Umm Al-Muhājir:

I was captured with some girls from Byzantium. Uthmān offered us Islam, but only myself and one other girl accepted Islam. Uthmān said: “Go and circumcise them and purify them”⁹.

This spirit of tolerance of the early rightly-guided caliphs was even seen in later times, under the caliphate of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. Even the zealous Umar II, the eighth century Umayyad Caliph, so keen to see Islam spread far and wide, could only instruct the governors of his provinces to invite the dhimmis (non-Muslims) to the Islamic faith and take steps to induce them by means of monetary gain to embrace Islam¹⁰. Likewise in the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Al Ma ‘mun in the ninth century we find a cousin of the Caliph, Abdullah writing to a Christian Arab of noble birth and of considerable distinction at the court named Ishaq Al-Kindi, begging his friend to embrace Islam in very affectionate terms. Having commenced the letter with a salutation of peace, he writes:

⁹ Al-Adab Al-Mufrad of Bukhari

¹⁰ Tabaqat. Ibn Sa’d

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4) Historical evidence for tolerance under Islamdom

There is ample evidence to show the extent of tolerance Islam extended to non-Muslims who came within its pale. This is borne out by numerous historical records as well as by the fact that there still exist Christian communities living peacefully amongst Muslims in the Arab world, in countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. In contrast, one could not find a single significant Muslim community peacefully living amidst Christians in Europe before the French Revolution, for the simple reason that they were not allowed to exist. The fate of the Muslims that followed in the wake of the Spanish inquisition speaks much for the kind of tolerance mediaeval Europe extended to Muslims. This never happened, and could never happen under Islamdom.

The fact is that it was not until the Western World broke away from their ecclesiastical establishment that they became tolerant. In fact, before the French revolution and other secular upheavals in post-mediaeval Europe, religious tolerance was regarded as something unthinkable.

Mediaeval Europe, in spite of Jesus' teachings of love and compassion, simply did not have a notion of tolerance the way Islam did. History tells us that despite the massacres perpetrated by the crusaders of an earlier age and even by his contemporary Richard the Lionheart, when the Muslim Sultan Salahuddin Ayyubi (known as Saladin to the West) retook Jerusalem in 1187 he spared the lives of the Christians within it as enjoined by his faith ¹¹.

¹¹ A Pilgrimage to Palestine. Harry Emerson Fosdick (1937)

T.W.Arnold in his monumental work *The Preaching of Islam* (1913) has convincingly shown how in Islamdom, non-Muslims enjoyed great freedom, more so than found in Christendom or elsewhere. This was in sharp contrast to the intolerance found at the time in Christendom, as for instance when Charlemagne, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire forced the pagan Saxons to undergo baptism at the point of the sword. Arnold points out that whereas the religious strife between various Christian sects led to much oppression such as when the 5th century Nestorian Bishop Barsauma persuaded the Persian authorities, who were then non-Muslims, to persecute the Orthodox Church, leading to the deaths of as many as 7800 clergymen as well as an enormous number of laymen, the principles of Muslim toleration forbade such acts of injustice as these. On the contrary it was their policy to deal fairly by all their Christian subjects. For instance while after the Arab conquest of Egypt, the Jacobites took advantage of the expulsion of the Byzantine authorities to deprive the orthodox of their churches, they were later restored by the Muslims to their rightful owners when they had made good their claim to possess them. And all this despite the fact that it was the Orthodox Church that prevailed as the official religion of the Byzantine Empire which was constantly at war with the Islamic Caliphate.

The fact is that peace and tolerance were the hallmarks of Islamic rule. As shown by H.Prutz ¹² the Christians in Muslim lands preferred Islamic rule to that of the crusaders. As seen in a missive written by the prelates of the Holy Land, even the native Christian population of Palestine preferred Islamic rule to that of the crusaders and welcomed their new masters when Jerusalem fell once again to Muslim hands in 1244 ¹³. Likewise the Christians of Asia Minor welcomed the advent

¹² Kulturgeschichte der kreuzzuge (1883)

¹³ Parisiensis Chronica. Edited by H.R.Luard (1872-73)

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When Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453 after nearly a thousand years of withstanding Islamic forces, the Ottoman emperor Muhammad II saw to it that he secured the allegiance of the Christians. He proclaimed himself the protector of the Greek Church and strictly forbade the persecution of Christians. He even granted a decree to the newly elected patriarch Gennadios, securing to him and his successors and the bishops under him, the enjoyment of all the old privileges enjoyed under the former Byzantine rule. The patriarch received from the hands of the Sultan himself the pastoral staff, the symbol of his office, together with a purse of a thousand gold ducats and a horse with gorgeous trappings, on which he was privileged to ride with his train through the city¹⁴.

Archaeological evidence also testifies to the tolerance Islamic rulers extended to non-Muslim communities. Thus we have Stephen Humphreys¹⁵ stating that the evidence of cultural and intellectual vitality among the Christian churches of the east throughout the early Islamic period, indeed well up to the 11th century and beyond, does not suggest stagnation and demoralization. “Christian theologians under Muslim rule were free to pursue their debates without concern for imperial favor or disfavor or for that matter, fear of violence from rival sects”. He notes that archaeological evidence from Palestine and Syria indicate the ongoing occupation and in some places prosperity of Christian towns and settlements down to the 9th century. He observes that although damages to mosaics are seen in churches of Transjordan such as Mount Nebo during the middle part of the 8th century, this should be attributed not to Muslim hostility, but rather to the iconoclast controversy, which clearly raged as strongly in Syria as in Anatolia.

¹⁴ Annales. Georgios Phrantzes. Ed.B.G.Niebuhr (1838)

¹⁵ Christian communities in early Islamic Syria, in Money, Power and Politics in early Islamic Syria. Ed.John Haldon (2010)

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Appendix I

The Law of War in Islam

First of all, it must be stressed that Islam views Jihad or Holy War as a means of liberation, not oppression, so unlike the wars of Europe that were meant for national aggrandizement or to boost the vanity of monarchs or the ruling elite at the expense of the common people, already burdened by an oppressive feudal system, who had to do the dying. This was particularly so in the benighted Europe of an earlier age than the more enlightened times we live in today. It needs no gainsaying that the need for the French Revolution could not have been felt under an Islamic regime. That holy war was meant for peoples' liberation is seen from the Qur'ān's admonishment to the believers : "And why should you not fight in the cause of Allah (*sabīlillāh*) and for those weak, ill-treated and oppressed among men, women and children" (4:75). Furthermore given that Islam is a unifying force, binding all believers into a common fraternity and treating all equally irrespective of race or class, jihad could be regarded as 'a war to end all wars'. This is in contrast to many other nations which could not address this problem adequately as seen from the fact that it was Europe that was responsible for causing two World Wars in which millions perished, all for the sake of a false national pride.

In contrast, Islam outlawed fighting for tribal or national causes, for as the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) clearly declared: He is not one of us who calls for *Asabiyah* (tribal partisanship), or who fights for *Asabiyah* or who dies for *Asabiyah*" (Abu Dāwud). Not only nationalist feeling, but also outlawed was the notion of nobility by lineage which entitled one to special treatment or privileges. Take for instance the case of Jabala bin Al Ayham, a Ghassanid ruler who became a Muslim during the caliphate of Umar, but afterwards turned Christian and went to live in the Byzantine empire, the occasion of his apostatizing from Islam being this: Once in passing through the bazaar of Damascus, he let his

horse tread upon one of the bystanders who sprang up and struck Jabala a blow on the face. The Ghassanids seized the fellow and brought him before Abu Ubayday, a well known companion of the Prophet, who answered: "If he has struck thee, thou wilt strike him a blow in return". Jabala asked "And shall not he be slain?". "No" replied Abu Ubaydah. "Shall not his hand be cut off?" "No" said Abu Ubaydah "God has ordained retaliation only – blow for blow". Jabala then betook himself to Roman territory and became a Christian (A Literary History of the Arabs. R.A.Nicholson.1907).

Although the early caliphs waged an aggressive jihad to spread the Islamic order of justice in the conquered territories, we would find that in the Prophet's day, Jihad was more defensive in nature, to ensure that the message of Islam could reach people freely sans any sort of repression. We know for one thing that the battles of Badr and Uhud fought against the Pagans of Mecca was meant to prevent the oppression of the Muslims. So was the battle of Muthah in Syria in which the Muslims fought against the Byzantines, the result of the arrogance of an ally of the Byzantine empire, an Arab Christian prince of the Ghassanid Kingdom named Sharhabil who had the Prophet's envoy Harith Ibn Umayr executed for seeking to convey the message of Islam to the governor of Basrah.

As the Qur'an says: "*Fight for the sake of Allah those who fight against you, but do not attack them first. Allah does not love aggressors*" (2:190). "*And fight them until there is no more oppression, and there prevails justice and faith in God. But if they cease let there be no hostility except against the oppressors*" (2:193).

Be it as it may, the jihad of the early caliphs was not without its benefits even to the conquered peoples, for it ended the oppression of one religious group by another and established a system of social justice based on the idea of human equality never seen before in history. As H.G.Wells observes in his Outline of History (1931): "*If the reader entertains any*

delusions about a fine civilization, either Persian, Roman, Hellenic or Egyptian, being submerged by this flood, the sooner he dismisses these ideas the better. Islam prevailed because it was the best social and political order the times had to offer. It prevailed because everywhere it found politically apathetic peoples, robbed, oppressed, bullied, uneducated and unorganized, and it found selfish and unsound governments out of touch with any people at all. It was the broadest, freshest and cleanest political idea that had yet come into actual activity in the world, and it offered better terms than any other to the mass of mankind”.

It is thus that we have S.P Scott writing in glowing terms of the Muslim treatment of the non-Muslims of Spain in his work *History of the Moorish Empire in Europe* (1904): “*By its example of equity, toleration and mercy, the new government rapidly gained the attachment of its subjects; the Jew prospered, the Christian forgot his bigotry, and the slave eagerly repeated the formula which released him from bondage and placed him on an equality with kings*”. Elsewhere he remarks: “*When the first shock of conquest had passed, the overpowering terror inspired by the presence of the invaders subsided. They proved to be very different from the incarnate demons which a distorted imagination had painted them. They were found to be lenient, generous, humane*”. We also have R.Dozy observing in his *Histoire des Mussulmans d’Espagne* (Translated as *Spanish Islam* by F.G.Stokes.1913): “*In some respects, the Arab conquest was even a benefit to Spain, for it brought about an important social revolution, and put an end to many evils under which the country had groaned for centuries. The power of the privileged classes, of the clergy and the nobility, was reduced almost to extinction, since the confiscated land had been divided among a very large number of persons, what was practically peasant proprietorship had been instituted. This proved highly beneficial, and was one of the causes of the flourishing state of agriculture in Muslim Spain. The conquest had, moreover, ameliorated the condition of the servile classes. Islamism was much more favourable to the*

emancipation of slaves than was Christianity – as interpreted by the bishops of the Visigothic dominion”.

At any rate Jihad is governed by strict rules of combat in the prosecution of war, which was followed to the letter by the Islamic Arab armies wherever they went. For one thing non-combatants including women, children, aged persons and those who had taken to religious pursuits were not to be harmed in any way. That non-combatants were not to be harmed in war is evident from the Prophet’s own reaction, when, seeing a woman lying dead in the battlefield, he protested: *“She was not engaged in fighting”*. He lost no time in sending instructions to his military commander Khalid bin Al Walid not to kill women or neutral bystanders (labourers/servants) (Sunan of Abu Dawud). He also instructed his military leaders: *“Do not kill the elderly, infants or children and women. Do not exceed the proper bounds”* (Abu Dawud).

Also consider the instructions given by Caliph Abu Bakr to Usamah Ibn Zayd before dispatching him to war: *“Do not commit treachery or fraud nor depart in any manner from the right. Do not mutilate any one, nor kill a child or aged man, nor any woman. Injure not the date-palm or burn it with fire; nor cut down any fruit-bearing tree. Slay not sheep or cows or camels except for your needful sustenance. You will come across persons who spend their lives in retirement in monasteries; leave them in their state”* (Tarikh Al Rasul Wal Muluk, Tabari).

Prisoners of war were also to be treated with kindness. The Qur’an (47:4) commands that once the enemy has been defeated, they are to be taken as captives and shown generosity (released without ransom) or for ransom (whichever benefits Islam) until the war lays down its burden. Such ransom could even take the form of teaching for in the days of the Prophet, some Meccan captives were released on condition that they taught some Muslims in Medina how to read and write.

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