

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF ISLAMIC HISTORY

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I will commence by saying that Islamic history, in short perspective, is the history of the achievements of the last of the Prophets Muhammad (Peace be upon him) and his best companions Abubakr Siddiq, Umar, Ali and Usman. Islamic history, I dare say, ended with the passing away of Hazrat Usman the fourth caliph.

The Islamic system that is based on mutual consultation, social justice and economic parity gave peace, tolerance and plenty to the human society. It was set aside by monarchies of the Muslims who, unfortunately, were the descendants of the faithful. The sound foundation of 'faith' and the socio-economic system based on it, however, led to research and advancement in the various fields of learning in the countries that came under Muslim rule of the faithful. Both the socialist and the capitalist systems that followed the Islamic system gained a lot from the research by the Muslims.

The dominance in the modern world of the capitalist system developed by the US and the West, and its absolute control over the electronic media, has spread ideological confusion amongst the people of the world and created enormous hindrances in the way of revival of the concept of 'faith' as against 'religion'. However, many attempts have been made throughout history, and will continue to be made in the future, to revive the Islamic faith i.e., the Islamic way of life.

The concept of 'religion', as developed and spread by the capitalist and socialist systems, is the most serious impediment in the way of the realization and acceptance of the truth about human existence. The leaders of the two modern systems of capitalism and socialism have coined the word 'religion' for political purposes, i.e., to enable them to rule unhindered over the people, whom the ruling elite consider inferior to them, and would like to exploit for their selfish ends. This concept of religion thus places the real power and authority in the hands of the few while preventing the majority of the people from managing the society in the wider interests of the people. Through such a narrow and false concept of religion, the interests of the people are maliciously

diverted towards useless attempts by them to secure false satisfaction of achieving salvation in the hereafter, without having to exert for the dominance of 'good' over 'evil' in worldly affairs, and making efforts in this world to order their lives for living in peace, progress and plenty. The concept of religion has been restricted to a few acts of worship of a God whose place in bettering the performance of world affairs is not really understood, and who is not considered to be connected in any way with one's daily life. The term 'religion' is, in fact, a misnomer and should not be used to mean the 'Faith of the Prophets'. It should be discarded altogether in order to avoid confusion in the minds of the people, and those who manage the State.

The concept of "religious tolerance" had in fact originated in the Islamic history under a different connotation from the present one. It was first mentioned in the Holy Quran in verse 5 of *Surah "Al-kafiroon"* in the words: "You are free to follow your faith and leave us to freely follow our faith". This was a clear direction from the Creator to build one's social relationship on toleration of the differences in thought and action of the people living in a society, which include differences in the ways of worship of God.

It would be pertinent to mention here that religions (i.e., religious or sectarian concepts) are man-tailored, while faith is the way of life revealed by God for man through His Prophets) for man. Religions have a tendency towards their being further divided into various sects and creeds. They go to divide people into innumerable dissident groups who disable the people from working together for a common cause.

'Faith', on the other hand, unites people of different ethnic, linguistic and religious origins for a common humanitarian cause and promotes human wellbeing irrespective of race, colour or creed. Religious dogmas are the source of intolerance, and breed a false concept of "*jihad*" that leads to terrorism. This disassociates one from taking up the responsibility of ordering affairs of the society and the state for betterment of human beings. Most of the evils prevailing in today's world which is dominated by imperialist powers, are due to the ideological misconceptions that at present sway the mind and intellect of the world leaders as well as political leaders of various countries.

'Islam' is the name given by the Quran to the "deen-e-Ambia" i.e., the way of life of the Prophets before Muhammad,

including Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Its role lies in its etymological meanings of peace, tranquility, tolerance and amity. Hence the term Islam is best understood if it is used in this context. The Quran says in verse 19 of *Surah Aal-e-Imran*: "Really, the deen – the way of life –you have been assigned is Islam". Men of faith (Muslims in the real sense), therefore, emit peace and amity through their dealings with others. This definition of Islam, given by the Quran, would lead one to understand that all persons who come to believe in God and serves humanity', belong to the category of *ahl-e-iman* even though they may be from the *ahl-e-kufr* by birth. Essentially, humanity is composed of two transposable categories of the 'faithful' and the 'negaters', and eventually it must return to its origin, which the Quran says in verse 4 of surah "Atteen" is: "Surely, I have created the human being in excellent disposition".

An important aspect of religious tolerance is that the future generations must be educated on a firm ideological footing and not chained any longer to false and idealistic notions that do not stand the test of rational and scientific inquiry. Such education should be action-oriented and not restricted to mere talk.

The touchstone for judging the correctness and usefulness of any notion is that it is practicable and serves the interests and basic needs of the common man, and does not promote intolerance, prejudices and superstitions in human society. For this to come about, we will have to pronounce in clear terms that no person shall be subjected to dominance of any kind by another person, be he a ruler, a leader, a religious elite or even a family head. A person should have absolute freedom to form an opinion or make decisions on his own. One should be enabled to seek guidance freely, without any extraneous pressure, from those one respects and trusts. The best guidance, however, is from God who is the bestower of life and sustenance to man. Guidance can be had from him directly by any person just by asking for it. No support is required from anyone else to seek guidance from God. One should not follow blindly any human being. Anyone demanding abject submission should be held to be an imposter and a fascist deserving full defiance.