

ISLAM: A RELIGION OF PEACE AND TOLERANCE

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The thesis of my article is based on Iqbal's statement that "Islam is essentially a religion of peace"²⁸ He categorically rejected the objection forwarded by Western critics that Islam is a militant religion, and that it was spread on the point of sword. Iqbal said, "Defensive war is certainly permitted by the Quran; but the doctrine of aggressive war against unbelievers is wholly unauthorized by the Holy Book of Islam."²⁹ I have in my article endeavoured to elucidate that Islam is intrinsically a religion of peace, tolerance and universal brotherhood.

Given the inevitable heterogeneity of beliefs, and man's intense experience of them, the message of the Holy Quran to accept the differences of religion, community and culture is one of toleration of differences: "And the Jews will not be pleased with thee, nor will the Christians, till thou follow their creed." (Chap. 1. 120 The Cow). "And even if thou broughtest into those who have received the Scripture all kinds of portents, they would not follow the qiblah, nor canst thou be a follower of their qiblah." (Chap. 2. 145 the Cow).

Mutual agreement on theological issues may not be possible, it is not even the desired goal, but mutual understanding and respect for other religions is desirable. If God wished, He the Omnipotent, could surely have made every one a Muslim, but that is not a part of the Divine Design. The absolute unity of Allah is inclusive of all the differences, because He is the creator of the variegated pattern. So what if the Christians do not accept Islam? Are they to be condemned as the followers of Satan to be finally hurled into the leaping livid flames of hell fire? Ought they to be butchered? Should they be cast out of the realm of good people? Or should they be forcibly or secretly converted to Islam? What is to be done? The Holy Quran is very explicit on this issue. "Let no hatred of any people seduce ye

²⁸ Syed Abdul Wahid, Thoughts and Reflection of Iqbal (Lahore, Ashraf Pr c, 1964), pp-46.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

that deal not justly. Deal justly, that is nearer to your duty. Observe your duty to Allah.” (6.8 The table spread). .

“Say (unto the people of the Scripture): Dispute ye with us concerning Allah when He is our Lord and you Lord? Ours are our works and yours you works.” (1.139 The Cow). And Each one hath a goal towards which he turneth; so vie with one another in good works wheresoever you may be, Allah will bring you all together.” (2.148 The Cow). The Quran teaches that all religious people have a duty to work for a just and equal society.

Iqbal in his article on the “The Ethical and Political Ideal of Islam” cites, many verses from the Holy Quran with a view to “educate political opinion on strictly Islamic lives.”³⁰ Iqbal views Christian and Muslim relationship in the historical perspective³¹ He gives the example of the courteous behaviour of the earlier Muslims, who had to settle in the Christian state of Abyssinia, because of persecution at home. Iqbal said³² that Muslim - Christian relationship is determined by the Quran, which says: “You will find the nearest in affection to those who believe, those who say, We are Christians. That is because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not proud”. (6.82 The table spread).

“This day are (all) good things made lawful for you. the food of those who have received the Scripture is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them.” (6.5 the table spread) The above quoted verses should dismiss the common superstition among Muslims that they cannot be friends with Christians. The misunderstanding has bred suspicion, rivalry, bitterness: and enmity between the two communities. Islam does not forbid its followers to mix with Christians. The idea of blocking one self into a narcissistic image of superiority on the basis of. faith alone is an absolute travesty of Islamic teaching. Excellence of conduct is the mark of superiority. The injunction is not to make friends with those who scoff at Muslim religious beliefs and practices. The Holy ‘Quran asks to tolerate verbal violence. Not to make friends with an insolent reviler does not permit hostility or use of violence or aggression. Provocative language inducing violence is disliked in Islamic

³⁰ Ibid., p.50.

³¹ Ibid., p.50.

³² Ibid., p. 47

teaching. The Holy Quran forbids Muslims to make derogatory remarks about any religion in front of, or at the back of the upholders of the other religion. “Allah loveth not the utterance of harsh speech save by one who hath been wronged.” (6-148).

God sent all His Prophets with one and the same message which was “Islam” and all prophets of Allah were “Muslims” The word Islam means ‘Peace’. It is willing surrender to the will of God. “Say, O People of the scripture (Christians and Jews) Come to-an agreement between us and you, that we shall worship none but Allah, that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, that none of us shall take others for Lords beside Allah. And if they turn, they say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him)” (3.64 Al ‘Imran). “Abraham was not a Jew; nor yet a Christian; but he was an upright man who had surrendered (to Allah) and he was not of the idolaters”. (3.67 Al Imran).

When the Christian Waraqa ibn Nawfal acknowledged Prophet Mohammed (may peace be. upon him) as the true prophet, neither he nor the Prophet expected him to convert to Islam. The Holy Prophet never wanted the Jews or the Christians to embrace Islam unless they themselves had a desire, because they had received authentic revelations of their own.

The Quran did not see the revelation as canceling out the messages and insights of previous Prophets, but instead it stressed the continuity of the religious experience of mankind. It is important to stress this point because tolerance is not a virtue that many western people today would feel inclined to attribute to Islam. Yet from the start, Muslims saw revelation in less exclusive terms than either Jews or Christians.”³³ The Quran does not condemn other revealed religions as false, but shows each new prophet as confirming, continuing and adding to the message of his predecessors. “We make no distinction between any of His messenger” (3-285 The Cow) and “He hath revealed unto thee (Mohammad) the scripture with Truth, confirming that which was (revealed) before it, even as He revealed the Torah and the Gospel”. (3-3 Al ‘Imran) and “We gave Jesus, son of Mary, clear proofs (of Allah’s sovereignty) and we supported him with the Holy Spirit” (3-253 The Cow). “say (Q Mohammad) we believe in Allah that which

³³ Karen Armstrong, History of God (U.S.A. Alfred A Knof, 1993), pp. 152.

is revealed unto Abraham and Ismael and Iseac and Jacob and the tribes and that which was vouchsafed unto Moses and Jesus and the Prophets form their lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered” (3-48 Al ‘Imran). thus the Quran repeatedly points out that Muslims must tolerate the older religions. “Do not argue with the followers of earlier revelations otherwise than. in the most kindly manner unless it be such of them as are set on evil doing ----and say: “We believe in that which has been bestowed upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we (all) surrender ourselves”. (21-46 The Spider)

Islam does not aspire to unify humanity by converting all human beings to institutional Islam. Such a feat is obviously impracticable. According to Quranic scriptures, it does not matter what creed a man professes or what rite he performs. “And who doth greater wrong than he who forbiddeth the approach to the sanctuaries of Allah lest his name should be mentioned there” (1-114 The Cow) It is important to note that the word used here for the place of worship is sanctuary and not mosque. Islam enjoins the Muslims to respect and maintain the sanctity of all the sanctuaries, whether they are mosques or churches. “The true mosque in a pure holy heart is builded. There let all men worship God;, For there He dwells, net in a mosque of stone”³⁴

This concept broadens the boundary of Islam, extends it to include the entire human race. Allah is one not only in the sense of being unique and undivided but in the sense of being all inclusive. Given the heterogeneity of human needs, customs, the ineradicable idiosyncrasies of human reasoning, Islam affirms the unity not of religion alone but of mankind. It deplors the divisions among Christians and Jews and calls on them to be at one with the Muslims in worshipping one God.

Christianity and Islam an encounter each other in a new way, one leading to a solidarity which in this critical hour of human history, all should seek. Bitterness, hatred and rivalry among them must give place not only to negative toleration, but also to a positive and fruitful cooperation on the

³⁴ Reynold A. Nicholson, *The .Mystics of Islam* (New York: Schockew Bks, 1975), pp. 87.

largest possible scale. They should fight together against materialism in all its forms; ideological, intellectual and political.

We must learn from the warnings and experiences of history and use religion as a source of love and more love and still more love. We must dispassionately, and free from prejudices, reinterpret religion and try to discover its true spirit. “We (God) have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another (and be friends). The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in the conduct.”(26-13 Apartments)