



Religious Diversity, Tolerance and Pluralism: The Islamic Perspective

Irm Jalali Bodha

Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar (Punjab), INDIA

(Corresponding author: Irm Jalali Bodha)

(Received 14 September, 2017, Accepted 27 November, 2017)

(Published by Research Trend, Website: www.researchtrend.net)

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there has been a monstrous migration of people from the east to the west. Most of them migrated for economic reasons, to keep away from persecution or are looking asylum due to their refugee status. Much of Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia are facing an influx of people of different religions, cultures, and ethnicities. This rapid increase has created a problem of integration resulting in conflicts and sometime in xenophobia. In this period of globalization, we have to go past our own religious limits and comprehend other worldliness that is not characterized by specific religious sacred texts or sets of principles.

This special issue focuses on “religious diversity” and “religious pluralism” in various parts of the contemporary world. These terms are both familiar and fraught. In common parlance, “diversity” is usually seen as a matter of description: distinct kinds of people living cheek by jowl, interacting or not, divided by religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political allegiance, or whatever brute empirical distinction they (or others) draw between them. “Pluralism”, on the other hand, is a moral term. It is a way to handle diversity by turning separations into a positive way for different people to connect with one another [1]. In this article, “religious pluralism” refers to a theory about the diversity of religions. Finally, some authors use “descriptive religious pluralism” to mean what is here called “religious diversity,” calling “normative religious pluralism” views that are here called varieties of “religious pluralism.”

Diversity and tolerance are considered very basis of modernity as one of the modernity’s fundamental principles is individual and community rights and also, as modernity implies democratic rule, tolerance and right to pursue any ideology or religion assumes great importance. The western countries see themselves as good models for democracy and freedom.

Religious intolerance, defined as the practice of keeping others from acting in accordance with their religious beliefs, is not new. However, there is concern world-wide over the increasing amount, and increasingly violent nature, of such behavior. Accordingly, there is understandably a renewed interest in fostering religiously tolerant environments in which individuals with differing religious perspectives can practice their faiths unencumbered [2].

The Islamic philosophy of tolerance is derived from the Quran and the practise of Prophet. Though, the concept of tolerance is clearly developed in the Holy text and the teachings of Prophet. In the contemporary world, Islam and Muslims have become a visibly intolerant. But the 09/11 attack in the US and the emergence of Islamic extremists / terrorists groups such as Taliban, Al Qaeda, Boko Haram and ISIS and their atrocities show to the world that the philosophy of Islamic teachings basically lead to intolerance, disharmony and extremism and rejects religious diversity and pluralism. The United States has experienced a significant rise in reported incidents of intolerant behavior directed at Muslims [3]. It appears that such misapprehensions and misunderstandings of Islam are growing increasingly.

Tolerance is a deliberate choice of non-interference in the conduct that one disproves. In other words, it is an attitude of not opposing the different beliefs and practices of others that evoke the disapproval in oneself. Some political philosophers such as John Rawls, Ross Harrison and Jean Hampton view tolerance as a liberal concept or as the basis for liberalism. In this view, tolerance can be flourish in the state or government that safeguards the rights of all religions and differences. But in the Islamic word, it is not viewed as a liberal political concept. Further, in the Western view religious tolerance has distinct characters; individual freedom of thinking, worshipping freely, propagation of ones religion or renunciation of ones religion.

Controlling of one of these is considered as violation of rights. In the book of the Difficulty of Tolerance (2003) T.M. Scanlon [4] describes tolerance as;

“Tolerance requires us to accept people and permit their practices even when we strongly disapprove of them. Tolerance thus involves an attitude that is intermediate between wholehearted acceptance and unrestrained opposition.”[4].

Religious intolerance has no place in today’s world. We do not need to pretend that we are all in agreement, but we need to learn to disagree respectfully. Tolerance, acceptance, and showing dignity to people of all faiths is the only way that people of different religions of the world can live together with peace and harmony.

These regimes of tolerance show two different types of tolerance; tolerating individual (creates assimilation) and group tolerance (creates recognition). Today’s forms of tolerance include both forms that democratic inclusiveness and communal autonomy. In other words, individuals move to regimes as individuals or individuals form as groups to separate from the regime as a group. Walzer (1999) makes the point in the examination of tolerance that tolerance does not mean harmony but it means lower classes can compete and they can move forward. Further, in highly enriched multiculturalism, minorities demand leads to the new democratic learning of tolerance [9].

Some view tolerance as mutual respect while others view it more pragmatically. But Rainer Forst explains away from these ambiguities and views toleration as a virtue of justice and a demand of reason (Forst, 2003). In other words, it plays an important role for cultural and minority groups in the current clash of civilizations. For some, tolerance helps to secure a peaceful and cooperative way life based on mutual recognition and political equality; for others this word is related to power, dominion and exclusion [5].

II. RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

Islam is the religion of mercy and kindness, the religion of tolerance and ease. Faith/Belief is from the first of the 5 pillars upon which Islam is based, they also consist of more than seventy branches (i.e. parts) and one of these parts is, “Tolerance”. The Quran speaks about the basic dignity of all human beings. The Prophet (SAW) spoke about the equality of all human beings, regardless of their race, color, language or traditional background. Clear elicitation of tolerance is expressed from the verse of Quran for the Muslims that is:

“For you is your religion, and for me is my religion.” (Quran 109: 6). We can’t force others to accept our point of view and religion or faith. As In Holy Quran Allah Almighty said: **“There is no compulsion in religion...”** (Quran 2:256).

The religion of Islam revolves around hope and fear of the one and only creator, so the believer is one who has hope and fear. In Holy Quran, Allah Almighty says: **“Verily, they used to hasten on to do good deeds, and they used to call on us in hope and in fear”** (Quran, 21: 90). From this verse, we can conclude that believer is the one who has hope and fear and these make believer to be tolerant or makes believer have tolerance.

From the life of our beloved Prophet (SAW), we can learn many lessons of tolerance as He (SAW) did with all mankind whether its believer or non-believer. The whole personality of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) demonstrates the implication of tolerance towards other minorities. Once the people asked Prophet Muhammad (SAW) that why Allah did not command hardships and forcefully flatten the false Gods to prove one true religion. Upon this Allah Almighty sent the following verse of Quran:

“And those who associate others with Allah say, “If Allah had willed, we would not have worshipped anything other than Him, neither we nor our fathers nor would we have forbidden anything through other than Him.” Thus did those do before them. So is thereupon the messengers except [the duty of] clear notification?”(Quran, 16:35)

To eliminate religious intolerance and persecution, we need to be examining similarities and understanding differing texts as complementary. We should not declare another religion’s sacred text to be false. The similarities of God’s message and the stories about Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus are the same in the Quran as they are in the Old Testament. In fact, the Quran has an entire chapter on the Virgin Mary, the Immaculate Conception, and the birth of Jesus Christ. The Medina charter, a document from 622 AD written by Prophet Mohammad is regarded as the first constitution in the world, which is an excellent reflection of diversity and tolerance.

The word 'pluralism' means the 'existence of different groups of people in one society. 'It leads to belief that it is possible and good for different groups to live together in peace in one society.' The European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly emphasized the following as particularly important features of a democratic society: pluralism, tolerance and broad-mindedness. Thus 'religious pluralism' means acceptance of a variety of religious beliefs or opinions in a multi-faith society. It is the free exercise of reason that will yield a permanent plurality of reasonable and comprehensive doctrines [6].

Pluralism is a modern catchword, which comprises 'diversity of cultures, belief systems and values' with the promotion of human expression and dread of irreconcilable conflict. Until recently, it was a routine practice to

dehumanize the "other" instead of accommodating divergent views. This recent recognition of the "other" is mostly a by-product of the snowballing technological advances in transportation and communication [7]. The 'marginalization of confessional language in theology and religious studies is another factor of acceptance of pluralism. An exposing of knowledge about various religions, massive immigration from East to West, and interfaith dialogue meetings also contributed in the significance of religious pluralism.

The focus on comparative religion has brought out extensive as well as intensive literature on pluralism, which demands critical study. The present paper aims at tracing the relation of Islam with other religion and the individual as well as collective relations of Muslims with the followers of other religions. It also identifies the Islam approach towards religious pluralism.

Rawls in his book "Political Liberalism" (2005) talks about religious pluralism pointing out that it does not threaten the rectitude of religious belief. He says;

"Political liberalism does not question that many political and moral judgments of certain specified kinds are correct and it views many of them as reasonable. Nor, does it question the possible truth of affirmations of faith. Above all, it does not argue that we should be hesitant and uncertain, much less sceptical, about our beliefs. Rather, we are to recognize the practical impossibility of reaching reasonable and workable political agreement in judgments of certain specified kinds are correct and it views many of them as reasonable." (Rawls, 2005) [8].

Islam respects diversity of religions as a natural phenomenon in the historical development of religions. Religious pluralism is the acceptance of all religious paths as equally valid, promoting co-existence. Pluralism is not just tolerance, but actively seeking to understand differences between religions and finding the core values. A pluralist approaches religious diversity by stating that, within certain limits, one religion is as good as any other. Thus, according to religious pluralists, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism all are equally worthy and are true religions. However, a majority of followers of any specific religion do not adhere to this belief. Such exclusivists say that only one religion is the truth and that their religion is superior to all other religions.

While a majority of Muslims may subscribe to the exclusionist viewpoint, the Quran promotes the concept of pluralism. God says in the Quran,

"O mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female and made you people and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted." (Quran 49: 13).

According to this verse, there is equality among all human beings and an acceptance of diversity. No person is superior to another person except for moral superiority. Human diversity exists, as the divine will. The Quran says,

"If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single community, but (God's plan is) to test you in what He has given you: so, excel one another in good deeds. You will return to God and Allah will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute." (Quran 5:48).

God stated clearly in the Quran, "If a person believes in God, surrenders to His will and does righteous things he will be rewarded," therefore the decision about salvation will be made by God not in the name of religion, but on the basis of behavior. Those who choose good behaviors of kindness, morality, and serving humanity will be rewarded. Those who neglect the truth and follow evil will be punished.

Islam affirms that the core of the messages of all the Prophets and Messengers was submission to God in the light of Divine guidance communicated by the Prophets. All Prophets were Muslims (submitters to God), and Islam is not merely the religion preached by Muhammad (peace be on him) but also the religion of all the true Prophets of God such as Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Jesus and their followers. Muslim recognition of legitimate religions is not limited to Christianity and Judaism- it extends to other major pre-Islamic religions such as Sabianism and Buddhism. This recognition is based on the Islamic belief that all communities have been visited by a warner and that the different religious traditions in the world presumably have had an authentic starting point.

The Quran acknowledges that different groups adhere to an exclusionist view, noting how adherents of one religion consider their beliefs as the absolute truth and those of any other as void, and how they consider themselves as blessed and saved, going to heaven, while all others will be damned to hell. But, the Quran makes it clear that it will be God who will decide who is saved and who is damned on the Resurrection/Judgment Day. God says in the Quran, "Jews assert the Christians have no valid ground for their beliefs. While the Christian asserts that the Jews have no valid ground for their beliefs and both quote from their sacred books, and those who have no knowledge (Pagans) say the same thing about others. But Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning that over which they used to differ." (Quran 2: 113).

Religious pluralism is on the rise due to many reasons, including politics, anti-discrimination laws, and globalization. To pronounce against any religion as false is deeply disrespectful. Many people associate the pluralist theory of religious diversity with a number of good qualities such as being humble, reasonable, open-minded, informed, appreciative of difference, tolerant, and being opposed to proselytizing (attempts to convince those

outside the religion to convert to it). Pluralists claim that all religions of some kind share a common core, and that this is really what matters about the religions: their equal value is found in this common core. Religious pluralism maintains that all problems are created by mutual ignorance and misunderstanding. This attitude is almost a distinguishing feature of the postmodern and the postcolonial world. Majority of the scholars today considers religious pluralism as a fact of today's world. It aims at proper understanding and search for common grounds of cooperation and harmony among the followers of various religious traditions. 'Pluralism' stands for the existence of more than one religion at a given time and space. More or less each religion has plural traditions. Religious pluralism is a theory according to which the perceptions, conceptions and responses of the great world religions to the one ultimate mysterious divine reality vary.

I believe that Islam is a perfect religion and it is a way of life, contributing towards building cohesive societies. It gives me a sense of purpose for life, morals, character building, and serving humanity. Islam is an inclusive religion of peace, tolerance, harmony, compassion, and gender justice; it is not an exclusivist religion of violence, intolerance, hatred, and misogyny. This is the path I choose to reach God. Based on Quranic directives and the examples of Prophet Muhammad. I treat the followers of all religions with respect and dignity.

It is important for people of all faith to teach their children to show respect, tolerance, and acceptance of all individuals irrespective of their beliefs. We need to remember, all of the religions were sent to earth for one basic purpose, which is for life to survive on the planet against entropy and to promote humanity. We can see this in the core of all religions. Respecting others and showing dignity to others is necessary to promote peace and harmony. As Islam emphasizes “*No man is a true believer unless he desires for his fellow being what he desires for himself.*”

In Dallas-Fort Worth in USA, many Muslim leaders are concerned about the increase in sectarian violence and atrocities towards minorities in Muslim countries. It is very disturbing that thousands of people belonging to minority sects have been killed during the past few years. For Muslim moral majority, it is very painful and disturbing. Hundreds of Muslim scholars and Muslim organizations have issued statements condemning these atrocities. ISNA issued a strong statement on Muslim code of honor promoting religious harmony. Marrakesh Declaration “On the Rights of Religious Minorities” in January 2016 emphasized to governments, scholars and Muslim community leaders to develop the concept of “citizenship” which is inclusive of diverse groups, to restrict material which instigates aggression and extremism and to confront all forms of religious bigotry, vilification, and denigration. Unfortunately none of these efforts have been fruitful. Unfortunately, the incidents of violence towards the minorities in Muslim countries had increased in past year.

It is time that the Muslim scholars and leaders once again sit together to spread the information on commonalities among various sects and religions, instead of elaborating the differences. We need to nurture our youth to tolerate the differences and learn to live in peace and harmony. To achieve this goal Muslim leaders and Imams representing different sects in DFW area have established an Institute of Quranic Knowledge and Intra-faith Religious Acceptance (IQRA) with the primary goal to “evoke insightful intra-faith/inter-faith dialog and serve as a policy institute that contributes knowledge to the Muslim world, through progressive research and advocacy concerning religious edicts, laws and policies”.

It is impossible to get the entire community of 1.6 billion Muslim to think alike but it is possible to have the coexistence of people with different beliefs to live in civilized communities in the world. The major challenge is to persuade people to stop killing one another because they have slightly different interpretations of the Quran and teachings of Prophet Mohammed (saws). We must learn from our Christian brothers who faced similar sectarian induced atrocities until a few hundred years ago.

Under the guidance of IQRA, started the dialog between community leaders, Imams representing various religious doctrines; Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, Ahmmadiyya, and Bohra communities. We also are including religious leaders of Christian and Jewish faith. Our meetings have been extremely fruitful as the entire representative Imams and community leaders have made a commitment, to promote religious harmony among various groups and instill the unity among all faiths and doctrines.

REFERENCES

- [1]. James V. Spickard, (2017). Diversity vs. Pluralism: Reflections on the Current Situation in the United States, *Religions, MDPI, USA*, 28 August 2017.
- [2]. D. Basinger, (2015). Religious Diversity (Pluralism), First published Tue May 25, 2004; substantive revision Fri Sep 4, 2015, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religious-pluralism/>.
- [3]. Philip L. Quinn. (2005). On Religious Diversity & Tolerance, *The MIT Press on behalf of American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, Vol. 134, No. 1, On Race (Winter, 2005), pp. 136-139
- [4]. Scanlon, T.M. (2003). *The Difficulty of Tolerance: Essays in Political Philosophy*, UK: University of Cambridge.
- [5]. Forst, Rainer. (2003). *Toleration, Justice and Reason in C. Mckinnon and D. Castiglione (eds.), The Culture of Toleration in Diverse Societies*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. pp.71-85

- [6]. Michael S. Merry, (2004). "Islam versus (Liberal) Pluralism? A Response to Ahmad Yousaf," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*," **24**:1 (2004) 124-126
- [7]. Abdulaziz Sachedina, (2001). *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 22-23
- [8]. Rawls, John, (2005). *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- [9]. Walzer, M. (1999). *On Toleration*, Yale University Press.