

# Religious Freedom and Tolerance in Islam

## A summary of the book *Islam, Peace and Tolerance*

### Freedom of religion

Islam recognises complete freedom of religion and belief for every human being, and does not prescribe any punishment whatsoever for a person who leaves the religion of Islam to adopt some other faith. The Quran declares:

“There is no compulsion in religion — the right way is indeed clearly distinct from error.”— 2:256

“The Truth is from your Lord; so let him who please believe and let him who please disbelieve.” — 18:29

The Quran teaches that the duty of Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah, and, following him, the duty of every Muslim, is only to *deliver* the message of truth:

“If they accept Islam, then indeed they follow the right way; and if they turn back, your duty (O Prophet) is only to deliver the message.” — 3:20

“Your duty (O Prophet) is only the delivery of the message, and Ours (God’s) is to call (people) to account.” — 13:40

“And you (O Prophet) are not one to compel them. So remind by means of the Quran him who fears My warning.” — 50:45

The Quran further says that it is in the natural order of things that while some people believe, others do not, and no human being can or should apply compulsion to others in this regard. To quote:

“And if your Lord had pleased, all those who are in the earth would have believed, all of them. Will you then force people till they are believers?” — 10:99

“... for everyone of you We appointed a law and a way. And if Allah had pleased He would have made you (i.e., all mankind) one religious community, but He wishes to try you in what He has given you. So vie with one another in virtuous deeds. To Allah you will all return, and then He will inform you about your differences (i.e., as to who was right or wrong).” — 5:48

It is taught in the last verse above that as all religions preach the doing of good, their followers should try to outdo each other in virtuous deeds. The differences between us in doctrine will always remain, as long as we are alive, and only after death do we find out who was right and who was wrong. There need be no dispute between religions.

### **Apostasy**

Several times the Quran speaks of people going back to unbelief after believing in Islam, but never once does it say that they should be killed or punished. For example:

“O you who believe, should anyone of you turn back from his religion, then Allah will bring a people whom He loves and who love Him.” — 5:54

In one place the Quran refers to the war being made upon Muslims by their opponents based in Makkah and says:

“They will not cease fighting you until they turn you back from your religion, if they can. And whoever of you turns back from his religion, then he dies while an unbeliever — these it is whose works go for nothing in this world and the Hereafter.” — 2:217

This verse clearly speaks of a person as continuing to live after turning away from the religion of Islam until he dies while still an unbeliever. This verse also shows that force was being used *against Muslims* by

their enemies to make them leave Islam, rather than being used by Muslims to keep the followers of Islam within its fold.

### **Islam's teaching on response to abuse and mockery**

Any criticism of Islam must be answered by means of words and speech only. The Quran teaches that when Muslims feel offended by people who abuse and ridicule Islam, they should respond by:

1. remaining patient under provocation,
2. ignoring the abuse,
3. forgiving the ignorant.

The Quran says:

“You will certainly hear much abuse from the followers of previous books and from the idol-worshipping people. And if you are patient and keep your duty — this is surely a matter of great resolution.” — 3:186

“And bear patiently what they say and forsake them with a becoming withdrawal.” — 73:10.

“The Muslim who mixes with the people and bears patiently their hurtful words, is better than one who does not mix with people and does not show patience in response to their abuse.” — Prophet Muhammad.

“No one and no thing has greater patience than Allah upon hearing hurtful words.” — Prophet Muhammad.

When a group of people spread a false accusation against the Holy Prophet's wife Aishah, her father Abu Bakr swore that he would stop his financial help for one of them who was poor. But the Quran told him not to withhold his help, and to forgive, in the following verse:

“Let not the possessors of grace and means among you swear against giving to the near relatives and the poor and those who had to flee in Allah's way. Pardon and overlook. Do you not love that Allah should forgive you?” — 24:22

## War

War was allowed for establishing freedom of religion **of all faiths** and protection of **all places of worship**:

“Permission (to fight) is given to those on whom war is made, because they are oppressed. ... And if Allah did not repel some people by others, then cloisters and churches and synagogues and mosques in which Allah’s name is much remembered, would have been pulled down.” — 22:39–40

Verse 2:190 of the Quran which permits Muslims to fight only in self-defence, but not in aggression, has been translated even by anti-Muslim translators of the Quran into English as follows:

“And fight for the religion of God against those who fight against you, **but transgress not by attacking them first**, for God loveth not the transgressors.” — George Sale’s translation.

“And fight for the cause of God against those who fight against you: **but commit not the injustice of attacking them first**: God loveth not such injustice.” — J.M. Rodwell’s translation.

The Quran says that war was disliked by Muslims but it was forced upon them by circumstances:

“Fighting is prescribed for you, though it is disliked by you;” — 2:216

If the enemy at any stage offered peace, Muslims were to accept it:

“And if they incline to peace, then you must incline to it, and trust in Allah. ... And if they intend to deceive you, then surely Allah is sufficient for you.” — 8:61–62

Even in the last period of its revelation, the Quran allowed war only against those who broke their agreements of peace with Muslims or who attacked Muslims first:

“...those of the idolaters with whom you made an agreement, then they have **not** failed you in anything and have not backed up anyone against you; so **fulfil their agreement** to the end of their term.” — 9:4

“Will you not fight a people who broke their oaths and aimed at the expulsion of the Messenger, and they attacked you first?” — 9: 13.

## Jihad

This term does not primarily mean war but striving to improve oneself morally and spiritually or striving to propagate the message of Islam:

“And those who strive hard for Us, We shall certainly guide them in Our ways. And Allah is surely with the doers of good.” — 29:69

“So do not obey the disbelievers, and strive against them a mighty striving with it (i.e. with the Quran).” — 25:52

*Jihad* of doing good deeds is mentioned by the Prophet Muhammad as being the best *jihad*. He is reported in Hadith as saying:

“The most excellent *jihad* is to say a word of truth before an unjust ruler.”

“The most excellent *jihad* is the properly-performed *Hajj* (Pilgrimage).”

“A man came to the Prophet and asked his permission for *jihad*. He asked: Are your parents alive? The man said, Yes. He said: Then do *jihad* in their way.”

## Anger

If a Muslim is angry, he should heed the following verse of the Quran:

“And hasten to forgiveness from your Lord and a Garden, as wide as the heavens and the earth; it is prepared for those who keep their duty, those who give in charity in ease as well as in adversity and **those who suppress anger and pardon people**. And Allah loves the doers of good to others.” — 3:133–134.

Muslims are described here as:

*al-kāzimīn al-ghaiz wal-‘āfīn ‘an-in-nās* — literally meaning: “suppressors of anger and pardoners of people”.

Besides suppressing their own anger, Muslims must always act with justice, even towards those whom they have cause to hate:

“O you who believe, be upright for Allah, bearers of witness with justice; and do not let hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably. Be just; that is nearer to observance of duty.” — 5:8

### **Muslims living with others**

The Quran provides a three-fold basis, philosophical, legal and moral, to enable Muslims to live peaceably with non-Muslims.

#### ***Philosophical basis:***

Allah is not the Lord of any one nation, race or religion. He is as much the Lord of a non-Muslim, or of even an enemy of the Muslims, as He is the Lord of a Muslim. All human beings are equally the creation of God, and so also their ancestors, and they share the same living space, atmosphere and resources. Their service is due to this Creator, and not due by one nation to another. The Quran says:

“O human beings, serve your Lord Who created you and those before you, so that you may guard against evil, Who made the earth a resting-place for you and the heaven a structure, and sends down rain from the clouds then brings forth with it fruits for your sustenance.” — 2:21–22

All mankind is one single nation or community (*umma*):

“Mankind is a single nation (*umma*). So Allah raised prophets as bearers of good news and as warners, and He revealed with them the Book with truth, that it might judge between people concerning that in which they differed.” — 2:213

“And mankind is but a single nation, then they disagree.” — 10:19

There need be no dispute between religions. Muslims must say to others:

“Allah is our Lord and your Lord. For us are our deeds, and for you your deeds. There is no contention between us and you. Allah will gather us together, and to Him is the eventual coming.” — 42:15

The natural differences between nations and peoples are not indicators of their superiority or inferiority, but are phenomena that must be studied to increase knowledge and understanding:

“And of His (God’s) signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours. Surely there are signs in this for those who have knowledge.” — 30:22

***Legal basis:***

The basis within the law of Islam upon which Muslims can live in peace and harmony among others is provided by the following injunction:

“O you who believe, fulfil the obligations.” — 5:1

The word translated as “obligations” includes all covenants, contracts, agreements, treaties etc. Muslims living in non-Muslim countries, where they are free to pray, go to mosques and call themselves Muslims, are in a covenant with the legal authorities to obey the law of the land.

According to Chapter 12 of the Holy Quran, the prophet Joseph was preaching and following the monotheistic religion of his grandfather, Abraham, while living in Egypt under a Pharaoh and a government which did not follow those religious doctrines. It is exactly akin to a Muslim living in a predominantly non-Muslim country today.

The lesson taught in the story of Joseph in this chapter of the Quran is that a true Muslim, indeed one who preaches the doctrines of Islam, may also be a faithful servant of a non-Muslim state, contributing loyally to both its moral and economic well-being, involving himself in the state organisation at the highest level and scrupulously observing its laws.

***Moral basis:***

The basis provided by the moral teachings of Islam for Muslims to live in peace, harmony and friendship with non-Muslims is evident from the following verse which lists the basic duties of a Muslim:

“And serve Allah, and ascribe no partner to Him, and be good to the parents and to the near of kin and the orphans and the needy and the neighbour of (your) kin **and the alien neighbour, and the companion in a journey** and the traveller and those under your care and control.” — 4:36

Among those to whom we must be good, the “alien neighbour” is placed in the same list as one’s parents, relations and the neighbour of one’s own people. **The alien neighbour may be of another race, country or religion.** “Being good” towards someone is a positive action, over and above simply not harming them. In his sayings, the Holy Prophet instructed Muslims as follows about their neighbours:

“The Prophet said: ‘By Allah, he does not believe! By Allah, he does not believe! By Allah, he does not believe!’ It was said: ‘Who is that, O Messenger of Allah?’ He said: That person whose neighbour is not safe from his evil.”

“Anyone who believes in Allah and the Last Day should honour his neighbour.”

This teaching equates a Muslim’s belief in Allah with his good treatment of his neighbour, whatever may be the religion, race or nation of the neighbour.

In the verse 4:36 quoted above, a Muslim is required to be good to **“the companion in a journey and the traveller”**. Therefore, for a Muslim even to harm his fellow passengers in the least, let alone to kill them by use of explosives or by crashing aircraft, is contrary to the very fundamentals of Islam and a clear violation of its basic principles.

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