

RELIGIOUS HARMONY AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE: A QURĀNIC PERSPECTIVE¹

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Abstract

Islam promotes religious harmony and peaceful co-existence not only among the Muslims, but also among the people of other faiths. As established by Islām, it is important for every Muslim to tolerate other religions, and to follow the policy of living peacefully with other nations, religions etc., despite fundamental disagreements. This article is aimed to explore how the Holy Qur’ān appeals to Muslims to engage in religious tolerance and harmony with the people of other religions in order to bring a true manifestation of peace and brotherhood in diversity and respect for each other’s rights on the basis of their common humanity. Hence, the article focuses on the Quranic principles for religious harmony and peaceful co-existence among the people, such as the equality of mankind, mutual understanding, cooperation, and freedom of religion and thought. The study concludes by highlighting the importance of the Quranic

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view of peace and coexistence which is interwoven with the universal moral discourse that unites all human beings.

Keywords: Religious harmony, Tolerance, Co-existence, Peace

Abstrak

Islam menggalakkan keharmonian agama dan kewujudan bersama secara aman bukan sahaja di kalangan orang Islam, tetapi juga di kalangan penganut agama yang berlainan. Seperti yang telah termaktub dalam ajaran Islam, adalah penting bagi setiap Muslim untuk bertolak ansur dengan agama-agama lain serta mengikuti dasar hidup secara aman dengan masyarakat lain, agama lain, dan sebagainya, meskipun terdapat perbezaan pendapat yang fundamental. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk meneroka bagaimana kitab suci al-Qurān menyeru umat Islam untuk melibatkan diri dalam toleransi dan keharmonian antara agama dengan penganut agama lain bagi menjelmakan satu manifestasi sebenar tentang keamanan dan persaudaraan dalam kepelbagaian serta saling hormat-menghormati hak masing-masing atas dasar kemanusiaan. Oleh itu, artikel ini memberi tumpuan kepada prinsip-prinsip al-Qurān yang berikaitan dengan keharmonian agama dan kewujudan bersama secara aman antara manusia, seperti kesamarataan antara manusia, persefahaman, kerjasama, dan kebebasan beragama dan berfikir. Kajian ini memberi kesimpulan dengan menekankan kepentingan pandangan al-Qurān tentang keamanan dan kewujudan bersama yang berhubungkait dengan wacana moral sejagat yang menyatukan semua manusia.

Kata kunci: Keharmonian agama, Toleransi, Kewujudan bersama, Keamanan

INTRODUCTION

Religious harmony and peaceful coexistence are some of the essential elements for the full realization of the creative potential of individuals, sustainable development of the economy and culture of nations, and a true security for the long lasting prosperity of mankind.

To emphasize the importance of peace and harmony among people, the message of Islām, from the beginning, declared the unity of mankind in its origin, value and destiny. It never limited peace and harmony to those who accepted the Islamic faith. On the contrary, by establishing the principles of religious tolerance and harmony which are stated clearly in the Qur'ān, Islām made peace a right for everyone, whether affiliated with the religion or not.

According to Islām, peace is not simply an absence of war. Peace opens doors to all kinds of opportunities which are present in any given situation. It is only in a peaceful situation that planned activities are possible. Islām firmly believes that peace is the main state of life and war is only an exception. Even in defensive war Muslims have to analyse its result; if the result is doubtful, they should avoid war. Stray acts of aggression are not enough for Muslims to rush into war. They have to assess the whole situation and adopt a policy of avoidance when war is not certain to achieve a positive result (Wahiduddin Khan, 2000).

QURANIC PRINCIPLES OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY AND PEACE

Quranic concept of peaceful co-existence and harmony is the view that human beings are united under one God which command Muslims to build bridges of understanding and cooperation with fellow human beings in order to create an environment of social order. Peaceful co-existence requires that people abstain from abusing and denigrating those who do not share their beliefs. Deriding and mocking others can engender violence and hatred. Therefore, the noble Qur'ān urges respect for the beliefs of others. The noble Qur'ān states that:

“Had God willed, they would not have been for not idolaters and, we have not appointed you a watcher over them, neither are you their guardian. Abuse not those to who they pray, apart from God, otherwise, they will abuse God in revenge without knowledge. So, we have decked out fair to every community their deeds: then to their lord they shall return, and He will tell them what they have been doing (Al-An'ān 6:107-108).

NO COMPULSION IN RELIGION

One of the fundamental truths established by the Holy Qur'ān in order to establish social harmony is that no one can be compelled to accept Islām. It is the duty of Muslims to establish the proof of Islām to the people so that truth can be made clear from falsehood. After that, whoever wishes to accept Islām may do so and whoever wishes to continue upon unbelief may do so. No one should be threatened or harmed in any way if he or she does not wish to accept Islām. (Jawdat Sa'īd, 1997). Allāh (swt) says:

“Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth has been made clear from error. Whoever rejects false worship and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that never breaks. And Allah hears and knows all things.”

(*Al-Baqarah* 2:256).

This verse is decisive in establishing that each person has the right to make his or her own choice about embracing Islām. There is other equally decisive evidence in the Qur'ān, among which are the following two verses:

“If it had been your Lord's will, all of the people on Earth would have believed. Would you then compel the people so to have them believe?”

(*Yūnus* 10:99).

“So if they dispute with you, say ‘I have submitted my whole self to Allah, and so have those who follow me.’ And say to the People of the Scripture and to the unlearned: ‘Do you also submit yourselves?’ If they do, then they are on right guidance. But if they turn away, your duty is only to convey the Message. And in Allah's sight are all of His servants.”

(*Āl 'Imrān* 3:20)

It is important to note that these verses were revealed in Madīnah. This is significant, since it shows that the ruling they gave was not just contingent on the Muslims being in Mecca in a state of weakness, but is valid for all time.

UNIVERSAL HUMANITY

Universal humanity is a central value in Islām conveyed through Muslims' beliefs in the equality of origins, and their calls for equal rights, treatment, and solidarity among all people. Humans are an integral part of an ocean of creation, and they are the most dignified and exalted of all creatures. Humans have the potential to learn and know the ability to decide which actions to take, and to bear the consequences of his /her actions. Humans are God's vicegerent on earth. The Qur'ān states:

“When your Lord said to the angels verily I am going to appoint a vicegerent on earth.”

(Al-Baqarah 2:30)

Thus, the protection of human life and respect for human dignity are sacred in Islam. The honor that God bestowed on humans is also stressed.

“We have honoured the sons of Ādam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favors, above a great part of Our creation.”

(Al-Isrā' 17:70)

Thus, the work, worship, and life of a person should be aimed at preserving, protecting, and achieving human pride and dignity as main principles and values in Islām.

TOLERANCE IN PERFECT MANNER

As a concept the tolerance means “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of the world’s cultures, forms of expression and ways of being human” (Ed Hindson and Ergun Caner, 2008). In Arabic it is called “*Tasāmuḥ*”. There are also other words that give similar meanings, such as “*Hilm*” (forbearance) or “’*Afu*” (pardon, forgiveness) or “*Safh*” (overlooking, disregarding). Thus it means to hold something acceptable or bearable (Mājid Gharbāwī; Ma‘had al-Abḥāth wa-al-Tanmiyah al-Ḥaḍārīyah, 2008).

Tolerance in Islām, is not a mere fairytale phrase, but Muslims live it in reality. Islām urges Muslims to be tolerant and forgive others. This is indicated in both the Qur’ān and the Sunnah. Indeed, one of the features of Islām is that it is *deen al-rahmah* (the religion of mercy). By the same token the Muslim should be easy going, not one who puts others off; he should forgive when he is able to take revenge and be tolerant when people make mistakes (Qurashi, 2006).

Tolerance comes from the basics such as the dignity of the human beings, the basic equality of all human beings, the universal human rights, and the fundamental freedom of thought, conscience and belief (Qurashi, 2006).

The Qur’ān points out the basic dignity of all human beings. The Prophet Muhammad (saw) declared the equality of all human beings, regardless of their race, color, language or ethnic background. *Sharī’ah* recognizes the rights of all people to life, property, family, honor and conscience. Islām emphasizes the establishment of equality and justice, both of these values cannot be established without some degree of tolerance. Islām recognized from the very beginning the principle of freedom of belief or freedom of religion. It said very clearly that it is not allowed to have any coercion in the matters of faith and belief. The Qur’ān states that:

“There is no compulsion in religion.”

(*Al-Baqarah* 2:256)

Tolerance is a basic principle of Islām. It is a religious moral duty. It does not mean “concession, condescension or indulgence.” It does not mean lack of principles, or lack of seriousness about one’s principles. Sometimes it is said, “people are tolerant of things that they do not care about.”

But this is not the case in Islām. Tolerance according to Islām does not mean that Muslims believe that all religions are the same. It does not mean that they do not believe in the supremacy of Islām over other faiths and ideologies. It does not mean that they do not convey the message of Islām to others and do not wish them to become Muslims (Wilyam Sulaymān, 2006).

Islām teaches tolerance on all levels: individual, groups and states. It should be a political and legal requirement. Tolerance is the mechanism that upholds human rights, pluralism and the rule of law. There are many levels of tolerance: Tolerance between family members, husband and wife, parents and children, and siblings, tolerance between the members of the community, tolerance in views and opinions, tolerance between the Islamic Juristic Schools (*madhahib*), and tolerance between Muslims and the people of other faiths. In other words, this can be summerized as tolerance in interfaith relations, dialogue and cooperation (Abdel-Salam Aly, 2005).

NO VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION

Islām clearly prohibits all kinds and forms of aggression and violence against anyone, except in self-defense. Islām is a practical religion which is meant to be implemented in every aspect of our life. Therefore, it realizes the fact that a person who commits aggression and violence against others will not cease these actions unless they are deterred by similar actions taken against them. Islām also places very high importance on justice, and allows punishment for aggressors and unjust people accordingly unless they repent before they are brought to justice. At the same time, Islam encourages people to forgive those who have wronged them whenever possible (Mahebūba Desāī, 2009).

Evidence of these ideals can be found in the Holy Qur'ān and *Sunnah*. A few examples of this are shown below from the Holy Qur'ān:

“Fight in the cause of Allāh those who fight you, and do not transgress; for Allāh loveth not transgressors.”

(*Al-Baqarah* 2:190)

“But if the enemy incline towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace, and trust in Allāh: for He is the One that Heareth and Knoweth (all things).”

(*Al-Anfāl* 8:61)

“Nor can Goodness and Evil be equal. Repel (Evil) with what is better: then will he between whom and thee was hatred become as it were thy friend and intimate!”

(*Fusṣilat* 41:34)

The verses above instruct Muslims to fight those who fight them, and not to commit aggression first, as God does not like transgressors. They also instruct Muslims to stop fighting those who wish to cease fighting them, and to accept peace with the enemy who becomes inclined towards peace. Moreover they instruct Muslims that if someone transgresses against them, they should respond to them likewise, and remind Muslims to fear God and to restrain themselves to this limit.

SOLIDARITY AND COLLABORATIVE ACTIONS

The solidarity and collaborative efforts based on the universal humanity are often utilized to motivate disputants to reach an agreement, achieve unity, gain strength, and be empowered by working together. *Ummah* also embraces the idea of reducing cost and damage that might incurred by individuals if they stand alone in a conflict. It is used to mobilize unity and support against the outside enemy, and to motivate people to avoid political and social split or rivalries (*fitnah*). As a collaborative approach to life's challenges,

ummah assists in social and political mobilization, and can be employed for collective actions in a social or economic development or peace-building context. In *Islām* the base for solidarity is wider than the Muslim community alone. God has created all humans equal, and they have a common origin. Therefore, they should assist one another and not neglect each other's' needs. Allāh says:

“O people fear your Lord who has created you from a single soul and created from it its pair and spread from this too many men and women.... Fear Allah, in whose name you plead with one another, and honour the mothers who bore you. Allāh is ever watching over you.”

(*An-Nisā* 4:1)

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

The objective of inter-faith dialogue is to create mutual understanding, respect and tolerance to work in unity for peace and prosperity of humanity at large without harming the identity of any religion. It is believed that every religion has some universalized values as a common ground. Islam meets all the requirements, needed for interfaith dialogue. The Holy Qur'ān laid down the basis of interfaith dialogue. Peace treaty of *Hudaibīyah* in the History of *Islām* was the result of successful dialogue of its kind. The treaty was signed despite divergent views of people. Interestingly, the Qur'ān called this peace process as the greatest victory. The Prophet Mohamed (saw) at *Hudaibīyah* agreed to enter a ten years Peace Treaty with the people of other faith. As per this treaty, it was agreed that the Muslims and Non-Muslims will not harm each other and in the shade of the produced security they shall be free to follow their own religion and none should plot against the other. The companions of the Prophet not wanted to remove the words Messenger of God from the treaty. The Prophet himself removed it from the treaty as the unbelievers were not ready to accept him as Messenger of God. It is important to keep in mind here that he was far more powerful than the combined strength of all the unbelievers at that time but he preferred to go with peace treaty and agreed to their condition.

The amazing point about Islām is that even in the most dominant and most powerful time of Islamic sway, it is suggested that if Muslims enter a peace treaty with the followers of other religions should have lordship over others. Islām orders its followers that faith and religion is not imposable. The Prophet Muhammad (saw) has no duty to be dominant over people's life, but only is entitled to reveal and explain the religion. God is kind to everyone and His mercy is for all humanity. Inter-faith dialogue is today's necessity to restore peace, harmony in the world. Islām meets all the requirements, needed for inter-faith dialogue. Dialogue has not only been an important principle in Islam, but also Qur'ān has also stipulated that it should be conducted in the best possible manner and based on good argument. God has mentioned frequent cases of dialogue between His messengers and their opponents and has advised Prophet Muhammad (saw) to engage in dialogue with people. The Prophet of Islam started his mission with dialogue and argument. The profound study of the Holy Qur'ān and tradition of Prophet, as he is living Qur'ān, show that he considered dialogue the sole legitimate way for peaceful coexistence and to find solutions to social and political problems. Any dialogue should be based on common points and progress within the Quranic framework. *Islām* is synonymous with peace. It encourages its followers to explore every possible avenue for peaceful negotiation to sort out the conflicts. The Holy Qur'ān appeals Muslims to engage in constructive dialogue with people of other faiths on the basis of what they have common in doing righteous deeds (Muhammad Shafiq and Mohammed Abu-Nimer, 2007).

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Islām calls for actions to do justice whether one is strong or weak. The following Qur'anic verses are commonly identified by scholars as carrying a strong message concerning the social justice and responsibility reflected in Islām. They describe the Muslim's duty to work for justice and reject oppression and injustice on interpersonal and structural levels.

Allāh commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion. (*An-Nahl* 16:90).

Allāh does command you to render back your trusts to those to whom they are due; And when you judge between man and man, that you judge with justice. (*An-Nisā* 4:58).

You who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allāh, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allāh can best protect both.... Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you swerve, and if you distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allāh is well acquainted with all that you do. (*An-Nisā* 4:135).

And Allāh (swt) says: O you who believe, stand out firmly for God, as witnesses to justice and let not the enmity of others make you swerve from the path of justice. Be just: that is next to righteousness, and fear God. Indeed, God is well acquainted with all that you do. (*Al-Mā'dah* 5:9).

Continuously, the Qur'an reminds Muslims of the value of justice, thus it does not simply favor, but rather divinely orders the followers and believers to pursue justice. Justice is an absolute and not a relative value, and it is the duty of the believer to seek justice and apply it. The early Caliphs were known for their strong pursuit of justice, particularly Umar Ibn al-Khattāb who left a distinctive tradition in pursuing justice. The connection of peace-building with justice is thus never far from the surface in Islām. Peace is the product of order and justice. One must strive for peace with justice. This is the obligation of the believer as well as the ruler. More than that, it is a natural obligation of all humanity.

DOING GOODS TO HUMANITY (*KHAIR AND IḤSĀN*)

As a religion, Islām spread in large measure because of its foundations of helping and empowering the weak and the disempowered, and it continues to be characterized as a religion of dynamism and activism. Struggling against oppression (*zulm*), assisting the poor, and pursuing equality among all humans are core religious values emphasized throughout the Qur'an and *Ḥadith*. Islām demands that one should do good (*ihsān*) not only to one's parents and relations but also to the orphans, the needy, the helpless and the neighbor

whether he/she is related to oneself in any way or not at all. The emphasis in Islām is on doing good (*khair*), not on power and force (*quwwah*). Good deeds are associated with the straight path (*al-Ṣirat al-mustaqim*) and with all the virtue of the Prophet (Syed Abul 'Ala Maudoodi, 1995). The two following verses of the noble Qur'an stress this meaning.

“And there may spring from you a nation who invites to goodness and enjoins right conduct and forbids indecency. Such are they who are successful”.

(*Āli Imrān* 3:104)

Those who believe (in the Prophet of Islām) and those who are Jews and Christians and the Sabians (that is who belong to a religious group) who believe in God and the Last Day of Judgment) and whose deeds are good, shall have their reward with their Lord. On them there shall be no fear nor shall they grieve. (*Al-Baqarah* 2:62).

Doing good extends beyond the interpersonal to a group or community level. A nation cannot survive, according to Islām, without making fair and adequate arrangements for the sustenance and welfare of all the poor, underprivileged and destitute members of the community. The ultimate goal Islam points toward is a world in which suffering and poverty can be eliminated. In addition to individual *Zakāh* or charity, the state is obligated to provide for its poor through *Zakāh* and *bayt-al-māl* (public treasury). *Zakāh* was even recognized, with offering prayer, as a minimal condition to recognizing a community as a community of true Muslims. Thus, economic justice is a major component of Qur'anic teachings, which describe in detail the proper distribution of wealth (Hossein Askari; Zamir Iqbal and Abbas Mirakhor, 2015).

SERVICE TO HUMANITY

The Holy Qur'an expressly declares that the human race is one family. All of us are the children of *Ādam* and Eve, whether our skin is white or black. At various places it says: “All human beings are a single nation” (*Al-Baqarah* 2:213). “All human beings are

naught but a single nation and yet they disagree” (*Yunus* 10:19). “And verily this your nation (human beings) is a single nation” (*Al-Anbiyā’* 21:92) and (*Al-Mu’minūn* 23:52).

The differences in human physical features, colors, complexions, languages, dresses, customs and the ways of living arise due to different climates and geographical territories. Those who settled in hot tropical zones grew to be black, and those who settled in cold climates remained white in their complexion. The people who are living in hot climates are hot-headed and the people living in cold climate have cold temperament. The lust for property, power and pelf made one tribe the enemy of the other tribe and led to bloodshed and battles. Such savage and illiterate people fashioned idols with their hands and worshiped natural phenomenon such as the sun, fire, bodies of water and snakes and other elements and creatures which could harm them. They believed that they could obtain protection from such material objects, creatures and elements of nature the river, the snakes and other objects which could harm them. Hence out of fancy and fear they made their gods, but the prophets always guided them and instructed them to worship one God (Ziaul Haque, 2008).

The prophets instructed these people to worship the one God, Who is omniscient, omnipotent and all merciful. These individuals, who were ruled by fear and stuck in their beliefs, frequently tortured, teased and persecuted these divine reformers known as the prophets. God never left humankind without guidance through prophets.

WORSHIP AND SACRED PLACES MUST BE RESPECTED

A Muslim must respect and protect the holy places where the People of the Book worship God, and protect them. For Muslims, these places are precious because in these places, people, whether Jews or Christians, remember God. In the Qur’ān, the places of worship of the People of the Book, ie. monasteries, churches and synagogues, are mentioned as places of worship protected by God.

“If God had not driven some people back by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques, where God’s name

is mentioned much, would have been pulled down and destroyed. God will certainly help those who help Him-God is All-Strong, Almighty” (Al-Hajj 22:40).

As a manifestation of his loyalty to God’s commands, the Prophet Muhammad (saw) was most careful not to destroy the holy places of the People of the Book. Such destruction means, in the first place, opposing God’s commands. This aside, it means preventing people who have faith in God worshipping Him. Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad (saw) promised the Christians, who were the other party to a peace agreement he made, that their churches would not be destroyed and that they would never be harmed. The tax (*Jizya*) agreements he made with Christians also guaranteed the safety of churches (Mahmoud Ayoub, 2004).

The first agreement made after the death of the Prophet (saw) that guaranteed the protection of the temples was a tax agreement Khalid bin al-Waleed signed with the leader of the city of Anat. Ibn *Is-hāq* stated that those agreements made by Khalid bin al-Waleed were also approved by Abu Bakr and the three caliphs following him. This aside, Abu Bakr offered the same guarantees that had been offered to the people of Najran by the Prophet Muhammad (saw) (Mohammad Razi Khan Afridi and Mohammad Ilyas Navaid, 2006).

The Islamic societies that abided by Islamic morality after the death of the Prophet (saw) also paid special attention to this issue. Muslim leaders who adhered to the Qur’ān and the Sunnah respected the places of worship of non-Muslims in conquered countries and showed great tolerance to the clergy. Christians who lived under Muslim rule for centuries never rebelled for religious reasons (Mohammad Razi Khan Afridi and Mohammad Ilyas Navaid, 2006). This, there is no doubt, is the result of the just and tolerant attitudes of Muslim leaders in compliance with Qur’anic rules.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the main emphasis of Holy Qur’ān is on calling the entire humankind towards faith in its Lord and Creator, and urging it to submit to His Will. Indeed, the real way to establish lasting peace

on earth is the following: First of all, a true Muslim society needs to be established in one part of the world; this would act as a beacon, inviting the humankind towards the light of *Imān* and Islam. As a result, the boundaries of Islamic society would keep on expanding till the entire humanity would come within the fold of love, benevolence and mercy of its Creator. Under the present circumstances, however, this seems like a far-fetched idea. But Islam has a message of peace, love, and harmony for the interim period as well. Islām provides Muslims with two cardinal principles (Origin of the humanity and knowing each other) on the basis of which the people of the world can be united in global harmony. Thus, the āyah 13 of Sūrah Al-Hujurāt reads: O mankind! We created you from a single (pair of a) male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allāh is (one who is) the most righteous of you.... (*Al-Hujurāt* 49:13).

Utilizing Quranic principles of Religious tolerance and harmony discussed in this article will increase the possibility for peaceful change and development in such communities.

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