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## HISTORICIZING ISLAM: RE-THINKING TOLERANCE

*Dr. Mehdi Rahimi*

### ABSTRACT

In spite of all efforts to paint a black portrait of Islam and to introduce it as a hostile and intolerant creed, Islamic civilization played a major role in shaping global civilization. Prominent Muslim scholars and intellectuals established the basis of art, philosophy, science and technology which directly and indirectly influenced societies around the world.<sup>1</sup>

Among all these bright and positive aspects of Islamic civilization, this paper will focus on the Islamic view of other religions and the status of non-Muslims in Islamic regions through the ages. In-depth study of the Quran and understanding the soul of its message, alongside Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) word and his behavior with non-Muslims, and tracing this subject in history, will show both theoretically and practically the high potentiality of Islam for peace and harmony. By this view, Jews in the Fatimid Caliphate and Christian Bakhtishu's clan were respected in Abbasid Caliphate, and even held government posts.

Tolerance and engaging in dialogue with other religions-notwithstanding dogma, brought Muslims progress in all areas and even led some scholars to regard tolerance and altruism as "the mother" of Islamic civilization.

**Keywords:** Tolerance, Islamic Civilization, Abbasid Caliphate, Dialogue, Religion

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### INTRODUCTION

Indeed, Islamic civilization is associated with the ideas of collective rights, collective responsibilities, ethical values, respect for human rights and freedom of the choice of faith. One of the main positive aspects of Islamic civilization that brought Muslims much progress and promotion in the cultural, social and economic arenas was, in fact, the Islamic view of other religions and the status of non-Muslims in Islamic regions. Tolerance for and engaging in dialogue with other religions as can be witnessed through numerous references from the history of Islam led some scholars to term *tolerance* and *forbearance* as "the mother" of Islamic civilization.<sup>2</sup> This historical fact (tolerance) is strongly supported by the Quran's message, alongside Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) word and behavior, showing both theoretically and practically the high potentiality of Islam for peace and harmony. It is interesting to note that Islam as an Arabic word comes from the root "*silm*" meaning surrendering, guiding to peace and contentment, and establishing security

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<sup>1</sup> Howard R. Turner, *Science in Medieval Islam* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1997), 270.

<sup>2</sup> Abdol Hossein Zarrin kub, *Kārnāmeḥ Eslām (The workbook of Islam)* (Tehran: Amir Kabir Press, 1976), 24.

and accord. The word “*salam*”, which Muslims use as a greeting word, means “peace” too. Owning this ideology, tolerance is one of the main themes in which Muslims have absolute belief, looking at it as a basic principle of Islam and religious, moral duty. Studying the subject a time when intolerance is on the rise in the world and there is widespread propaganda presenting Muslims as being intolerant, assumes great importance. This shows the bright past and its golden key to success that encourages Muslims to learn from the past in order to improve the present, and to better shape the future.

Literally the word "tolerance" means "to bear." As a concept, it means “the willingness to accept or tolerate somebody or something, especially opinions or behaviors that you may not agree with, or people who are not like you”.<sup>3</sup> In Arabic, it is called “*tasahol, tasamoh*” as their equals in Persian the words “*modara, rawadari*” and the word “*hosgoru*” is used in Turkish which means “to hold something acceptable or bearable”. Tolerance is considered the very basis of modernity, thus UNESCO has defined tolerance: "Consistent with respect for human rights, the practice of tolerance does not mean toleration of social injustice or the abandonment or weakening of one's convictions. It means that one is free to adhere to one's own convictions and accepts that others adhere to theirs. It means accepting the fact that human beings, naturally diverse in their appearance, situation, speech, behavior and values, have the right to live in peace and to be as they are. It also means that one's views are not to be imposed on others."<sup>4</sup>

### SPIRIT OF TOLERANCE IN ISLAM

The foundation of tolerance in Islam is based upon the dignity of the human beings. The Quran honors mankind as a vicegerent on earth<sup>5</sup> and all are equal in creation. This concept can be clearly seen in the following verse where Allah states this equality and remarks that the verity in human beings is as God wills:

*“O you men! We have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other (not that ye may ignore or despise each other); the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful (of his duty).”*<sup>6</sup>

According to the spirit of the above verse, men showed respect for people of other races, colors or religious background. We find that diversity among men in general is Allah’s will and must be respected. Verily, Islamic epistemology tolerated and even celebrated schools of thought and divergent opinions. This diversity may be of religion, belief, race or language. But all are human beings and wherever they belong to, they should enjoy equal dignity and equal rights. The following Qur’anic verse clearly states that diversity is Allah’s will:

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<sup>3</sup> A.S. Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Dictionary* (Tehran: Rahnama Press, 2003), 1368.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO Declaration on the Principles on Tolerance 1995, Article, 1.4, [http://www.unesco.org/webworld/peace\\_library/UNESCO/HRIGHTS/124-129.HTM](http://www.unesco.org/webworld/peace_library/UNESCO/HRIGHTS/124-129.HTM)

<sup>5</sup> Al-Qur’an, 2:30.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Qur’an, 49:13.

*"And if Allah wills He would certainly make you a single nation, but He causes to err whom He wills and guides whom He wills; and most certainly you will be questioned as to what you did."*<sup>7</sup>

Religious freedom is one of the reflections of this tolerance. One can see that freedom of belief is one of the basic rights of man. There is no coercion in Islam regarding religion and belief. Religion is not to be, and was never, forced upon an individual against his/her own will. There would be no meaning to belief if religions were oppressed. Related to there being no force in religion, Allah says, *"And if your Lord had pleased, surely all those who are in the earth would have believed, all of them; will you then force men till they become believers?"*<sup>8</sup>

Islam lays stress on wisdom and knowledge, giving men and women freedom to choose their faith and religions. Hence, there is no compulsion in religion as the Qur'an says, *"There is no compulsion in religion."*<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Islam reproves bigotry and fanaticism and tolerates the existence of other religions present in the world. The Qur'an considers the mother of Christ the most pious woman and testifies to the legitimacy of all previous prophets:

*"Say: we believe in Allah and what has been revealed to us, and what was revealed to Ibrahim and Ismail and Ishaq and Yaqub and the tribes, and what was given to Moses and Jesus and to the prophets from their Lord; we do not make any distinction between any of them, and to Him do we submit."*<sup>10</sup>

Also in the following verse, the Quran tells Jews, Christians as well as Sabians and whoever believes in Allah that there is no fear for them:

*"Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the last day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve."*<sup>11</sup>

Renowned Muslim scholar and translator of the Quran, Pickthall (1990) truly remarks that "for the Muslims, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are but three forms of one religion, which, in its original purity, was the religion of Abraham: Al-Islam." Hence the Quran says:

*"Say: O followers of the book, come to an equitable proposition between us and you that we shall not serve any but Allah and (that) we shall not associate aught with Him."*<sup>12</sup>

Allah advises His Messenger to present Islam to the people through peaceful argument and beautiful preaching and never asked him to coerce people:

<sup>7</sup> Al-Qur'an, 16:93

<sup>8</sup> Al-Qur'an, 10:99.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Qur'an, 2:256.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Qur'an, 3:84.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Qur'an, 2:64.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Qur'an, 3:69.

*“And do not dispute with the followers of the Book but by what is best, except those of them who act unjustly, and say: we believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our Allah and your Allah is one, And to Him do we submit.”*<sup>13</sup>

*Say: obey Allah and obey the messenger; but if you turn back, then on him rests that which is imposed on him and on you rests that which is imposed on you; and if you obey him, you are on the right way; and nothing rests on the Messenger but clear delivering (of the message).*<sup>14</sup>

The Prophet’s (SAW) duty is to convey the message and not to force them to accept Islam and to become Muslim. Quran clearly states:

*“Nothing is (incumbent) on the Messenger but to deliver (the message).”*<sup>15</sup>

Islam is the religion of mercy and wisdom, so Allah advises the Messenger:

*“Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and godly exhortation, and have disputations with them in the best manner.”*<sup>16</sup>

And the Prophet (SAW) states:

*“I deliver to you the messages of my Lord, and I offer you good advice and I know from Allah what you don’t know.”*<sup>17</sup>

All these verses emphasize that Islam is the religion of tolerance and dialogue. It invites all human beings to accept the truth and presents them with salvation and deliverance in the most cogent and clear way without any constraint. According to the Quran’s message, Muslims are allowed to have good relationship with non-Muslims, those who don’t fight against Islam, those who live in peace and those who respect human rights. Muslims are enjoined to behave kindly, justly and righteously. Allah says:

*“Allah does not forbid you respecting those who have not made war against you on account of (your) religion, and have not driven you forth from your homes, that you show them kindness and deal with them justly; surely Allah loves the doers of justice.”*<sup>18</sup>

As is clear from these verses that Muslims are not allowed to start any conflict against any other religion and are not to forcibly convert people to Islam. Faith or

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<sup>13</sup> Al-Qur’an, 29:46.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Qur’an, 24:54.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Qur’an, 5:99.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Qur’an, 16:125.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Qur’an, 7:62.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Qur’an, 60:8.

religion is not changed by force; it can only be done with persuasion and recognition. Islam has spread in the world by wisdom and its modern human rights values are welcomed by all who are looking for truth and justice. Islam has not spread by force which does not match with any Islamic principles. It is noteworthy that the concept “*jihad*”, which is misunderstood by some non-Muslim intellectuals, is a kind of war against tyranny to remove injustice and aggression and *not* against other religions. *Jihad* is just against those who fight and, even in this case, Allah strongly advises Muslims not to transgress limits:

*“And fight in the way of Allah with those who fight with you, and do not exceed the limits, surely Allah does not love those who exceed the limits.”*<sup>19</sup>

Allah advised believers to deal with everyone justly even the enemies:

*“O you who believe, Be upright for Allah, bearers of witness with justice, and let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably; act equitably, that is nearer to piety, and be careful of (your duty to) Allah; surely Allah is aware of what you do”*.<sup>20</sup>

#### **TOLERANCE AND THE DEALING OF THE PROPHET**

Here, we would discuss some of the foundations the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) himself laid in dealing with people of other religions, along with some practical examples from his lifetime. A study of the Prophet’s life, his *ahadith* and behavior studying his words and sayings both clearly show the major role of tolerance in his thought and action.. He says, “*Allah strongly advised me of tolerance with people as well as adducing duties*”.<sup>21</sup>

The Prophet (SAW) also preached tolerance, when dealing with people, knowing the concept as an essential part of religion: “*Tolerance towards people is half’s belief and kindness to them, half’s life*”.<sup>22</sup> However, the greatness of the Prophet (SAW) was such that at no point of time did he lose his patience. By evidence of history, after the conquest of Mecca, the Prophet (SAW) granted general amnesty to all people (except a few). Several years of offending, vituperation, ravaging and killing of Muslims notwithstanding, the Prophet (SAW) forgave all of them. Abu Sufyan was the worst enemy of Islam before he became a Muslim. The Prophet (SAW) not only forgave him but also honored him by declaring “amnesty” for those who took refuge in his house. The Messenger never took revenge upon anyone and announced, *today is the day of mercy of Allah. “Go! You are all free!”*<sup>23</sup> He even forgave Vahshi who killed his uncle Hamzah, deformed the dead body, and even let Hinda eat his liver with incredible wild rancor. The Prophet (SAW) was such a great reformer and had high moral character. He tried to remove the ignorance and

<sup>19</sup> Al-Qur’an, 2:190

<sup>20</sup> Al-Qur’an, 5:8.

<sup>21</sup> Abolghasem Payandeh, *Nahjol Fasahe (Prophet SAW word)* (Qom: Daftar Tablighat Press, 1990), 136.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 566.

<sup>23</sup> Jafar Sobhani, *Forugh Abadiyat (The Eternal Light)*. Fourth Edition, vol. 2, (Qom: Daftar Tablighat Press, 1995), 338.

emotionalism of the people by his tolerance and forbearance. This event is justly famous in history. Will Durant<sup>24</sup> pointing to the event, lauds the great manner of the Prophet (SAW) and writes: “*Mohammed responded handsomely by declaring a general amnesty for all but two or three of his enemies.*”

The tolerance and justice of the Prophet (SAW) was for everyone having any faith, race or religion. He was tolerant in dealing with people of other religions, behaved kindly and justly and, moreover, advised his followers to respect all human rights. The importance of respect for other religions and their rights in the Prophet’s (SAW) thoughts led him to strictly warn against any injustice to people of other faiths. He said, “*Whoever is cruel and oppresses people of scripture or burdens them with more than they can bear, I (Prophet Muhammad SAW) will complain against the person on the Day of Judgment.*”<sup>25</sup> He also remarked, “*The one who kills a mu’adhid (true believer) will not feel the smell of the Paradise although its smell can be felt from a distance of forty years.*”<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, the Prophet (SAW) did not simply preach tolerance but practically demonstrated it throughout his life. One of the best examples of his tolerance towards other religions is the pact that was signed by the Prophet (SAW) with the Jews of Medina which detailed the responsibilities and their obligations towards each other. This contract practically portrays the tolerance Allah’s Messenger showed for other faiths. According to this accord, which provided for co-existence, Muslims and Jews were to obey what was mentioned therein. Here we bring the articles of the concord from “The Story of Civilization” by Will Durant:

The Jews who attach themselves to our commonwealth shall be protected from all insults and vexations; they shall have an equal right with our own people to our assistance and good offices; they... shall form with the Moslems one composite nation; they shall practice their religion as freely as the Moslems.... They shall join the Moslems in defending *Yathrib* against all enemies.... All future disputes between those who accept this charter shall be referred, under God, to the Prophet.<sup>27</sup>

The Prophet (SAW) had good relations with the Christians as well. When a delegation of Najran’s Christians came to Medina to see the Prophet (SAW), he welcomed them. The Prophet (SAW) gave them due respect and even allowed them to perform their religious rites and rituals. Najran’s Christians entered a concord with Muslims, undertook to pay *Jizia* (tax on non-Muslims under Muslim rule); in lieu of that the Muslims ensured their security against their enemies.<sup>28</sup>

The Quran also highlights that the Prophet’s (SAW) tolerance and forgiveness is the key to his success in dealing with people and delivering his message:

<sup>24</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization, The Age of Faith* (1994), 220.

<sup>25</sup> Abolghasem Payandeh, *Nahjol Fasahe (Prophet, SAW word)*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization, The Age of Faith*, (1994), 216.

<sup>28</sup> Jafar Sobhani, *Forugh Abadiyat (The Eternal Light)*. Fourth edition, vol.2, (Qom: Daftar Tablighat Press. 1995), 322.

Thus it is due to mercy of Allah that you deal with them gently and had you been rough, hard hearted, they would certainly have dispersed from around you; pardon them therefore and ask pardon for them, and take counsel with them in the affairs; so when you have decided, then place your trust in Allah; surely Allah loves those who trust.<sup>29</sup>

Will Durant writes: "All in all, despite deprecating intimacy with them, Mohammed was well disposed toward Christians. Even after his quarrel with the Jews, he counseled toleration toward the "people of the Book," i.e., the Jews and the Christians".<sup>30</sup>

Muslims, looking upon the Prophet (SAW) and following his path of forgiveness and forbearance the Quran referred to as a noble example and exemplary model, "*certainly you have in the Messenger of Allah an excellent example*",<sup>31</sup> discarded dogma and bigotry. They adopted tolerance and developed good relations with people of other religions. As evidenced by historians, one of the reasons for improvement of Islamic society in different arenas and gaining success in every walk of life was this kind of tolerance which let non-Muslim intellectuals to mix up with Muslims in society, where they were welcomed and prompted to learn from them. Wisdom and knowledge are highly valued in Islam. The Quran terms wisdom as "great good" and says: "*He grants wisdom to whom He pleases, and whoever is granted wisdom, he indeed is given a great good and none but men of understanding mind.*"<sup>32</sup>

Apart from this verse, we have some *Ahadith* (the sayings of Prophet Mohammad SAW), recommending Muslims to learn wisdom and knowledge even from the pagans (*Fish wisdom even from heathen*), (*Wisdom is the missing inheritance of believer; learns it wherever find it*). Motahhari refers to these *Hadiths* advising Muslims to tolerance because without tolerance or co-existence, learning wisdom and knowledge from non-Muslims is impossible.<sup>33</sup> Jurji Zaydan, a Christian writer, emphasized on tolerance and narrates the story of Seyyed Razi, a Muslim intellectual who wrote a poem when his contemporary erudite, Abol Hasan Sabi, died:

*Did you see who was carried on coffin?*

*Did you know the light of our circle snuffed?*

*This was a mountain which collapsed!*<sup>34</sup>

Some people objected that he celebrated a non-Muslim in such a great way. His response was: I celebrated his knowledge!

With this in view, Jews in the Fatimid Caliphate and Christian Bakhtishu's clan were respected in Abbasid Caliphate, and even held government posts.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Al- Qur'an, 3:159.

<sup>30</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization, The Age of Faith*, 238.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Qur'an, 33:21.

<sup>32</sup> Al-Qur'an, 2:269.

<sup>33</sup> Morteza Motahhari, *Sireh Nabavi (The Prophet's SAW Manner)* (Sadra Press, 1991), 147.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.



Thus in spite of the image presented by Western historians, the spread of Islam was not just a military process. Shahbazi under the title '*The Mystery of Spreading Islam in Europe*' writes that, 'if it was not the tendency of some important part of Europeans to Islam, the Ottomans couldn't establish the golden Islamic civilization in Europe.'<sup>36</sup> The same happened before in Iran, Egypt, India and Spain. Ottomans were tolerant towards 'people of the book' and because of this, Europeans who were suffering the religious oppression of Roman Church were able to find better freedom. Stanford Jay Shaw, an American historian, best known for his works on the Muslim Ottoman Empire, writes about the voluntary tendency of the Europeans towards Ottomans, 'The Ottomans followed the traditional Islamic policy of tolerance toward "people of the book": Christians, Jews and others who accepted the same one God and who, therefore, had the right to protection of their lives, properties, and religion as long as they paid their taxes (*Jizia*) and recognized the Islamic government. A few Balkan Christians did convert to Islam to secure the benefits of the official religion.'<sup>37</sup>

However Iqbal writes in his essay, "Islam preaches total social harmony which includes religious harmony that the whole world needs." We repeat his word to conclude that, "despite our age of information, geographical unification of countries and internationalization of learning and economics, the world badly requires a strong movement to dispel aggression in the name of race and creed. Islam provides an excellent model implemented by Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and proved of its practicality."<sup>38</sup>

### CONCLUSION

There are lessons and wisdom that should be learnt by the Islamic world as well as the West. The lesson for Muslims is to review their history to recognize the foundation of Islamic civilization. However, in historical perspective, when Muslims drifted away from the purity of Islam, there was a decline in tolerance and the Islamic civilization declined. Therefore, if Muslims are looking for their past grandeur, they should realize that in order to improve the present, and better shape the future, they have to learn from the past. On the other hand, the message for the West, specifically those who label Islam as a hostile and intolerant creed or describe Muslims as fanatics and bigots, is that they need to study the Quran's messages and the Prophet's (SAW) words and his actions to avail the high potentiality of Islam for peace and harmony.

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<sup>35</sup> Hamid Enayat, *Jahāni Az Khod Bigāaneh (Alienation of the World)* (Tehran: Farmand Press, 1974), 112.

<sup>36</sup> Abdollah Shahbazi, "The Mystery of Spreading Islam in Europe," in *Zar Sālāran (Plutocracy)*. Vol.4, (Tehran: Political Research Institution, 2007), 19.

<sup>37</sup> Stanford Jay Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*. Vol. II, (Cambridge University Press, 1976), 19.

<sup>38</sup> M. J. Iqbal, *Islam Preaches Religious Tolerance*, 2006 <[www.YaHind.Com](http://www.YaHind.Com)> (accessed 10.07.2010).

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