

# Islam's Concept of Religious Freedom

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The question of salvation, howsoever innocent it may appear to be, is potent in its danger to peace in the religious world.

It is one thing for a religion to declare that those who seek to be redeemed from Satan, and attain salvation, should rush to its safe haven. But, it is quite another thing for the same religion to declare, in the next breath, that those who do not come to it to seek refuge will be damned eternally. Whatever they do to please God, however much they love their Creator and His creation, however much they lead a life of purity and piety, they would most certainly be condemned to an everlasting fire.

When such a rigid, narrow-minded, and non-tolerant view is expressed in a provocative language, as it generally is by religious zealots, it is known to have produced violent riots.

People come in all shapes and sizes. Some are educated, cultured, and refined, and so are their reactions to offences committed against them. Yet, a large number of religiously-inclined people, be they educated or illiterate, are likely to react violently, when their religious sensibilities are hurt.

Unfortunately, this seems to be the attitude of the clergy of almost all religions of the world against those who do not conform to their faith. Even Islam is presented by most medieval scholars as the only door to salvation, in the sense that, ever since the advent of Islam, all the descendants of Adam, who have lived and died outside the pale of Islam, are denied salvation. Christianity does not offer a different view, nor does any religion.

But this bigoted and narrow view has no justification in Islam. According to the Holy Quran, *salvation cannot be monopolised by any single religion of the world*. Even if new truths are revealed, and new eras of light have dawned, those who live a life of ignorance, through no fault of their own, and those who generally try to lead a life of truth, even if they inherited false ideologies, will

not be denied salvation by God. The following verse from the Holy Quran elaborates this point further.

“Surely, those who have believed in Muhammad and the Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians – who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and do good deeds, on them shall come no fear nor shall they grieve” (Ch. 5; Al-Mâ'idah: 69).

The Holy Quran uses the term *Sabiana*, which is a term used by the Arabs to apply to the followers of all non-Arab and non-Semitic religions, which have their own revealed books. As such, followers of all religions, based on divine revelation, have been granted the assurance that, provided they do not genuinely fail to recognise the light of a new religion, and stick honestly, and truly, to the values of their ancestral religion, they have nothing to fear from God, and will not be denied salvation.

To prevent Muslims from censuring, indiscriminately, all those who do not belong to Islam, the Holy Quran categorically declares:

“They are not all alike. Among the people of the Book are those who are very pious and God-fearing, and who stand by their covenant; they recite the Word of Allah in the hours of night, and prostrate themselves before Him. They believe in Allah and the Last Day, and enjoin good, and forbid evil, and hasten to vie with one another in good works. These are among the righteous. Whatever good they do, they shall not be denied its due reward, and Allah well knows those who guard against evil” (Ch. 3: Âli ‘Imrân: 113-115).

There is a great misunderstanding, today, born out of the recent political rivalries between Jews and Muslims that, according to Islam, all Jews are hell bound. This is totally false, in light of what has been declared from the Holy Quran, and in light of the following verse:

“Of the people of Moses, there is a party, who guides with truth, and does justice therewith” (Ch. 7: Al-A'râf: 159).

## **MUTUAL RESPECT AMONGST RELIGIONS**

It is declared, in unambiguous terms, in the Holy Quran, that it is not only Muslims, who stand firmly by the truth, and admonish and dispense justice righteously. Amongst the followers of other faiths, there are also people, who do the same.

This is the attitude, which the entire world of religion must adopt today, to improve the quality of relationship with other faiths. Religious peace cannot be achieved without cultivating such a broad-minded, magnanimous, and humane understanding attitude towards the people of other faiths. Referring to all religions of the world, in general, the Holy Quran declares:

“Of those We have created, there are a people that guide men with truth and do justice therewith” (Ch. 7: Al-A‘râf: 181).

## **THE UNIVERSALITY CONCEPT**

Since time immemorial, many philosophers have been dreaming of the moment, when mankind can gather as one large human family under one flag. This concept of the unification of mankind has been entertained, not only by political thinkers, but also by economists, and sociologists, alike. But, nowhere has the idea been pursued with greater fervour than in the domain of religion.

Although Islam also shares this view with other religions (some having highly ambitious programmes of world domination), within this apparent commonality, Islam stands distinctly different in its attitude to the aforementioned ambitious claim. This is no place for developing this controversial theme further, and to enter into a debate, as to which religion has actually been commissioned by God to gather the whole of mankind under one divine banner. But, it is very important for us to understand the implications of such claims by more than one religion of the world. If two, three, or four powerful religions, with long-established historical traditions, simultaneously claim to be universal religions, will it not generate monstrous confusion, and uncertainty, in the minds of all human beings at large? Will their mutual rivalry, and struggle for domination, not pose a real and substantial threat to world peace?

Such movements, of global dimension, on the part of religions, are a matter of grave concern, themselves. But, to add to that, the danger of such movements

falling into the hands of an irresponsible, bigoted, and intolerant leadership, means that the risks will be manifold, and more real than academic.

In the case of Islam, unfortunately, there is widespread propaganda, carried to the effect that Islam promotes the use of force, where possible, for the spread of its ideology. Such words emanate not only from opponents of Islam, but also from medieval-minded Muslim “clergy”.

Obviously, if one religion opts for the offensive, the others will have the right to defend themselves with the same weapons. Of course, we do not agree, and strongly reject the notion that Islam advocates the use of force for the spread of ideologies – but to this aspect, we will return later.

Let us first examine the rationality of such a claim by any religion of the world. Can any religion – Islam, Christianity, or whatever – become universal in its message, in the sense that the message be applicable to all people of the world, whatever their colour, race, or nationality? What about a host of different racial, tribal, national traditions, social habits, and cultural patterns?

The concept of universality, as proposed by religions, should not only transcend geographic and national boundaries, but should also transcend time. So, the question would be: can a religion be accepted globally, by the entire mankind, and how could such a religion be competent enough to fulfil the needs for the future generations?

It is for the followers of every religion to suggest how the teachings of their religion propose to resolve the problems discussed above. However, on behalf of Islam, we summarise very briefly the Islamic answer to these questions.

## **ISLAM IS A UNIVERSAL RELIGION**

The Holy Quran repeatedly makes it clear that Islam is a religion, whose teachings are related to the human psyche. Islam emphasises that any religion, which is rooted in the human psyche, transcends time and space. The human psyche is unchangeable. Therefore, the religion, which is truly rooted in the human psyche, becomes unchangeable, by the same token, providing that it does not get too much involved with the transient situations of man, in whatever age, as he progresses forward. If the religion sticks to those principles, which

emanate from the human psyche, such a religion has the logical potential of becoming a universal religion.

Islam goes one step further. In its uniquely understanding attitude, it ascribes all religions of the world as possessing this character of universality to some degree. As such, in every divinely-revealed religion, there is always found a central core of teaching, which is bonded to the human psyche, and eternal truth. This core of religions remains unchangeable, unless, of course, the followers of that religion corrupt that teaching at a later period of time. The following verse illustrates the case in point:

“So set thy face to the service of religion, turning, as one devoted to God. And follow the nature made by Allah – the nature, in which He has created mankind. There is no altering the creation of Allah. That is the right religion. But most men know not” (Ch. 30: Ar-Rûm: 30).

In view of the above, the question may be raised as to the wisdom of sending one religion after another with the same teaching. Further, one may wonder why Islam claims, in relative terms, to be more universal, and perfect, than all previous religions, if all had the same unchangeable universal teaching, applicable to human beings at all times.

1. In answer to the first question, the Holy Quran draws the attention of mankind to the indisputable historical fact that the holy books and scriptures revealed earlier than the Quran have been tampered with. Their teachings were corrupted by a process of gradual amendment, or new elements were introduced, through interpolation, until the validity and authenticity of these books and scriptures became doubtful and questionable.

So, the onus of proof that no change whatsoever has been affected, of course, lies on the shoulders of the people belonging to such religions. As far as the Quran goes, it occupies a unique and distinct position amongst all religious books and scriptures. Even some of the staunchest enemies of Islam, who do not believe the Quran to be the Word of God, have to confess that the Holy Quran, without a shadow of doubt, remains the same unchanged, and

unaltered, book, which was claimed by Muhammad – peace and blessings of Allah be upon him – to be the Word of God.

“There is otherwise every security, internal and external, that we possess the text, which Muhammad himself gave forth and used. . . . We may, upon the strongest assumption, affirm that every verse in the Quran is the genuine and unaltered composition of Muhammad himself” (Cf. Sir William Muir, *Life of Mohamet*, London, 1878, pp. xxvii-xxviii).

It is a completely different domain of controversy as to which Book was authored by whom. But the same Book, whose authorship by God is challenged by the other people of the Book, stands witness to the fact that the Torah and the Injeel (collectively the Old Testament and the gospels) were authored, in part, by God Himself. In addition, other books, belonging to different religions, in other parts of the world, were, without question, also authored by the same God – only the contradictions one finds in them today are man-made. Need it be said that the attitude of the Holy Quran is, by far, the most realistic and conducive to peace among religions.

2. As to the second question, the Holy Quran draws our attention to the process of evolution in every sphere of human society. New religions were needed, not only for the sake of restoring the fundamental teachings of older religions, which had been mutilated at the hands of man, but also, as society evolved, more teachings had to be added to previous ones, to keep up with the pace of progress.
3. That is not all. Another factor, at work in this process of change, was the element of time-related, secondary teachings, which were revealed to meet only the requirements of a certain people or period. This means that religions were not only made of central cores of unchangeable principles, but were also dressed up with peripheral, secondary, and even transient, teachings.
4. Last, but not least, man was not educated and trained in divine instructions in one single stride, but he was gradually carried

forward, step by step, to a stage of mental adulthood, where he was considered fit and mature to receive all the fundamental principles, which were needed for his guidance. According to the Quranic claim, a secondary teaching, inseparably used on everlasting fundamental principles, was also revealed as a part of the final, perfect, and consummate religion, i.e., Islam. That which was of a purely local or temporary character was abrogated or omitted; that which was still needed, henceforth, was provided and retained (see Ch. 5: Al Mâ'idah: 14-16).

This, in essence, is the Islamic concept of religious universality, which Islam claims to possess. It is for man to investigate, and judge, the comparative merit of different claimants.

Now, we turn to the question of such religions, which have set themselves the goal of global ascendancy. Clearly, Islam does entertain such ambitions. By way of prophecy, the Holy Quran declares that Islam is destined to emerge one day as the one religion of mankind.

“He it is Who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of the truth, that He may cause it to prevail over all religions, even if those, who associate as partners with God, do not like” (Ch. 61: As-Saff: 9).

Despite its commitment to the promotion of peace and harmony between various religions, Islam does not discourage the competitive dissemination of messages and ideologies, with a view to gaining ascendancy over others. In fact, it sets the ultimate ascendancy of Islam over all other faiths, as a noble goal, which must be pursued by the adherents of Islam, speaking of the Holy Founder of Islam, the Holy Quran states:

“Say, ‘O mankind! Truly I am a Messenger to you all from Allah, to Whom belongs the kingdom of the heavens and earth. There is no God but He. He gives life, and He causes death. So, believe in Allah, and His Messenger, the Prophet, the Immaculate one, who believes in Allah and His words; and follow him, that you may be rightly guided’ ” (Ch. 7: Al-A'râf: 158).

However, to preempt frictions and misunderstandings, Islam prescribes a set of clear-cut rules of conduct, which guarantee fair play, absolute justice, freedom of speech, right of expression, and the right of disagreement, for all alike.

## **NO COMPULSION**

How can a religion claim itself to be universal, international, or global, and yet, not cause frictions? No religion, with a universal message, and global ambitions to unite mankind under one flag, can even momentarily entertain the idea of employing force to spread its message. *“Swords can win territories, but not hearts. Force can bend heads, but not minds.”*

So there is no need for any coercion. Leave it to man to determine where the truth belongs. Addressing the Holy founder of Islam, God clearly indicates to him of not entertaining any idea of force in an attempt to reform society. His status as reformer is made very clear in the following verses:

“Admonish, therefore, for thou art but an admonisher; thou hast no authority to compel them” (Ch. 88: Al-Ghâshiyah: 21-22).

“But if they turn away, we have not sent thee as a guardian over them. Thy duty is only to convey the message. Leave it to God to make the message effective” (Ch. 42: Ash-Shûrâ: 49).

Even if a struggle develops in the process of the propagation of the new ideology, and violent reaction ensues, then Islam strongly exhorts its adherents to show patience and perseverance, and avoid conflict, as much as possible. This is why, wherever a Muslim is admonished to deliver the message of Islam to the world at large, a clear-cut code of conduct is laid out for him. Out of many verses, related to this subject, we quote the following verse to illustrate the point.

“Call unto the way of thy Lord, with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in a way that is best. Surely, thy Lord knows best who has strayed from His way; and He also knows who are rightly guided” (Ch. 16: An-Nahl: 125).

According to the Holy Quran, the survival, and ultimate victory, of a message depends entirely upon the potency of its arguments, and not on the material force

it can employ. The Holy Quran is very clear, and specific, on this subject. It declares that, even if the most powerful forces are employed to annihilate truth, and support falsehood, such efforts would invariably be defeated and frustrated. Reason will always prevail over the crude force of material weapons.

“but those who knew for certain that they would one day meet Allah said: ‘How many a small party has triumphed over a large party by Allah’s command! And Allah is with the steadfast’ ” (Ch. 2: Al-Baqarah: 249).

This is the everlasting principle, which has played the most important role in the evolution of mankind. Survival of the fittest is the essence of this message. That, in fact, is the methodology of the evolution of life.

### **FREEDOM OF SPEECH**

Freedom of speech and expression is vital to the spread of a message, as well as to restore the dignity of man. No religion is worthy of any consideration, unless it addresses itself to the restoration, and protection, of human dignity.

In view of what has passed, it should become apparent that it is impossible for a religion like Islam to deny freedom of speech and expression. On the contrary, Islam upholds this principle, in a manner, and with such boldness, as is seldom witnessed in any other ideology or religion in the world. For instance, the Holy Quran declares:

“They say, ‘None shall enter heaven unless he be a Jew or a Christian.’ These are their vain desires. Say, ‘Produce your proof, if you are faithful’ ” (Ch. 2: Al-Baqarah: 111).

“Have they taken gods beside Him! Say, ‘Bring forth your proof. Here is the Book of those with me, and those before me! Nay, most of them know not the truth, and so they turn away from it’ ” (Ch. 21: Al-Anbiyâ: 24).

Liberty and emancipation are the two important slogans, which are influencing the entire world, with varying intensity, and different connotations, in different parts of the world. There is no doubt, whatsoever, that man is gaining greater awareness and consciousness, in the importance, and value, of liberty. There is a pressing need, felt everywhere in the world, for emancipation, but from what? Is

it philosophies; oppressive democracies and corrupt bureaucracies; the economic stranglehold of the poor countries by the rich; ignorance; superstition; fetishism?

Islam champions the cause of liberty from all these maladies, but not in a manner as to cause disorder, chaos, and indiscriminate vengeance, causing suffering to the innocent. The message of Islam is: “God does not like disorder” (Ch. 2: Al-Baqarah: 205). Islam, like every other religion, emphasises the role of balanced freedom, in a spirit of give and take. “Absolute freedom” is hollow, weird, and unreal, in the context of society.

Sometimes, the concept of freedom is so misconceived, and misapplied, that the beauty of the cherished principle of freedom to speak gets transformed into the ugliness of freedom to abuse, hurl insults, and to blaspheme.

## **BLASPHEMY**

Islam goes further than any religion in granting man freedom of speech and expression. Blasphemy is condemned, on ethical and moral grounds, no doubt, but no physical punishment is prescribed for blasphemy, despite the commonly-held view in today’s world of both the West and Islam itself.

Although the Holy Quran very strongly discourages indecent behaviour, and indecent talk, or the hurting of the sensitivities of others, Islam does not advocate punishment in this world, nor vests such authority in anyone. Blasphemy has been mentioned a number of times in the Quran.

1. “When you hear the signs of Allah being denied and mocked at, sit not with them, until they engage in a talk other than that; for, in that case, you would be like them. Surely Allah will assemble the hypocrites, and the disbelievers, in hell, all together” (Ch. 4: An-Nisâ: 140)

What a beautiful response to the utter ugliness of blasphemy. Islam declares that people should register their protest, by staging a walkout only, and not even a permanent at that. On the contrary, the boycott is to last for the period that the act of blasphemy is being committed.

2. “For their disbelief and uttering against Mary (is) a grievous calumny” (Ch. 4: An-Nisâ: 156).

The Jews, according to this verse, committed a grave blasphemy by declaring Mary – on whom be peace – to be unchaste, and alleging Jesus – on whom be peace – to be a child of questionable birth. The Arabic word *buhtanam azeema* (grievous calumny) expresses condemnation of this folly on the part of the Jews in the strongest term. Yet no physical punishment is prescribed.

3. While the Jews are condemned by the Quran for an act of blasphemy against Mary and Jesus – peace be on them – at the same time the Christians are censured for committing blasphemy against God by claiming that a son was born to God through a human wife. In the following verse, the Quran declares it to be an enormity, yet no punishment of any sort is advocated.

“No knowledge have they thereof, nor had their fathers. Monstrous is the word that comes out of their mouths. They speak nothing but a lie” (Ch. 18: Al-Kahf: 5).

4. Now we come to the most sensitive area, in the sense that the Muslims of today are more sensitive to blasphemy against the Holy founder of Islam than blasphemy against anything else – even God!

There is, in the Quran itself, recorded the blasphemy of Abdullah bin Ubbay, known in the history of Islam as the Chief of the Hypocrites:

“They say, ‘If we return to Medina, the most exalted will surely drive out therefrom the most mean’, while true honour belongs to Allah and His Messenger and the believers; but the hypocrites know not” (Ch. 63: Al-Munâfiqûn: 8)

After returning from an expedition, Abdullah uttered the above quoted words, implying that the Holy Prophet, who was the “most mean”. The Companions were seething with rage, and, if

permitted, they would have, most certainly, put Abdullah to the sword.

It is reported, authentically, that no less a person than the son of Abdullah himself approached the Prophet, and asked permission to kill his own father. But the Holy founder of Islam – peace and blessings be on him – refused to grant him his request, and nor did he permit anyone else from the companions to punish the hypocrite.

“Abdullah continued to live in peace in Medina, and when he died, a natural death, of course, the Holy Prophet gave his own shirt to Abdullah’s son, so that he could enshroud his father’s body – a singular act of blessing, indeed. Not only that, but the Holy Prophet decided to lead the funeral prayer himself. This decision must have disturbed many of his companions, who could not forgive Abdullah for the grievous offence he had committed, and from which he never recanted. Finally, it fell to Umar, who later became the second Caliph, to give voice to the suppressed uneasiness.

“As the Prophet was proceeding to the funeral, Umar stepped forward and begged the Prophet to change his decision. Umar reminded the Prophet of the Quranic verse, in which, referring to some known hypocrites, on whose behalf, intercession would not be accepted, even if the Holy Prophet prayed for them 70 times. The Holy Prophet smiled and responded: ‘Stand aside, Umar. I know better. If Allah will not forgive him, even if I pray 70 times, I would seek forgiveness more than 70 times.’ The prophet then led the funeral prayers” (*Bukhari II Kitab al Janiaze*).

This is a fitting rebuttal to those, who are crying themselves hoarse in demanding death of the blasphemer, who dares to insult the Holy Prophet of Islam, and deserves nothing but death.