Religious Tolerance in a Pluralistic World:
An Islamic View

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Introduction

Today's world is a place of confluence of many cultures and races. Pluralism in respect of race, religion and culture has contributed to colour and shape the demographic contours of every nation. Thus, it is quite common to ensure people of various ethno-religio-cultural backgrounds living side by side with much harmony and tolerance. Frequently, this tolerance is stretched to its limits when issues pertaining to religious sensitivities and interests are affected.

Man, ever since he appeared on this planet, has all along been searching for peace and harmony. Despite this fact, now, mankind, more than ever before, is in need of peace and harmony. This is because, it is now, in the wake of all these scientific and technological advancements of our modern times, and these being geared more towards destructive purposes than constructive ones, that mankind faces inter-ethnic, inter-religious and international peace-less-ness. It is now, when mankind is reaching its pinnacle of achievements in intellectual and scientific progress, that the clouds of peace-less-ness with their thunders and lightnings soar through the skies of many a country. Individuals have no peace of mind, families are increasingly becoming less harmonious, communities are becoming more and more hostile towards one another and increasingly suspicious of one another. All this is due to the lack of morality and the real spirit of tolerance.

It is religion which can legitimately come forward to instill the different levels of morality, if it surpasses all racial, linguistic,

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ethnic, colour and class discriminations. But unfortunately, some of tne present day clouds of hostility are supposed to be religious in nature. This makes the secular leaders of nations assume, though wrongly, that religions are the causes of all trouble. They, in order to steer their countries clear from apparently religious-based disharmony and discord, drive towards godless secularism. Some merely make use of the name secularism, just to cover up their prejudices and discriminations against some particular religion. There are yet some who make use of this term merely as a nomenclature to express their governments' strictly non-prejudicial stance towards any particular religion. However, the name itself has a psychological effect in attracting various irreligious and anti-religious cultures, permissiveness and drug abuse, into the midst of our society. This is a danger signal which forebodes a greater and more serious danger than disharmony, and makes the leaders realize the importance and urgency of moral education. Now, it is an admitted fact that moral education cannot succeed without religious education, because, morality has its foundation and roots in religion, and is therefore, inseparable. Therefore, it seems desirable that the religionists and religion-friendly people should actively co-operate with their respective governments in implementing religious education.

Defining Tolerance

The literal and lexical meaning of tolerance is "to bear, to endure, to put up with"[1]. Discussing tolerance the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* offers:

> Toleration, however, has a peculiarly limited signification. It connotes refraining from prohibition and persecution. Nevertheless, it suggests a latent disapproval and it usually refers to a condition in which the freedom which it permits is both limited and conditional. Tolerance is not equivalent to religious liberty, and it falls far short of religious equality. It assumes the existence of an authority which might have been coercive, but

which, for reasons of its own, is not pushed to extremes ... However, lamentable the fact may be, it should not surprise us that greater intolerance has been found amongst the Christian nations than among any other people[2].

The above definition confines tolerance to the domain of religion in a limited sense. However, this term, over the years and particularly in recent times, has taken a whole lot of meaning in terms of its concept and scope. Accordingly this term, dictated by the demands of modernity, now refers to tolerating all manners of views, beliefs and practices of others that are varyingly and even diametrically opposite to one's own. "This new sense of tolerance", says Haleem, "is broadening so fast that there are people now, even in the West, who are worried about the extent of the new spirit of tolerance"[3]. Thus, they feel that the redefined tolerance not only asks for accommodation of differences "but often demands acceptance of the beliefs and practices of others"[4]. There is a real problem in admitting this. That is accommodating may be tolerable but not acceptance. For the term "acceptance" means "to consent, to take what is offered"; "to view with favour"; "to admit the truth or to acknowledge"[5]. There is no harm in admitting partial truth as partial truth and accommodating it accordingly. But the difficulty arises when such truth is to be acknowledged as perfect or the only truth. This may not be tolerable, since acceptance of it as truth would mean to acknowledge it as equal to the truth that one holds. This is one of the problems that arises, from pluralism.

Religion and Tolerance

Religious tolerance means to extend religious understanding and accommodation to the people of all religions, even though you disagree with their beliefs and practices. However, apparently it seems that there is lack of religious tolerance in the contemporary world. We need to take the following points into consideration to test this hypothesis: [a]

How religions tolerate one another? [b] How religions (together) tolerate the others (meaning the non-religious and the irreligious)? [c] How each religion tolerates its internal divisions? and [d] How others (i.e.: the non-religionists) tolerate religions?

All the religions talk about tolerance. Some of the religionists also set limitations to tolerance, meaning that they admit that there is no absolute tolerance. For instance, a Christian scholar, Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica*, propounds, in respect of the objection that the rites of unbelievers ought not to be tolerated, that:

> Human government is derived from the Divine government, and should imitate it. Now although God is all-powerful and supremely good, nevertheless He allows certain evils to take place in the universe, which He might prevent, lest, without them, greater goods might be forfeited, or greater evils ensue. Accordingly, in human government also, those who are in authority, rightly tolerate certain evils, lest certain goods be lost, or certain greater evils be incurred... .Hence, though believers sin in their rites, they may be tolerated, either on account of some good that ensues therefrom, or because of some evil avoided. Thus from the fact that the Jews observe their rites, which, of old, foreshadowed the truth of the faith which we hold, there follows this good - that our very enemies bear witness to our faith, and that our faith is represented in a figure, so to speak. For this reason they are tolerated in the observance of their rites. On the other hand, the rites of other unbelievers, which are neither truthful nor profitable are by no means to be tolerated, except perhaps in order to avoid an evil, for instance the scandal or disturbance that might ensue, or some hindrance to the salvation of those who if they were unmolested might gradually be converted to the faith. For this reason the Church, at times, has tolerated the rites of even heretics and pagans, when unbelievers were very numerous[6].

But elsewhere he sets the limit even to this toleration of the heretics when he suggests that they be excommunicated or executed. Giving the reasons for such intolerance, Aquinas

explains:

> With regard to heretics two points must be observed; one, on their own side, the other on the side of the Church. On their own side there is the sin, by which they deserve not only to be separated from the Church by excommunication, but also to be severed from the world by death. For it is a much graver matter to corrupt the faith which quickens the soul, than to forge money, which supports temporal life. Therefore if forgers of money and other evil-doers are condemned to death at once by the secular authority, much more reason is there for heretics, as soon as they are convicted of heresy, to be not only excommunicated but even put to death. On the part of the Church, however, there is mercy which looks to the conversion of the wanderer, and therefore, she condemns not at once, but after the first and second admonitions... After that, if he is yet stubborn, the Church no longer hoping for his conversion, looks to the salvation of others, by excommunicating him and separating him from the Church, and furthermore delivers him to the secular tribunal to be exterminated from the world by death[7].

Arguing his case for such intolerance, Aquinas quotes Jerome as saying, "cut-off the decayed flesh, expel the mangy sheep from the fold, lest the whole house, the whole paste, the whole body, the whole flock, burn, perish, rot or die. Arius was but one spark in Alexandria, but as that spark was not at once put out, the whole earth was laid waste by its flame"[8].

Islam and Tolerance

The Arabic equivalence of the term tolerance is *al-tasamuh* which denotes leniency, generosity, magnanimity, indulgence, forbearance, tolerance and even forgiveness in respect of all matters be they transactional or constitutional. Surprisingly, there is no *Qur'anic* verse wherein this word or its derivatives have occurred. However, there is a saying of the blessed Prophet which affirms that the religion most beloved by God is the tolerant true religion (*al-hanafiyyah al-samha*) — in reference to Islam. In fact, as Haleem says, "tolerance is born out of the very nature of Islam -

which seems to be the only religion that is not named after a race of people, like Judaism and Hinduism, or after any single person like Buddhism and Christianity"[9]. Explaining the term *tasamuh*, Abdel Haleem says that "the root form of this word has two connotations: 'generosity' (*jûd wa karam*) and 'ease' (*tasahul*)[10]. Thus the Muslims in Arabic "talk about *tasamuh* al-Islam and *tasamuh al-dini*, in a quite different way from the English usage"[11]. Where 'tolerance' indicates a powerful authority, grudgingly 'bearing' or 'putting up with' others who are different, the Arabic term denotes "generosity and ease from both sides on a reciprocal basis"[12].

Tolerance, apart from its earlier literal definition, is also defined as "the readiness to allow others to believe or act as they judge best"[13], or as "the ability of an organism to survive in difficult conditions"[14]. Thus the term tolerance applies at two levels: (1) Letting others to function as they deem best (2) Surviving in a difficult condition.

These two aspects can be found in one and the same situation, particularly in a genuinely pluralistic society. However, the degree of tolerance present varies from society to society. What is considered tolerance in a theocratic society may not be tolerated in a non-theocratic society. Likewise what is considered tolerance in a democratic society may not be tolerated in a non-democratic society. So is the case with tolerance in a pluralistic society and a non-pluralistic society. Similarly, tolerance in a majority society may not hold good in a minority society. Thus, it becomes imperative that tolerance be loosely defined and tailored according to the situation in which the people live. Tolerance in an absolute sense is non-existent. Tolerance must go hand-in-hand with understanding. Tolerance without understanding is dangerous, nay, even detrimental. For it may be that what is considered as sacred by one community may be considered as profane by the other and vice-versa. The situation is very delicate

in a pluralistic society. Responsible tolerance cannot be practiced by carelessly compromising any core values and principles of one community simply for the sake of maintaining harmony with others. That could mean suicidal for the community that compromises in that manner its values for promoting tolerance. Discarding or compromising any of the core values and principles of one religion to maintain harmony and tolerance with others would be tantamount to throwing oneself into self-destruction.

There are many fundamental as well as secondary differences, which restrict Muslims from compromising their values in their pursuit of tolerance. How then can a Muslim conduct himself in a pluralistic society? In a pluralistic Muslim majority country the situation can be better for the Muslims, since they apparently shape the destiny of their society. The Muslims could be lenient in accommodating the beliefs and actions of the minority non-Muslims provided the latter do not engage, overtly or covertly, in activities aimed at bringing discredit to Islam and Muslims. It is just like building a church or temple in the Holy cities of Islam. It has been said that during the Muslim rule of Spain, the Christians in Spain were guaranteed their religious freedom by Muslims, who permitted them to keep their religion of choice, and no one was ever forced to abandon his/her religion and embrace Islam. Muslims even protected the churches and other possessions of those Christians. This spirit is also seen in the appointment of Arabicised Spaniards to government posts by the Umayyad ruler there, Muhammad Ibn Abd Rahman (238-273 .AH.). He appointed Cumis Ibn Antian, who had been in charge of collecting the poll tax from non-Muslims, as a secretary and administrator. When that man asked to be excused from working on Sundays, the ruler excused him and extended the relaxation to all the Christian employees so that they could attend church services. This consideration for and accommodation of even politically and otherwise weak non-Muslims still continues to be

in vogue in Muslim countries including in Morocco, Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey[15].

By contrast, in a pluralistic Muslim-minority society, where the Muslims are at the mercy of their majority non-Muslim fellow citizens, they often adopt the Makkan phase in conducting their affairs by strictly confining themselves to the barest necessities of their religion and often try to accommodate the demands of their society as long as such demands do not contravene their religious prescriptions. In case such demands clearly violate their religious requirements Muslims must explore ways and means to bring their grievances to the attention of the relevant authorities and try to reconcile it in the light of their constitutional rights. Many of these Muslim minority countries simply ignore the rights of Muslims and prompt them to accept the unfair demands of their society. Even countries known for preaching democracy, the rule of law, human rights, separation of state and church are themselves becoming increasingly intolerant towards Muslims to the extent that they even deny "Muslim girls the right to wear headscarves in schools"[16] under the ridiculous guise of wanting to preserve uniformity.

Principles of Religious Tolerance in Islam

Islam lays down clear guidance for Muslims with regard to the treatment with non-Muslims. It emphasizes that all men are but one family as such their differences are considered as diverse paths. Among the principles enunciated by Islam in this respect are[17]:

(a) Common Message of All the Messengers

Islam believes that the Divine message meant for all humanity is essentially the same. Thus, the *Qur'an* states that all the Messengers preached the same religion. In 42:13 God says that Muhammad was given the same religion which He enjoined on Noah, Ibrahim (A.S.) and 'Isâ (A.S.).

Thus, it is binding on Muslims to believe in all Divine prophets. Chapter 2 verse 136 states that revelation given to Muhammad, and to Ibrahim, Ismail, Isaac and Yaq'ûb and that given to all prophets is from God. Muslims are also guided not to treat these prophets as demi-gods or semi-gods or as the personification of God or even as the only begotten sons of God.

(b) No compulsion in Religion

Muslims are prohibited from compelling others to accept their faith. Both in 2:256 and 10:99 God discourages such compulsion. Rather the decision to accept the faith is left to the outcome free of the choice, of the people after the Truth and falsehood are clearly explained.

(c) No superiority of one man over the other

Thus, no man is superior to another in respect of birth or position. In God's sight the superior men are those who take God as their protector and are most God-fearing[18].

(d) Respect for the places of worship

A Muslim is required to respect the places of worship of the followers of all religions. God guides in 22:40 that had He not tested one group of people by means of another, the monasteries, churches, synagogues and *masâjid*, in which the name of God is profusely commemorated, would have been certainly pulled down.

(e) Abhorrence of oppression on account of creed differences

Islam does not permit men to murder one another or oppress one another on the ground of differences in creed. Rather they are encouraged to cooperate with one another in promoting good and eradicating evil[19], regardless of their differences in faith[20].

(f) Creed differences should not lead to non-cooperation in good

Despite the differences in creed, one should do good to others and must demonstrate love and good treatment. God permits Muslims to share food with the People of the Book and them to marry chaste women among them[21]. In fact, Islam encourages Muslims to hold debates and dialogue with people of different faiths in the ways that are best, gracious, dignified, and respectful with proper arguments convincing and satisfying the other party[22], without reviling them for their false creed even if they are idolaters[23]. However, when Muslims are oppressed because of their religious ideology, it is obligatory for them to put an end to such mischief and to defend their faith through all possible means so that violence against them is stopped. God guides in 2:193 and 60:9 that Muslims must fight those who fight them for their faith, drive them out of their homes, or even support others in driving them out of their homes, and they (the Muslims) should not turn to them for friendship and protection. But once the Muslims dominate those who had formerly adopted an attitude of aggression and oppression towards Muslims and their religious freedom, it is not permitted for the Muslims to exact revenge on account of their religious beliefs by forcing them to renounce their faith, or perpetrate violence on them or even be harsh to them in treatment. Suffice is their submission to the state and if they sincerely adhere to their covenant, so that they enjoy the same rights and obligations as that of Muslims.

Thus these principles make it obligatory for every Muslim to believe in all the Prophets and to give equal respect to all of them, not to oppress the followers of any of these prophets, treat them with kindness and to deal with them in the best possible way. Even though Islam permits Muslim men to marry women of the People of the Book, it, however, abhors the marriage of any Muslim woman to marry the People of the Book or worse still to non-Muslims. Sadly what is sometimes happening in the name of

tolerance is a total disregard for these values.

These are the bases on which Islam shapes its civilization without any prejudice against other religions. Thus, the Islamic civilization does not exclude the non-Muslims from the field of collective function nor does it degrade them from their status and position. This has been the hallmark of the prophetic message. However, when degradation and decay overtook Muslims, they discarded these lofty and noble principles of tolerance and peaceful-coexistence as enshrined in the teachings of the Prophet (صلی الله علیه وسلم) and instead they adopted an obstinate ignorance in respect of their own faith and its high principles of religious tolerance.

Religious Tolerance through the Prism of Islamic History

(a) Tolerance during the Prophet's Life[24]

When the Prophet صلی الله علیه وسلم was at Makkah he tolerated the unjust treatment at the hands of the Makkans and their neighbours. When he migrated to Madinah, he negotiated a covenant between the Muslims and the Jews under which Muslims agreed to respect the Jews and protect them from harm of any kind in return for the Jews' pledged to stand by the Muslims in case of an attack on Madinah. Despite this, the Jews time and again violated the covenant and tested the limits of the Prophet's tolerance. Even a Jew tried to kill the Prophet by sending him a roasted leg of mutton injected with a lethal poison. When the Abyssinian Christians visited him in Madinah, the Prophet صلی الله علیه وسلم provided them shelter in the *masjid* and took upon himself the responsibility of providing hospitality and service. The Prophet even allowed the Christians of Najran to conduct their services in one side of the *masjid* in their own way and he himself prayed with his companions on the other side of the *masjid*. When they presented their arguments regarding their faith, the Prophet attentively listened to their arguments and

gently replied without hurting their religious sentiments.

The teachings of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم guide the Muslims the way they should treat their Non-Muslim friends and neighbours on a day to day basis as well as about the treatment of non-Muslim citizens in an Islamic State. Some expressions are cited as under:

> He who believes in God and the Last Day should honour his guest, should not harm his neighbour, should speak good or keep quiet[25].

> Whoever hurts a Non-Muslim citizen of a Muslim state hurts me, and he who hurts me annoys God[26].

> He who hurts a Non-Muslim citizen of a Muslim state, I am his adversary, and I shall be his adversary on the Day of Judgment"[27].

> Anyone who kills a Non-Muslim who had become our ally will not smell the fragrance of Paradise[28].

> Beware on the Day of Judgment; I shall myself be the complainant against him who wrongs a Non-Muslim citizen of a Muslim state or lays on him a responsibility greater than that he can bear or deprives him of anything that belongs to him[29].

(b) Tolerance during the period of the Rightly-guided Caliphs[30]

Following the footsteps of their illustrious Prophet, his companions, particularly the rightly-guided caliphs, maintained his high-ranking humanitarian policy of religious tolerance. One of the examples that befits here is that 'Umar, the second Caliph, entered Jerusalem, then called Aeilia, as a conqueror accepted the condition laid down by the Christians of Palestine that no Jews will be allowed to settle there. He abstained from praying in the great Church of Jerusalem, fearing that the Muslims in time to come may claim it as *masjid* on the plea that he had prayed there once[31]. It is even said that 'Umar even admonished his governor for Egypt 'Amr b al-'As for annexing a house belonging to an Egyptian woman for the extension of the *masjid* against her will. Despite convincing arguments for taking such action, 'Umar

ordered demolition of the portion of *masjid* built on the site of the woman's house and the reconstruction of her house[32].

(c) Tolerance during the period of the Islamic Empires[33]

Thus, it is evident in Islamic history that Muslims and non-Muslims lived side by side without hurting the sentiments of each other. Muslims even sheltered the Christians against the tyranny operated against them by their fellow Christian co-religionists. For instance, Harun al-Rashid, the 'Abbasid ruler, was called to intervene in the revenge killing of the Malachi sect of the Greek Christians by the Copts. He resorted the churches and properties to the Malachis after taking them from the Copts.

The Islamic state did not interfere in the affairs of its non-Muslim subjects. They were granted total freedom in respect of their religious rites and rituals. Their religious leaders had full authority over their co-religionists. In fact, many of them were entrusted with important position, in the Islamic state. The appointment of Christian physicians, in the Umayyad, the 'Abbasid, and the Ottoman periods, to highly responsible posts reflects the immense confidence the state reposed in these Christians[34]. Even non-Muslim scholars and poets received due recognition and encouragement for their knowledge and achievement.

Another aspect of tolerance witnessed during this period was participation of Muslims in the festivals of non-Muslims at a large. According to al-Siba'i, both al-Maqri and al-Maqdisi record in their respective works entitled, *Al-Khitat* and *Ahsân al-Taqâsim fi Ma'rifat al-Aqâlim* respectively, the participation of Muslims and Christians in their respective festivities[35].

There are certain moral values, which are common to all religions such as loyalty, humility, respect the elders. Out of all these moral values, the most important one is the spirit of peaceful coexistence, especially in a pluralistic society. It is rather

unfortunate that time and again people of insufficient religious knowledge and stature, are causing inter-religious disharmony, by uttering irritating slighting remarks, sarcastic allusions and unreasonable criticism against other religions, in public. When the mountains opt for peace and harmony, realizing the perils of discord, it is usually the mushrooms through their subtle and tender penetrations that create crevices, often taking unfair advantage of their equal rights. When lions, elephants and tigers agree to co-exist peacefully in the jungle these are usually the little mice which, by hypocritically taking and switching sides at their own pleasure, vile cause chaos in the jungle.

Conclusion

It is said that for the progress and development of any society or country, stability is a must. And to ensure stability of any country, peaceful co-existence of all its members is very vital. Such peaceful co-existence of the citizens of any country would not come about without the harmony, mutual respect, tolerance and understanding of all the member communities which make the nation. In whatever way the leaders of a nation try to bring about this inter-ethnic or inter-religious harmony, respect, tolerance and understanding, it invariably assumes the name of national unity or national integration.

There seem to be three intelligent ways to achieve national unity or integration:

a) by doing away or by playing down the distinct ethnic or religious values and by emphatically establishing only the values which are perceived to be common to all the various ethnic or religious communities,

b) by introducing some new hitherto unheard of pseudo-values, as common values, thereby trying to increase the area of commonness,

c) by allowing the various religious communities of the

country a reasonable freedom to practice all the values taught amidst them, including, particularly, their distinct values.

The Government needs to play the role of an overseer who exercises discipline over anyone or any group trying to take advantage of that freedom, to commit excesses. This is one area where the country needs a sort of National Inter-Faith or Ideology Council to define the parameters and set limits for such freedom and to determine exactly when and where such limits have been violated, of course, all these without undermining any long-established distinctive national institutions.

The first way has its defects and dangers, because, by doing away the distinct ethnic or religious values, will also do away all the religions. Because, after losing their distinctness, the religions themselves become non-existent. That ushers in a chaos which can render no nation, any good. The second, too, is no better, for it, at its best, can only help to create an ideology which is left with little or no value, moral or ethical, and it would end up in the creation of a society worse than that of the frenzied fans of sports, games and pastimes. Such an ideology can only help to thrive the beastly nature in man and it will have nothing for the angelic spirituality in him. The third is the only reasonable choice left for the achievement of national unity or integration whereby any nation can succeed, prosper and progress steadily. But it is difficult to bring about such a national unity or integration, without getting the proper representatives of all religious communities of a country to meet and join their heads as often as possible to frankly and open-mindedly discuss matters of common interest, such as matters of national importance and to explore the possibilities of cooperation and of doing away the disharmony, distrust and suspicions, if any, on the basis of traditionally established equality, mutual respect and understanding. Even that is not sufficient, if such meetings were to end as mere NATO (no action talk only). To act one must have

influence, however little, and without influence no action can take place. This is what, precisely, the position and role played by the various inter-religious bodies is. Their important role is comparable to that of the fire brigade. Only when there is a fire their importance could be realized and otherwise, to most eyes, they remain dormant, though their role is very significant to contribute to the promotion of peace and harmony in their own humble ways, despite having no power. But, now, these neutral bodies are coming under pressure of political scheming, undermining their traditional non-political stance.

The only realistic approach to mould the minds of people of different religions into one in order to achieve the cherished goal of national unity or integration, is by allowing every individual or community to practice and preach his or her religion, without encroaching the perimeter of another, and the government guaranteeing to everyone of them the right to do so, and playing the role of an overseer. There is no other realistic way. Therefore, it must be made clear that it is highly unrealistic to attempt to mould the minds of people of different religions into one, in order to achieve whatever high an ideal, even if it be the cherished goal of national integration, by preaching the falsehood that "all religions are the same and lead to one and the same goal", thereby trying to deceptively take the people of diversified religions to that ideal. This is a lazy man's work, because he wants to finish his job quick and with no toil, by simply believing that the job is done. But the undeniable truth which everyone knows manifestly is that no two religions are the same and no two religions work for the same goal. There are, however, similarities in the values taught by many religions.

How can any two religions be the same? How can the destination and goal of any two religions be the same? Whereas one says Zero, the other says Two, and another says Three, and another says many and still another says Only One. Is there

anything in common amidst all these numberings? We have only touched on the tip of an iceberg of differences, though there may be another iceberg of agreements. Religions are not comparable to the material, non-intelligent rivers, nor is God a confluence of religions like the ocean is the confluence of rivers. these statements are mere allegories which have little to do with facts. If all the religions are the same and they all lead to one and the same goal, then why there is need for creating harmony or tolerance? Only when there is a very significant disagreement between any two things it makes sense to talk of creating harmony, unity and integration. Otherwise it will only be an effort to achieve what has already been achieved, which is absurd. It is a clear sophistry to talk of promoting harmony between any two things which are already the same and leading to the same goal. Therefore, if anyone tries to create harmony, unity or integration between any two things, he should first recognize that there is disagreement, disharmony, disunity and disintegration between them and that they are not the same and are not leading to the same goal. Then and only then the working for agreement, harmony, unity and integration will bear some fruits.

This exemplary diversity-acknowledging tolerance is in-built in the teachings of Islam. The entire message of Islam is that this life is a test and we have the option of choosing the path to hell or to heaven. Messengers were sent to inform about the choices and to warn about the consequences. They were not sent to forcibly put the people on the right path. The job of the ordinary Muslims too is the same. They must deliver the message of Islam to the humanity around them as they have received it. They are neither to change it to make it attractive, nor to coerce others to accept it. In addition, the results in the Hereafter will depend upon faith. For all good acts are meaningless in the absence of the proper faith. And faith is an affair of the heart. It simply cannot be imposed.

Therefore, in promoting religious tolerance in a pluralistic world efforts should be made to understand and then appreciate the essential diversity between the various religions before commemorating their imaginative and misconstrued unity.

References and End Notes

1 That is to bear or to endure particularly poison. It is because of this negativity that many scholars of inter-religious dialogue view the term tolerance with caution.

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3 Haleem Muhammad Abdel, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style*, London/New York: I.E. Tauris Publishers, 1999, p. 79.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Arthur L. Hayward, and John J. Sparkes, *The Concise English Dictionary*, London: Cassell Ltd., 1994, p. 7.

6 *Great Books*, 18:435-6.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 440.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Haleem. *op.cit.*, p. 72.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

13 *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, ed. C. T. Onions, 3rd edition, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 2205

14 *Ibid.*, p. 2206

15 Dayf Dr. Shawqi, *The Universality of Islam*, Trans, by Dr. Abdelwahab El-Affendi, Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [ISESCO], 1998, pp. 99-100.

16 Haleem, *op.cit.*, p. 80.

17 Dr. Mustafa Al-Siba'i, *Some Glittering Aspects of Islamic Civilization*, trans, by Sharif Ahmad Khan, Delhi: Hindustan Publications, 1983, pp. 69-73.

18 *Al-Qur'an*, 49:3.

19 *Ibid.*, 5:3.

20 *Ibid.*, 2:113.

21 *Ibid.*, 5:5.

22 *Ibid.*, 29:46.

23 *Ibid.*, 6:108.

24 Al-Siba'i, *op .cit.*, pp. 75-6.

25 *Bukhari, Muslim.*

26 *Bukhari*

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Al-Siba'i, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-7.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[33] For details on this see, Adolph L. Wismer, *A Study in Tolerance as practiced by Muhammad and his immediate successors*, New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1966, pp. 65-76.

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 85. Nazir-Ali records similar inter-religious dialogue between two friends the Nestorian patriarch of Baghdad, Timothy (780-823) and the Caliph al-Mahdi. Their discussions are extant and took place in an atmosphere of very great respect, friendship, courtesy and great frankness.

See, Nazir-Ali, Michael, *The Roots of Islamic Tolerance: Origin and Development*, Oxford: Oxford Project for Peace Studies, 1990, (OPPS), Paper No. 26, p. 4.

He also records incident where a Christian monk in Spain tried to attract martyrdom by cursing the prophet and how the *qadi* referred him back to the secular authorities with the suggestion that he was insane. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.