



THE NOTION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND ISLAM

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Abstract

Religious freedom is a contested notion in our modern times and has been the standard to judge any tradition or religion as rational and acceptable ideology. Islam is alleged to be a religion which puts limitation upon human freedom and thus an 'outdated' religion. But in reality, Islam is the religion allows and promotes religious freedom. The modern notion of religious freedom is considered to be introduced by 'the West' but rather this notion has been the key feature of Islam as a religion mentioned in Quran. Putting limitations on religious freedom and dissent of opinion is not innate in Islam rather it has been misinterpreted. Such misinterpretations have given a reason to the critics of Islam to charge it as an outdated and rigid ideology. This paper attempts to clarify this misconception with the help of examples from Quran. Islam offers full freedom and prohibits any kind of coercion in matters of faith.

Keywords:

Religious freedom, Islam, Human Rights, Coercion, Quran



Religious belief is a matter of free choice and not force. There are different religious ideas and belief systems in the world among which one has to choose one (or one may not believe in any of these at all). One cannot conclude or come up with a decision about something before properly doing a critical and logical analysis; hence freedom of thought is essential for making a choice for a belief system. Hence, it is illogical to not to provide religious freedom within a religion which claims to be promoting reflection and free thinking, like Islam does. It is self-evident that one needs to have religious freedom in order to have a strong belief deeply rooted in one's heart, as the main aim of a religion or belief system is to bring about an inner change.

The rapid modern technological advancements have turned the world into a global village in which no society can live in isolation and a closed environment. Therefore, whether one wishes or not, different religious ideas and beliefs are accessible to everyone, which makes coercion in matters of faith, even the more illogical and absurd. The use of force and coercion will make people turn away from such a belief system rather than to attract them. People must be trusted and given a free choice to accept a belief system wholeheartedly. If a belief system is based on free and rational choice, coercion can never make a person to give it up, while if it is not based on free and rational choice coercion cannot help someone to believe in such a system. This article surveys and tries to argue that Islam being a religion as a *deen* not only provides man with freedom of religion but also stresses and protects it.

The Development of the Modern notion of Religious Freedom:

“Freedom of religion or belief remains one of the most controversial rights set out in international Human Rights treaties”.

(Evans, C. 2001)

Religious freedom has not been present everywhere in the history of different religions. Every universal religion takes itself to be the only guardian of truth and considers it to be a duty to ‘spread’ this truth to all mankind. Consequently, each religion tries to fight against other claim of religious truths, defining them as deviant in faith. This tendency is not limited to ‘other alien’ religions but occurs also within traditions among those people who differ in beliefs and views based upon different interpretations of religious texts and who brand each other as apostates and heretics. Such a tendency inevitably provokes likewise reactions which result into greater intolerance and discrimination towards all those who disagree. The truth of the matter is that all forms of intolerance and discriminations are the product of the human mind, which needs to be changed in order to eliminate these crimes and problems faced by mankind. Allowing for difference of opinion regarding beliefs, ideally speaking, makes up the beauty of any system of beliefs and is essential for its progress. But, unfortunately, we do not witness this in practice. The rejection of differences of opinion (dissent) leads to discrimination and intolerance and even to religious persecution. But this tradition is neither unique to Islam nor limited to religion in general, as it has occurred in secular ideologies too. (An Na'im. 2008)

The 17th and 18th century Enlightenment considered the individual person as defined by her moral dignity and freedom, based on her reason and right to be the author of her own fate. John Locke, by developing toleration into a philosophical position, (though being intolerant to atheism) called religious liberty a natural right which must be protected by the state, and thought of toleration as the main characteristic of the true church. (Madan, TN. 2003)

It is the natural right of a human being to enjoy freedom in all aspects of life, including religion. The difference of opinion in terms of religious beliefs and ideologies should be accepted wholeheartedly by a modern human being as he has witnessed so much horror and killings in the name of religion. Man has to learn from history that in order to live peacefully he has to eliminate all those issues which led to the wars and conflicts about religion. Difference of opinion lies in the roots of all knowledge and enquiry and we have to acknowledge and appreciate difference of opinion and dissent rather than seeing it as a problem to be solved. We must strive for safeguarding the right to differ and dissent in terms of religious beliefs and should not react violently and destructively but to benefit for the progress of humanity.

According to William Sweet the main reasons to support religious freedom from Locke onwards are: (Sweet, W. 2010)

- (a) Human knowledge is limited and reason is not infallible, and so a proper response is to allow people to hold a range of views on various topics including religion.
- (b) A growing realization that the fact of religious diversity must be explained and accepted in some way rather than seen as a problem to be solved.
- (c) Religious freedom is a 'natural right' and is ultimately grounded in the nature of man. This view is also expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The human rights movement has gone beyond mere idealism and has transcended national boundaries in modern times. It is not possible for any culture or religion to live in isolation under its specific and rigid interpretations in order to abuse rights in the name of religious or traditional principles. It has infiltrated into international institutions and embedded itself in the world's modern consciousness. (UN Press Release 2009)

Ideas of religious tolerance and respect for conscience did not emerge spontaneously after the foundation of the United Nations. These ideas, including freedom of thought and expression can be traced back to many world cultures but most influentially to European thought and experience.

The French Revolution 1789 and the American Bill of Rights 1791 are considered to be the landmark for the development which eventually led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Other important conventions regarding Human rights and Religious freedom include the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950), The international Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and The United Nations Declaration on the

Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981). (Saeed A & Saeed H. 2004) So the idea of religious freedom has gone through quite a significant development in modern times. The concepts in Article 18 represent a millennium of struggle in Europe for individual freedom of thought and religion against the power of church and state. (Neff S.C 1977)

Religious Freedom in Islam:

Although the idea of religious freedom, in its modern form began as a western construct, this does not mean that this concept is specifically western in terms of interest and concern (Dweyr 1991). Religious freedoms, codified from European experience, does not entail necessarily that the idea behind it is not found in other cultures and traditions.

The tolerance towards difference of opinion is one of the fundamental characteristics of Islam. Islam seeks to stimulate the deeper consciousness of moral and spiritual responsibility of man to safeguard freedom, justice and equality and seeks to establish a society in which human freedom and prosperity are fostered. The Holy Quran says,

But if your Lord had pleased He could have made all human beings into one community of belief. But they would still have differed from one another. (Al Quran 11:118)

It shows that difference of opinion and dissent is part of human nature which cannot be eliminated. Man is created in such a way that dissent is an integral part of his nature, now instead of futile and dangerous efforts to abolish and eliminate this part of human nature, we need to understand it and should stop seeing it as a problem to be solved. God had a plan to create such a creature, the human being, which does not live a static and bound life like other species, but is dynamic in nature displaying differences in order to explore and progress. A society can only be progressive and dynamic, and can achieve its heights, if it is tolerant, acknowledges rational enquiries and appreciates differences of opinions and beliefs in all respects. Freedom of thought and conscience is the dynamic force behind all the social, cultural, economic and intellectual development of any tradition. Those traditions which are intolerant towards dissent and which do not allow freedom of thought, cannot progress at all, become static and rigid and eventually diminish. The most dangerous situation, a religion can be in, is to put its society in a closed atmosphere without freedom of thought, which would eventually stop its growth and development, and would lead to its decline. Therefore, the key is to take into consideration, more carefully, the opinions of those who differ with us and acknowledge and accept dissent rather than violate the rights of our enemies. (An Na'im 2008)

Islam, like other religions, claims to be a truly divine religion so the best way to invite people to believe in it, is to convince them rationally. Man is free to make his own choices in this world, as this world is considered to be a test for him to make his choices, good or bad, right or wrong, based on his own rational decisions, for which he would be rewarded or punished likewise, in the life hereafter. If God wanted it to be impossible for man to make any other choice apart from the 'correct one' He would have done it Himself, having both the

power and authority to do so, by creating human beings just like angels. But such an act would leave no room at all for the concept of reward and punishment and consequently for life hereafter.

Islam as a religion lays down freedom in matters of religious beliefs. The Quran unequivocally declares,

There is no compulsion in matters of faith. Distinct is the way of guidance now from error. He, who turns away from the forces of evil and believes in God, will surely hold fast to a handle that is strong and unbreakable, for God hears all and knows everything.

(Al Quran 02:256)

If the Islamic tradition restricts free thinking and does not allow Muslim intellectuals to reflect freely in religious matters, it not only stops the growth and development of Muslims but also harms the whole idea of Islam being a true religion. If Islam is a true religion, then why do we have to fear free thinking and religious freedom and not allow difference of opinion? Those systems of beliefs which have a logical and rational basis do not have to fear free thinking. Allowing religious freedom and freedom of thought shows the strength and rational grounds of a true belief system. But if such liberties are not provided, the belief system will be considered weak and not based on rationality.

In the verse of the Quran mentioned above (There is no coercion...) God not only denies that He Has based Islam on coercion and force but also declares it prohibited for people to use coercion in matters of faith. The verse shows the importance of religious freedom in Islam in all matters of faith including accepting or leaving the religion as well as expressing ideas and interpretations. The freedom of the individual to express her own opinions in terms of religious beliefs and their interpretations, different from others, especially those in authoritative powers, gives birth to the labeling tradition in a religion. Labeling people who disagree with traditional interpretations, is actually the denial of religious freedom given by God. If one cannot express his opinion, no matter how sound and logical it is, this means one is forced to accept a 'particular' interpretation, which actually runs counter to the spirit of Islam. It not only allows for freedom of religion in Islam but rejects all kinds of coercion in matters of faith without exception.

Now the question arises, if force and coercion are not permissible in Islam how can one make people to follow a strict and rigid interpretation by threatening to label and persecute them as apostates and heretics? How can someone make people choose one particular 'traditional interpretation or version' or labeled as apostate or heretic otherwise? No one, including medieval jurists and orthodox scholars of Islam, has any authority to coerce people. The Quran says again,

Say, the truth is from your Lord; so believe if you like or do not believe if you will. (Al Quran 18: 29)

Man is granted full freedom to make his choice in matters of faith here once again. To be sure, there are warnings of punishments for those who do not make the right choice, but that punishment is in a life hereafter, which means only God has the authority to judge. Hence no human being has any authority whatsoever to

judge and label people and exclude them from Islam. The making of the right choice is in the own benefit of man and if he makes the wrong choice he would be punished by God in the life hereafter. If there was no freedom of choice and there was only one path, the right one, there would be no need for warning of punishments. One of the essential parts of faith in Islam, that is the belief in life hereafter and resurrection, logically requires freedom of religion. In order to help making the right choice God revealed the Quran.

We have sent down this book to you with the truth for all mankind.

So, he who comes to guidance does so for himself, and he who goes astray does so for his own loss; on you do not lay their guardianship.

(Al Quran 39: 41)

The Quran is revealed for the guidance of the whole mankind for their own benefit hence there is no coercion needed to make people believe in it. People are free to make their own choices. Even the prophet has been assigned the task to only inform and convey the message. Therefore if neither God Himself nor His prophet put restrictions on religious freedom and free will to make a choice, what authority one has to 'force' people to believe in his own version by threatening to label and exclude others?

...Belief in Islam presupposes and requires freedom of choice and can never be valid under coercion or intimidation. The possibility of belief in anything logically requires choice in the matter as one cannot believe in anything without the freedom and ability to disbelieve in it. (An Na'im 1996)

The Quran and the Prophet provide people with the guidance and warnings of severe punishments in life hereafter for not making the right choice, not through forcing them but through inviting them to reflect rationally. And this freedom to make choices logically abolishes all forms of coercion, including the labeling tradition, in Islam.

Remind them; you are surely a reminder. You are not a warden over them. (Al Quran 88: 21- 22)

The prophet has not been given an authority to force people to believe but just to remind as a messenger of God. If the prophet himself has no authority how can the followers of the prophet intimidate and coerce people in matters of faith? How can the followers of the prophet, who was sent as a messenger for the whole mankind to convey the message of God, deprive people from the freedom to make choice? The warning about punishments and rewards in life hereafter means that the authority to judge people only belongs to God and forcing one's own version and interpretation on others is basically denying this fact. The Quran time and again reminds us of being free to make choices and even of the coexistence of different kinds of belief systems. Everyone has the freedom to believe or not to believe.

O you unbelievers, I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship who I worship. Nor will I worship that you worship, nor will you worship who I worship. To you, your way, to me my way.(Al Quran 109: 1-6)

The Quran does not mention any worldly punishments for exchanging religion, though it warns of severe consequences in the life hereafter, which means no one has been given the authority to judge and label anyone in this world, in matters of faith except God Himself.

..But those of you who turn back on their faith and die disbelieving will have wasted their deeds in this world and the next. They are inmates of hell and shall there abide forever. (Al Quran 02: 217)

The punishment for someone who turns back (an apostate) takes place in the other world, in a life hereafter, and will be judged and decided by God alone. Also, the Quran instructs the prophet to convince people in a rational and a polite way to accept the right path which entails he cannot force or use other coercive means to invite people to Islam.

Call them to the path of your Lord with wisdom and words of good advice; and reason with them in the best way possible. Your Lord surely knows those who are guided the right way. (Al Quran 16: 125)

Conclusion:

God clearly sets out the way to invite people to His path in polite and good manners, and not by any coercive means or in an irrational way. Looking down upon them and labeling them will put them off rather than to accept the message. Although the prosperity and success declared by the Quran is for those who choose the right path, it must be out of free choice in order to be genuine belief. Everyone is free to think, reflect and choose freely. If it is not permissible to force someone to accept Islam, then logically speaking, it is not acceptable either to use coercive force to make someone stay in. Therefore, it is evident that Islam provides us with religious freedom clearly and indisputably. If a person or a group of people is threatened to be labeled as apostate or heretic and eventually get persecuted in the name of Islam, it means that force is used, which is prohibited clearly by God in the Quran.

Although the popular interpretation of Islam based on medieval jurists' interpretation, having different political motives denies religious freedom and free thinking and has led Muslim societies to rigidity and intolerance suppressing dissent. The interpretation of Islam which provides us with religious freedom based on rational thinking is absolutely in concord with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and modern notions of religious freedom.



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