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Peaceful Coexistence in Multi-Cultural Societies: The Qu'ranic Perspective

In a current global society, it is no longer possible to lead an isolated life. People of different faiths and belief live together. It is therefore, necessary to understand each other's needs aspirations, faiths, belief and practices. Religion is a potential force and an agent for the generation of peace and happiness; it facilitates goodwill among people and helps them to lead a life of spirituality and fulfilment. Islam is the first voice in the world which sent an invitation for universal brotherhood and unity. The Qura'nic vision of peace is not limited to the borders of the particular country or the confines of its own followers or community, it embraced all of humanity. Islam is synonymous with peace. It encourages its followers to explore every possible avenue for peaceful negotiations to sort out the conflict among the people and put their all efforts to establish peace in the society. The Holy Quran appeals to Muslims to engage in constructive dialogue with the people of other faiths on the basis of what they have common belief and doing of righteous deeds. The Holy Quran emphasizes that all the people have the right to follow the religion of their own choice. Islam calls on people of different faiths to have mutual respect for each other on the basis of their common humanity while following their own religions.In this paper, I will delineate the Qura'nic position to promote the peace in the world and establish the manner of universal brotherhood. How does Quran expect Muslims to live and interact with the people of other faith? I will also examine how the Quranic vision of world peace and human brotherhood as exemplified in the life of the Prophet of Islam who is the supreme exemplar in Islamic tradition.

Key Words: Islam, Quran, Coexistence, Freedom, Harmony, Dialogue,

Introduction:

In the name of religion as we have seen in the past, and even today that people have suffered from superstition, self mortification, intolerance, violence, hatred, bigotry, exploitation and so on and so forth. All these create a very gloomy picture of the world today. Peaceful coexistence addresses most of these issues and tries to find amicable solution to them. Peaceful coexistence is the most basic and important need of the times.This paper explores the ability of Quranic teachings to contribute and to strength inter-faith dialogue in order to overcome the inter-religious conflicts in various parts of the world. So that creative peace can be established on the earth. This paper also aims to find out a way of mutual understanding, respect and tolerance to work in unity for peace and prosperity for the entire humanity in the light of Quran.

The Quranic vision of peace:

The Quranic vision of peace is not limited to the borders of the particular country or the confines of its own followers or community, it embraced all of humanity. Islam is synonymous with peace. It encourages its followers to explore every possible avenue for peaceful negotiations to sort out the conflict among the people and put their all efforts to establish peace on the earth. The Quranic view of peace and coexistence is interwoven with its view of a universal moral discourse that unites all human beings. According to the Quran, human beings are created with an innate disposition *(fitrah).* Islam embraced certain universal human values that could form the basis for interaction with the people of other faiths. The basis of such universal moral order can also be traced to verses like the following, "Human kind, be aware of your duties to your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women".[1]The verse suggests a common genesis and unity of human beings based on God's creation. It also implies that human beings have to recognize and to live in peaceful manner with the people of other faiths with their differences. The Quran also views human diversity as a basis for understanding and peaceful coexistence. The Holy Quran says: "O, People, We have created you from one male and female *(Adam and Eve),*and We have created to in different communities and tribes so that you may know each other".[2]In the light ofthis verse, human diversity should enhance the recognition of rather than confrontation with the other.

Quranic Theory for Peaceful Coexistence:

Islam brought to the world the message of peaceful coexistence, not only in theory, but also in practice. The truth is that Islam is a peaceful way of life: it was so for the man of past and it is so for the man of today. Human beings are to coexist in peace and harmony, diversity and differences in faith were to be judged by God. Quranic concept of peaceful co-existence is the view that human beings are united under one God.[3]They are to strive towards virtuous deeds[4]for

most noble person in the eyes of God is the one who is most pious.[5]These and other verses command Muslims to build bridges of understanding and cooperation with fellow human beings in order to create a just social order. Peaceful co-existence requires that people abstain from abusing and denigrating those who do not share their beliefs. Deriding and mocking others can engender violence and hatred. Therefore, the Quran urges respect for the beliefs of others. The Quran further sates, "Had God willed, they would not have been for not idolaters and,we have not appointed you a watcher over them, neither are you their guardian. Abuse not those to who they pray, apart from God, otherwise, they will abuse God in revenge without knowledge. So, we have decked out fair to every community their deeds: then to their lord they shall return, and He will tell them what they have been doing.[6]

The Prophetic Example of Peaceful Coexistence:

The Prophet of Islam had formulated an important principle of peace. This principle took practical shape in the *Hijra* emigration. It was in adherence to this principle that the Prophet of Islam immigrated to Medina, leaving his hometown Mecca in the thirteen years of his prophet hood. The community *(Ummah)* that the Prophet established in Medina comprised not only Muslims but also the Jews who lived with them in Medina. The Prophet himself articulated and implemented the Quranic demand of peaceful co-existence with the followers of other faiths. The Prophet envisioned the Jews as being an important component of Medina community and outlined the rights and obligations of the Jews of Medina. The constitution states, "Whoever of the Jews follows us has the same help and support as the believer, so long as they are not wronged by him and he does not help the enemies of Muslim. The constitution also states the Jews of *Banu Áwf* are community along with the believers,tothe Jews their religion, and to the Muslims their religion. This applies both to their clients and to themselves, with the exception of anyone who has done wrong or acted treacherously; he brings evil only on himself and on his household" Another articles of the document states that between the Jews and Muslims is sincere friendship and honourable dealing, not treachery. There is help for the person wronged. Such terms indicates the basis of a pluralistic society that the Prophet envisioned, a society that fully implemented the Quranic pronouncement of peaceful coexistence with followers of other faiths.

The Concept of Mutual Respect in Quran:

Islam teaches us to respect every man who is good whatever his religion may be, and to be drawn towards merits and virtues whatever be the religion or race of the person who possesses them. All human beings were creatures of God. The Holy Quran emphasises that all the people have right to follow the religion of their own choice. In Islam, all human beings are brothers and sisters unto each other. Islam calls on people of different faiths to have mutual respect for each other on the basis of their common humanity while following their own religion.According to

Islam, the life of human being is a trust from God, irrespective of his or her ancestry, colour, or language. Humankind is the best of all creations[7]and is created of the best stature.[8]So, every human deserves respect by nature.

Religious Harmony in the light of Quran:

What the world needs today is an acceptable formula for the attainment of religious harmony. Religious pluralism is a historical fact. Religious pluralism is not only a hard fact but also necessity to maintain the dynamism and growth of a religious worldview.In this connection, one of the commands of the Quran is that, there is no compulsion is religion.[9]Another place Quran declares that "you have your religion and I have mine".[10]When the Prophet Mohammad migrated to Medina, he issued a declaration his acceptance of the religion of Muslims for the Muslim and the religion of Jews for the Jews.[11]This principle formulated by the Holy Quran is the best described not as religious harmony, but as harmony among religious people. A great example of this principle is found in the life of Prophet of Islam. It concerns the conference of three religions which was held in the Prophet's own mosque in Median. Mohammad Husain Haykal writes in his book, *The life of Mohammad:* "The three scriptural religious thus confronted one another in Medina. The delegation entered the prophet into public debate and these were soon joined by the Jews, thus resulting in a tripartite dialogue between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This was a truly great congress which the city of Yathrib had witnessed. In it the three religions which today dominate the world and determine its destiny had met, and they did so for the greatest idea and the noblest purpose."[12]In view of this historical reality, it is clear that the suggestions made by Islam as how to produce harmony among the different religions is the only viable solution. There are a number of similar verses in the Quran which make it quite plain that one's choice of religion or faith is wholly a matter of individual conscience.

Religious Freedom in Islam:

Religious freedom is not under attack in the Quran, but is actually upheld by it. Islam recognises complete freedom of religion and belief for every human being. The Hoy Quran excludes compulsion from the sphere of religion. It lays down in the clearest words: there is no compulsion in religion – the right way is indeed clearly distinct from error.[13]The Holy Quran has stipulated that all human humans were a single Ummah[14]and God has created them from a single man and a single woman and has divided them into various groups to know one another.[15]If God had wanted to create people with the same faith, He would have done that, but He had not done it on purpose.[16]The holy Quran has noted that there is no compulsion in accepting the religion[17]but also has specified that if God wanted, He could have made all people Muslims or believers[18] but God has decided to let them choose their way and also see the results.[19]He has ordered Prophet Mohammad that his duty is to spread the message of God and has no right to force people to

accept religion. Therefore, every person is responsible for his or her conduct and acts: if the people follow the right path they would have done justice to themselves and if they choose unwisely; they would harm their own cause.[20]God has told Prophet Mohammad that if people did not accept his invitation to faith, just to tell them that he will follow his own act and they will follow their own acts. This Quranic verse assesses that every person actions according to their own logic and every person will be naturally held accountable for what he has done.[21]Therefore Islam maintains that no person is allowed to force others into holding a certain faith, even if it is the best.[22]When Islam introduces itself as the best religion but does not impose this on others. Quran has noted that Islam is only religion acceptable to God[23] but also specifies that if followers of other faiths acted in their belief in God and did well. God will also reward them.[24]This verse considers a unique right for all humans which make way for peaceful coexistence of various religious groups.

Interfaith Dialogue in the light of Quran:

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

The amazing point about Islam is that even in the most dominant and most powerful time of Islamic sway, it is suggested that if Muslim enter a peace treaty with the followers of other religions should have lordship over others. Islam orders its followers that faith and religion is not imposable.[25]The Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) has no duty to be dominant over people's life, but only is entitled to reveal and explain the religion[26].God is kind to everyone and His mercy is for all humanity.[27]Inter- faith dialogue is today's necessity to restore peace, harmony in the world. Islam meets all the requirements, needed for inter-faith dialogue. Dialogue has not only been an important principle in Islam, but also Quran has also stipulated that it should be conducted in the best possible manner[28]and based on good argument.[29]God has mentioned frequent cases of

dialogue between His messengers and their opponents and has advised Prophet Mohammad P.B.U.H) to engage in dialogue with people.[30]The Prophet of Islam started his mission with dialogue and argument.[31]The profound study of the Holy Quran and tradition of Prophet, as he is living Quran, show that he considered dialogue the sole legitimate way for peaceful coexistence and to find solutions to social and political problems. Any dialogue should be based on common points and progress within the Quranic framework. Islam is synonymous with peace. It encourages its followers to explore every possible avenue for peaceful negotiation to sort out the conflicts. The Holy Quran appeals Muslims to engage in constructive dialogue with people of other faiths on the basis of what they have common in doing righteous deeds.

Tolerance in the light of Quran:

Islam is a tolerant and forward looking religion that calls the whole world towards itself and is also ready to tolerant all the religious beliefs of the world. While being aware of the truth of the falsehood people, Islam encourages its followers to mingle with them, live with them in peaceful manner, interact with them and share in their happiness and sorrow. Islam is a flexible religion. It encourages Muslims to covenant with non- Muslims, commerce with them, joint ownership and of properties and borrowing and lending with them. Tolerance has been the principle throughout the history of Islam. It has been one of the main underlying causes of its successful dissemination. The concept of Qur'anic tolerance extends protection not only to Muslims and the people of the book *(Ahl al- Kitab)* but even to strangers who openly declare idolatry. If one of the idolaters seeks protection, grant him protection so that he may hear the word of God.[32]This indicates clearly that Quran envisioned a diverse community that was united under common moral values. Human beings are to coexist in peace and harmony. Diversity and differences in faith were to be judged by God only since, Is not He (God) the best of judges.[33]

Universal Brotherhood in the light of Quran:

Islam is the first voice in the world which sent an invitation for universal brotherhood and unity. Islam always persuaded people to live with tolerance, harmony, love, brotherhood and peace on the earth adding that humanity is more precious than any of the religions. The prophet if Islam created a bond among Muslims that is superior to all bonds. A Muslim, whoever and where ever he is, is the brother of another Muslim and he has right over other. The Prophet said: "A Muslim is brother to a Muslim. Neither the wrongs him, nor hands him over". "Every Muslim's blood, property and honor are sacred to a Muslim."[34]All Muslims under the sky constitute a single body. Muslim may live in different geographical areas, speak different languages and practice a variety of socio-cultural customs yet they still follow the Islamic norm with regard to conduct their daily activities. The Quranic teaching proposes unity rather than conflict as the basis for social relations and mutual assistance. Islam makes all mankind one great

brotherhood and exhorts all of us to seek the path of peace through the righteousness and beneficence of our conduct towards each others. The Qu'ranic concept of universal brotherhood of mankind is also evident from the fact fact that the word "Muslim" has come only 42 times in the holy Qu'ran whereas the word "man" came 65 times furthermore the word "mankind" appeared as many as 240 times. This clearly shows that the welfare of the entire human kind is one of the principal concerns of Islam.

Conclusion:

India and other parts of the world are facing serious problems of extremism and intolerance whereas religious harmony and tolerance is the need of the day. Peaceful coexistence is one of the most important human ideals. Peace and harmony constitute the soul of Islam. The Holy Quran has laid the foundation of peace and has leveled the path to peaceful coexistence. The Holy Quran emphasizes that all the people have the right to follow the religion of their own choice. Islam calls on people of different faiths to have mutual respect for each other on the basis of their common humanity while following their own religions. The followers of various religions have learned that to adhere the Quranic teachings to live together like members of one big united family in the small village of this new age world.Needless to say that gaining this mutual understanding is much easy in modern days than it was in old era. Peaceful coexistence is the most basic and important need of the time. It is Islam that brought to the world the message of peaceful coexistence, not only in theory, but also in practice. Hence, Islam, in short is the science of strife-free living, supported by a factual history of peaceful co-existence. It seeks for peaceful coexistence and mutual tolerance between the people of different religions and cultures.

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