

Islam and social relations

Horizons



Wahiduddin Khan

lievers in Islam. The Prophet's behaviour towards the former was invariably that of respect and tolerance. At a time when the majority of the denizens of Mecca were still idolaters, his conduct consistently conveyed his high moral character. On the one hand, he communicated to them the message of tawheed with love and kindness and, on the other, fulfilled all of their human rights. That is why the non-Muslims of Mecca had such great confidence in him — to the point of entrusting their belongings to his care. This they continued to do right up to the last days of his stay in Mecca.

After the attainment of his prophethood, he lived in Mecca for a period of thirteen years, later migrating to Madina, where he lived for ten years until his death. For about half of this

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period in Madina, he was living among people belonging to three religions — Muslims, Jews and idolaters. The Prophet devised a constitution for these people, known in history as Sahifa-e-Madina (Madina Charter).

This charter expressly mentioned that issues concerning these three groups domiciled in Madina would be decided on the basis of their own religious traditions — those of Muslims according to their Islamic traditions, and those of idolaters and Jews according to their respective traditions. This principle of Islam was intended to apply at all places where Muslims lived along with adherents of other religions. This sunnat, or practice of the Prophet, for a plural society carries the same moral authority as other of his practices.

Islam recognises no difference between Muslims and non-Muslims from the ethical standpoint. The rights granted to a Muslim are exactly the same as those granted to a non-Muslim.

A tradition in Sahih al-Bukhari gives us a telling example of how this principle should in practice be followed. When the Prophet was in Madina, he saw a funeral procession passing along a street. The Prophet was seated at that time. On seeing it, the Prophet stood up in deference to the deceased person. One of his companions said: "O God's messenger, it was the funeral of a Jew (not a Muslim)." The Prophet replied: "Was he not a human being?"

This tradition of the Prophet of Islam tells us that every human being is worthy of respect. There might be differences between people in religion, culture and traditions but it is incumbent upon everyone to accord equal respect to others, as all men and women are creatures of one and the same God. All are descendants of Adam and Eve.

Everyone has certainly the right to adopt one religion according to his beliefs. But with that choice comes the ineluctable responsibility of giving respect in full measure to adherents of other faiths and, in the light of those faiths, giving them what is ethically their due.

What are the teachings of Islam on the subject of the multi-religious society? When Islam is studied with this question in mind, we find clear and consistent commandments for all social interaction. In chapter 109 of the Quran, the Prophet is enjoined to address non-Muslims thus: "I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your own religion, and I have mine."

This verse of the Quran, coupled with others of its teachings, amounts to an unambiguous and easily applicable formula for mutual respect. It means simply that all believers, whatever their elected religion, must have due reverence for the religions adhered to by others.

What establishes the need for such a formula is the edifice of religion being founded on the total conviction that it is the whole truth. To have any followers at all, a religion must carry that conviction. It is in the nature of things. But religious conviction alone is not a broad enough base on which to form a just society, particularly if that conviction is publicly expressed by different groups through the widely differing practices of different faiths.

In the multi-religious context, it also takes broadmindedness, compassion and fellow feeling. Only when in possession of these virtues can members of society display that tolerance in their dealings with others which will ensure a lasting peace.

The principle of mutual respect is a natural one and is to be found in all areas of civilised living. One of the major demands made by Islam is that this natural principle be upheld and acted upon by the adherents of different religions, so that societal structures may be strengthened by stable and enduring relationships.

For the greater part of his life, the Prophet of Islam lived in a society where adherents of other religions existed side by side with be-