On being Tolerant

by Abdur Rab

An earlier consolidated version of some sections of Abdur's book "Exploring Islam in a New Light [20]".

The Issue of Tolerance in Light of the Quran

The question whether Islam encourages tolerance has been in focus since September 11. Many think that Islam is a religion of intolerance and violence. However, if one looks at what the Quran actually states in this regard, this misreading about tolerance in Islam becomes crystal clear. The Quran is far above the current spate of terrorist acts, and inter-religious and sectarian violence. Indeed the quality of being tolerant is part and parcel of the right iman (mindset) and righteousness of a Muslim.

The significance of tolerance should become evident if we perceive the essential role of religion for man. Religion is for creation of an enabling and conducive environment for all men and women to pursue spiritual development, including supportive material development. In such an environment, there is need for full respect for human dignity and for equal treatment of all human beings irrespective of race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other similar status. Man needs to be freed from slavery, serfdom, and indignity, liberated from poverty, deprivation and ignorance, and guaranteed justice, security, peace, and equal and non-discriminatory treatment by others in society. In such a context, tolerance plays a very important role. It is various forms of prejudice and intolerance, religious or other, that lead to all kinds of discrimination – racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance - in society, which in turn often manifests itself in, beside unjust discrimination, violent religious and ethnic conflicts, and inhuman and barbarous acts of oppression, murder and other atrocities.

Prejudice is a mean mentality. Prejudice is akin to, and leads to, intolerance. “To hate a man because he was born in another country, because he speaks a different language, or that he takes a different view on this subject or that, is a great folly.”[1] Intolerance or prejudice based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other similar status does great harm to social harmony and development. Religion does not encourage prejudice. For example, it is wrong to say, as many seem to suggest, that Islam permits treating women as inferior to men. There is no basis for such thinking (See below for elaboration). Likewise, it can be concluded that there is no room for other kinds of prejudice in religion, since all that really matters for a man or a woman is righteousness (right or good deeds) [The Quran, Baqarah (2): 62; Maidah (5): 69]. Getting the iman right thus requires that one should get rid of all kinds of prejudice.

With the progress of human civilization and the end of the colonial era, man and society have made important advances towards tolerance. According to a recent United Nations report, the international community has made some notable progress in this direction in the recent past, including and starting from, the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since then national and international laws have been enacted and numerous international human rights instruments, including particularly a treaty to ban racial discrimination, have been adopted. Progress also includes the defeat of apartheid in South Africa.[2] Yet acts of intolerance, including acts of religious and ethnic violence, continue unabated, and slavery and slavery-like practices still exist in parts of the world. A further United Nations description of such problems is worth citing:

“Despite continuing efforts by the international community, racial discrimination, ethnic conflicts and widespread violence persist in various parts of the world. In recent years, the world has witnessed campaigns of ‘ethnic cleansing’. Racial minorities, migrants, asylum seekers and indigenous peoples are persistent targets of intolerance. Millions of human beings continue to encounter discrimination solely due to the color of their skin or other factors that indicate the race to which they belong.”[3]

Since the nineteen thirties, the world remembers some of the darkest episodes of history marked by appalling and barbarous acts of oppression, genocide and massive human displacements such as the Holocaust, the genocides in Rwanda and Cambodia, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, and the long-running human tragedies in the Darfur region of Sudan.[4] Also disconcertingly, religious intolerance manifesting itself in the emergence of hostile acts and violence against certain communities, notably against the Jewish, Muslim and Arab communities, because of their religious beliefs and their racial or ethnic origin – outward expressions of what have now-a-days come to be known as ‘anti-Semitism’ and ‘Islamophobia’ – is still continuing in various parts of the world, which in particular limit their right to freely practice their belief. “Although the great civil rights battles of the 1960s ended segregation in the United States, the lot of black Americans is still a delicate and difficult issue.”[5] One American Muslim writer notes that though Christianity has similar universal claims as those of Islam, and though segregation in the form of existence of churches exclusively for whites or blacks has been formally ended in America, “informal, habitual and perhaps ideological” segregation still persists, and “racial discrimination and segregation” on the basis of the color of the skin still remains to be completely eliminated.[6] Also, there are hate sites on the Internet promoting intolerance and xenophobia. All this is despite the fact that in recent years great awareness has been created, and some action-oriented measures have been taken at international and national levels to stem the tide of intolerance worldwide.[7]

Islam is a religion of peace, tolerance and compassion. Unfortunately, it is because of the activities of some extremist groups that Islam is being viewed by many as an intolerant and violent creed. In fact, there is no room for human discrimination and intolerance in Islam on the basis of race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other similar status. All men and women are equal in the eyes of God; only virtuousness determines who is nearer to Him [Imran (3): 195; Nisa (4): 124; Nahl (16): 97; Ahzab (33): 35]. All the children of Adam – all men and women - deserve the same dignity:

“And verily We have bestowed honor on the children of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favors, above a great part of Our creation.” [Bani Israel or Israa (17): 70]

While racial discrimination or that on the basis of color has existed in its stark form well into the twentieth century in some parts of the world – notable examples: apartheid in South Africa and segregation in the United States, and though some vestiges of such discrimination are still to be found, Islam never approved such discrimination and banished it ever since its birth.

Although traditionally women have been treated as inferior to men among Muslims, Islam never approved such discrimination. The Quran clearly states that women have rights over men similar to those of men over women [Baqarah (2): 228]. In God’s sight, it is only righteousness that counts - not sex [Imran (3): 195; Hujurat (49): 13]; Nisa (4): 124; Nahl (16): 97]. Also, man and woman can excel each other in various qualities [Nisa (4): 32]. One of these verses reads as follows:

"…Never do I cause the work of any to be lost, be ye male or female – ye are one from another. …" [Imran (3): 195]

The expression "ye are one from another" meaning "members of the same family" in this verse, which recurs in the Quran, is also usually taken as a reminder to men that women are of the same human status as themselves. Nor is there any rationale for discrimination on the basis of any religion in name [Baqarah (2): 62; Maidah (5): 69]. For that matter, no other reason, e.g., wealth or property, strength in manpower, or status or power in society, is of any value to God [Tauba or Baraat (9): 55, 69; Yunus (10): 58, 88-89; Qasas (28): 76-81; Rum (30): 39; Saba (34): 37; Zukhruf (43): 32-35; Lahab (111): 2]. Thus human rights abuses that are found to have been committed from time to time by governments or ethnic groups are objects that deserve strong condemnation from Islam. The Quran categorically forbids us to do any wrongs to others:

"And wrong not men of their things (or rights), and act not corruptly in the earth, making mischief." [Shu'ara (26): 181-183]

The Quran strongly exhorts Muslims to uphold the cause of justice, if necessary by testifying against themselves, parents and relatives [Nisa (4): 135], and not to let the hatred (by implication, enmity or injustice) of others make them commit any injustice [Maidah (5): 8]. This call for upholding justice is essentially a call for tolerance as well.

One of the Quranic verses, which points out the futility of human discrimination on the basis of wealth or manpower, reads as follows:

"It is not your wealth, nor your sons, that will bring you nearer unto us in degree, but only those who believe and do good – these are the ones for whom there is a two-fold reward for their deeds, and they will dwell secure in lofty places." [Saba (34): 37]

Also the Quran unequivocally proclaims that there must be no coercion in religion. The following verses are well worth noting:

"There is no compulsion in religion." [Baqarah (2): 256] … *"And if thy Lord had willed, verily all who are in the earth would have believed together. Wouldst thou (O Muhammad) then force them till they become believers?"* [Yunus (10): 99]

"Say: 'O disbelievers! I worship not that which ye worship; nor ye worship that which I worship. And I will not worship that which ye worship; nor will ye worship that which I worship. Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion." [Kafirun (109): 1-6]

"We are best aware of what they say, and thou (O Muhammad) art in no way a compeller over them. But warn them by the Quran him who feareth My threat." [Kahf (50): 45] … "Therefore do thou remind, for thou art only to remind. Thou art not at all a watchman over them." [Gashiya (88): 21-22]

Verse [Yunus (10): 99] above and other related verses in the Quran such as those at [Hujurat (49): 13] that refer to the creation of mankind into diverse nations and tribes and at [Maidah (5): 48] that refers to different laws and ways being given by God to different peoples also explicitly recognize the diversity of people on earth and underscore the need for, and the importance of, inter-communal tolerance. These last two verses are worth reproducing below:

"O mankind! We created you of a male and a female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may come to know one another. Verily the most honored of you, in the sight of God, is the most righteous." [Hujurat (49): 13]

“For each of you We have prescribed a law and a way. Had God willed He could have made you one community, but that he may try you by that which He hath given you. So vie ye one with another in good works.” [Maidah (5): 48]

The Prophet Muhammad was advised by God to strictly maintain cordiality in his preaching; and he was advised not to revile those to whom other religious people pray beside God lest they should revile God through ignorance, as eventually they might be able to know the truth:

“Invite unto the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation; and argue with them in the best possible manner. Thy Lord knoweth best who strayeth from His path, and He knoweth best who receiveth guidance.” [Nahl (16): 125] … *“And argue not with the People of the Book except in a way that is best, unless it be with those of them who do wrong, but say: ‘We believe in that which hath been revealed unto us and revealed unto you; our God and your God is One, and unto Him we submit.”* [Ankabut (29): 46]

“And bear with (O Muhammad!) what they say, and part from them in a nice manner.” [Muzammil (73): 10]

“Revile not those unto whom they pray beside God lest they wrongfully revile God through ignorance. Thus unto every nation have We made their deed seem fair. Then unto their Lord is their return, and He will inform them what they used to do.” [An’am (6): 108]

As noted Islamic scholar Abou El Fadl aptly points out, some of the Quranic verses explicitly exhorting Muslims to turn way from those who are ignorant, disbelievers, or who engage in idle talks while wishing them “salam” or peace at the same time in essence “emphasize the need not just for interreligious tolerance, but for cooperative moral ventures that seek to achieve Godliness on earth.”[8] These verses are worth citing below:

“And the slaves of the Beneficent (God) are those who walk on the earth with modesty, and when the ignorant address them, they say: Salam (Peace).” [Furqan (25): 63]

“And when they hear idle talk, they turn away from it and say: ‘Unto us our deeds, and unto you yours; salam (peace) be on you; we seek not the ignorant.’” [Qasas (28): 55] … “So turn away from them and say: ‘Salam (Peace), for they will (soon) come to know.’” [Zukhruf (43): 89]

The Prophet was urged to hold on to forgiveness and ignore the ignorant and thus to be tolerant to others even if they did not listen to his call [A’raf (7): 198-199]. He was urged to grant refuge or protection to the Pagans, who were idolaters, if they sought such protection: “If anyone amongst the Pagans asketh thee (O Muhammad) for asylum, grant it to him, so that he may hear the Word of God, and then escort him to where he can be secure; that is because they are a folk who know not.” [Tauba or Baraat (9): 6] The Quran thus provides clear and unambiguous instructions to Muslims for tolerance of other faiths and views and advice to them to be helpful to non-Muslims in case they need help.

According to noted scholar on Islam John Esposito, *“Despite the recent example of the Taliban in Afghanistan and sporadic conflicts between Muslims and Christians in Sudan, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Indonesia, theologically and historically Islam has a long record of tolerance.”* He further notes:

“Historically, while the early expansion and conquests spread Islamic rule, Muslims did not try to impose their religion on others or force them to convert. As "People of the Book," Jews and Christians were regarded as protected people (dhimmi), who were permitted to retain and practice their religions, be led by their own religious leaders, and be guided by their own

religious laws and customs. For this protection, they paid a poll or head tax (jizya). While by modern standards this treatment amounted to second-class citizenship in premodern times, it was very advanced. No such tolerance existed in Christendom, where Jews, Muslims, and other Christians (those who did not accept the authority of the pope) were subjected to forced conversion, persecution, or expulsion. Although the Islamic ideal was not followed everywhere and at all times, it existed and flourished in many contexts."[9]

Also worthy of note, as many writers of Islam point out, is the historical example of the Prophet Muhammad setting a precedent of peaceful and cooperative inter-religious relations in Medina among Muslims, Christians and Jews.

This is, of course, not to deny, exonerate or slight at all the regrettable history of internecine strife within the Muslim ummah (community) itself ever since Islam's early history after the Prophet's death, the multiple divisions that took place among Muslims despite the Quranic admonition against such divisions, and the continuing saga of intermittent clashes between Muslims on the one hand and Christians, Hindus and Jews on the other in various countries[10], and most importantly the heinous terrorist acts being conducted by extremist Muslim organizations such as the al Qaeda and other groups against innocent civilians in many countries. Esposito further notes that in recent years acts of intolerance among Muslim groups, and between Muslims and non-Muslim groups have rather increased due, in significant part, to a resurgence or revivalism of Islam [albeit in its orthodox form].[11] Minority religious groups in Muslim countries such as Christians in the Sudan, Pakistan and Nigeria, Christian Copts in Egypt, Hindus in Bangladesh, Bahais and Jews in Iran, Ahmadiyas (followers of Ghulam Ahmad Qadiani) in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and Quranists (who believe in the Quran alone and not in the traditions) in Egypt are particularly vulnerable and are being subjected to humiliation, harassment, torture and killing. Ahmed Mansour gives a graphic account of humiliation, imprisonment or torture of himself, his extended family members and his fellow Quranists in Egypt.[12] It is obvious the Quran strongly disapproves such acts.

Also worthy of note is the fact that the September 11, 2001 attacks and the subsequent terrorist acts of the extremist groups in several countries such as Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Morocco, Spain, the United Kingdom, Egypt and Jordan have put the minority Muslims living in Western societies in a very delicate situation, which not only requires Muslims to revisit the tolerance issue in a new light, but which also puts a special responsibility on the shoulders of the governments of those societies to avoid intolerance and discriminatory treatment against Muslims. In the aftermath of the 9/11, there has been considerable backlash against Muslims in the United States and Europe. Contemporary American Muslim writer Muqtedar Khan, who emphasizes the role of ijtihad (independent thinking or interpretation) in Islam and has written promoting compassionate understanding of religion and interfaith tolerance and understanding, notes that there have been "many nasty episodes" and surfacing of "large-scale anti-Muslim prejudice" in the United States, despite the call for tolerance by President George Bush and members of his staff.[13] Officially, Muslims, especially from the Arab and Muslim worlds, have been subjected to special scrutiny and discrimination at border crossings and airports. But such treatment may backfire. As one journalist writer has aptly commented, when members of a community are feeling they are being unfairly treated by the society they are part of, this has the inherent danger of engendering "resentment, alienation and, possibly antisocial conduct".[14]

The Quran permits avenging any wrong done to a person in the like manner, but at the same time encourages forgiveness in lieu of revenge, as forgiveness helps a person expiate his sin:

"And We prescribed for them (the Children of Israel) therein (in the Torah): Life for life, and the eye for the eye, and the nose for the nose, and the ear for the ear, and the tooth for the

tooth, and (like) retaliation for wounds; but whoever forgoeth (forgiveth) it, it shall be expiation for him. Whoever judge not by that which God hath revealed are wrongdoers." [Maidah (5): 45] … "The recompense of an ill-deed is an ill the like thereof. But whoever forgiveth and mendeth (his own conduct), his reward is (ensured) from God; verily (He) loveth not the wrongdoers." [Shura (42): 40] … *"If ye punish, then punish with the like of that wherewith ye were afflicted. But if ye endure patiently, that is indeed the best for those who are patient."* [Nahl (16): 126]

What could be a better appeal for tolerance? The Quran has urged similar generosity and forgiveness in several other verses [Baqarah (2): 263; Imran (3): 134; A'raf (7): 198-199; Shura (42): 43; Jathyia (45): 14]. It is a well-known historical fact that the Prophet Muhammad set a glorious precedent of tolerance when he and the Muslims accompanying him triumphantly marched into Mecca in 630 A.D. without any significant bloodshed or harm to the inhabitants who had earlier fought with the Muslims. According to the Historian Grunebaum, "The resistance of a small group of Quraish was quickly dispelled … the revolution was effected remarkably leniently … even the most extremist leaders were shown mercy. Looting was forbidden."[15] Such political and religious tolerance in treatment of who were archenemies before has no parallel in history. It is indeed a great irony that we still find Sunnis and Shiites fighting one another in countries inhabited by them, causing loss of many innocent lives and immense misery and suffering to many others due to their intolerant sectarian strife.[16]

God considers life as sacred and forbids taking any life except by way of justice [An'am (6): 151]. He characterizes the killing of a human being without any legitimate reason as like the killing of all mankind, and the saving of a human being as like the saving of all mankind:

"For that reason (because of the killing of one son of Adam by another for no good reason) We decreed for the Children of Israel that whoever slayeth a soul for other than manslaughter or mischief in the land, it is as though he slayeth all mankind; and whoever saveth the life of one, it is as though he saveth the life of all mankind." [Maidah (5): 32]

There are some misgivings about Islam among some circles that it authorizes the killing of other religious people. A part of a Quranic verse is cited in support of this wrong contention, which is reproduced as follows:

"And slay them wherever ye find them …" [Baqarah (2): 191]

Regrettably, however, this citing of a Quranic verse without citing the full context is a mischievous misrepresentation of the Quranic message! The full context makes it abundantly clear that such slaying is sensible only when the Muslims are at war with a non-Muslim group. The verses giving this full context are as follows:

"Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but initiate not aggression. Verily God loveth not aggressors. And slay them wherever ye find them, and drive them out of the places wherefrom they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter. And fight not with them at the Sacred Mosque until they first attack you there, but if they attack you (there), then slay them. Such is the reward of disbelievers. But if they desist, then verily God is Ever Forgiving, Most Merciful. And fight them until there is no more persecution, and religion is for God. But if they desist, let there be no hostility except against the wrongdoers." [Baqarah (2): 190-193]

There are other verses in the Quran, which are often cited by critics to suggest that Islam is not so tolerant to other religions. These are verses at [Tauba or Baraat (9): 5 and 29]:

"When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush." [Tauba or Baraat (9): 5]

"Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by God and His Apostle, nor hold the religion of truth of the People of the Book," [Tauba or Baraat (9): 29]

Again, these are citations from the Quran without the full context in which they were revealed and they thus miss or distort the correct message of the Quran. The cited first verse at [Tauba or Baraat (9): 5] is followed by a statement in the same verse:

"But if they repent and establish worship and pay the zakah, then leave their way free, for God is Ever Forgiving and Most Merciful."

Notably, this is also followed by another verse, which exhorts the Prophet Muhammad to provide protection or asylum to idolaters who seek such protection [Tauba or Baraat (9): 6].

The second verse at [Tauba or Baraat (9): 29] cited above is also followed by a statement:

"Until they pay zijya (the poll tax) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued."

Critics point out, however, that the idea of a special poll tax to be paid by disbelievers living in a Muslim territory to the Muslim rulers is in itself a form of religious discrimination and intolerance. However, as noted Muslim scholar Abou El Fadl points out, such a levy should be understood in a historical context when *"it was common inside and outside of Arabia to levy poll taxes against alien groups."* The tax was in return for protection of the disbelievers. He cites the example of a case of return of the poll tax by the second Caliph Omar to an Arab Christian tribe when it could not be protected from Byzantine aggression. During Omar's time, he allowed the Christian tribes to pay zakah instead of the zijyathat they regarded as degrading. Abou El Fadl further notes that the Prophet Muhammad did not collect the poll tax from all non-Muslim tribes, and that he in fact paid periodic sums of money or goods to many non-hostile non-Muslim tribes. "In short," he further notes, "there are various indicators that the poll tax is not a theologically mandated practice, but a functional solution that was adopted as a response to a particular set of historical circumstances. Only an entirely ahistorical reading of the text could conclude that it is an essential element in a divinely sanctioned program of subordinating the nonbeliever."[17]

Also importantly, the above-mentioned verses should be understood only in the context of a war situation where Muslims are urged to fight only for defensive purposes, i.e., to fight against only those who fight with the Muslims, and not to initiate aggression, as God does not love the aggressors [Baqarah (2): 190-193]. Indeed, as Karen Armstrong aptly notes,

"During the ten years between the hijra and his death in 632 Muhammad and his first Muslims were engaged in a desperate struggle for survival against his opponents in Medina and the Quraysh of Mecca, all of whom were ready to exterminate the ummah. In the West, Muhammad has often been presented as a warlord, who imposed Islam on a reluctant world by force of arms. The reality was quite different; Muhammad was fighting for his life, was evolving a theology of the just war in the Koran with which most Christians would agree, and never forced anybody to convert to religion. Indeed the Koran is clear that there is to be 'no compulsion in religion.' In the Koran war is held to be abhorrent; the only just war is a war of self-defense. Sometimes it is necessary to fight in order to preserve decent values, as Christians believed it necessary to fight against Hitler."[18]

In some other verses, the Quran clearly advises the Muslims fighting non-Muslims to opt for peace when the enemies want peace, and not to worry about the possibility that the enemies may deceive them thereby:

"And if they (the enemies fighting you) incline to peace, then incline to it, and trust in God, for verily He is Hearing, Knowing. And if they intend to deceive you, then verily God is sufficient for you. He it is Who strengthened you with His help and with the believers." [Anfal (8): 62-63]

How clear are these verses! God forbids us to begin aggression, and He does not love the aggressors. And He exhorts the fighting Muslims to desist from fighting with the disbelievers when they cease hostilities and persecution. He advises the fighting Muslims to seek peace when the enemies seek peace. And the Quran strongly condemns persecution, as it characterizes persecution as worse than slaughter [See also Baqarah (2): 217]. Also note that God authorizes us to attack others in the like manner as the others attack [Baqarah (2): 194; Hajj (22): 60]. As noted above, the Quran rather encourages us, where possible, to condone and forgive, which is considered still better [Maidah (5): 45; A'raf (7): 198-199; Shura (42): 40, 43; Jathyia (45): 14, Muzammil (73): 10]. Thus far from encouraging intolerance, the Qura'n clearly advocates peace, tolerance, peaceful and compassionate co-existence.

Also note that, citing some Quranic verse, some allege that Islam discourages Muslims to make friends with the people of other religions. Again, this is another classic example of misgivings based on citation of a Quranic verse out of context. The Quran does not discourage making friends with the people of other religions, unless such people can be identified as real foes. Note the following verses:

"It may be that God will ordain love between you and those of them with whom ye are at enmity. God is All-Powerful, and God is Ever Forgiving, Most Merciful. God forbiddeth you not those who fought not against you on account of your religion, and drove you not out from your homes, that ye show them kindness and deal justly with them. Verily God loveth the just dealers. God forbiddeth you only those who fought against you on account of your religion and have driven you out from your homes and helped to drive you out, that ye make friends of them. Whoever maketh friends of them are wrongdoers." [Mumtahana (60): 7-9]

These verses make it amply clear that making friendship with people of other religions is not intolerable in Islam, unless such people have proved themselves to be enemies of Muslims.

Also, as mentioned above, the Quran unequivocally forbids and denounces any acts of mischief, violence or terrorism. Some of the relevant verses may be noted as follows:

"Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, and help not one another in sin and transgression; and be careful (of your duty) to God. Verily God is stern in punishment." [Maidah (5): 2] … "And do not make mischief in the earth, after it hath been set in order…" [A'raf (7): 56] … *"So remember the bounties of God and do no evil, making mischief in the earth."* [A'raf (7): 74]

"And those who violate the covenant of God after ratifying it, and sever that which God hath commanded to be joined, and who make mischief in the earth, for them is the curse, and for them is the terrible abode." [Ra'd (13): 25]

"And wrong not mankind of their right things (of rights), and do no evil, making mischief in the earth." [Shura (26): 183] … *"Then, is it to be expected of you, if ye were put in authority, that ye will do corruption in the land, and sever your ties of kinship? Such are the men whom God hath cursed, for He hath made them deaf and blinded their eyes."* [Muhammad (47): 22-23]

From the foregoing discussion it is quite clear that, far from encouraging violence and terrorism, Islam advocates peace, tolerance and peaceful co-existence with other religious communities. Hence nurturing a tolerant attitude to others is an important part of righteousness. However as noted below, it is the Hadith literature that contains many texts, which misguide Muslims and lead them to commit violent and other acts of intolerance against other religious groups. However, a proper understanding of Islam must rule out such hadith texts as not representing Islam or its Prophet.[19]

The Hadith Encourages Religious Intolerance, Violence and Terror

Despite the clear Quranic advice to the contrary, the Hadith encourages offensive wars, intolerance, violence and terror. References to some of the hadith texts that illustrate this point are provided below.

There are several hadith texts originating from Abdullah bin Abi Aufa that show Paradise as under the shades of swords (Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 4, Book 52, # 73, 210, 266l). Such a statement may not be particularly objectionable, if it is specifically meant for and addressed to fighters fighting a just war, but as a general statement it sounds rather belligerent, a sentiment which apparently has played and is still playing a role in encouraging aggressive campaigns by Muslims against other communities. Some hadith texts preach particularly anti-Semitic sentiment, where Muslims are urged to fight and kill the Jews wherever they are. The hadith below is worth citing:

Narrated Abu Huraira: "Allah's Apostle said, ‘You (i.e. Muslims) will fight with the Jews till some of them will hide behind stones. The stones will (betray them) saying, 'O 'Abdullah (i.e. slave of Allah)! There is a Jew hiding behind me; so kill him.' " (Sahih Bukhari, Volume 4, Book 52, Number 176)

A similar hadith at Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 4, Book 52, # 177 says that the Hour (the eventual hour of Qiamat) will not be established until Muslims fight with Jews and they kill the Jew hiding behind a stone. There is a similar hadith also against the Turks (Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 4, Book 52, # 179).

Still other hadith texts show that the Prophet ordered acts of atrocities and violence against the enemies. The hadith text narrated by Ibn Umar at Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 4, Book 52, # 263 states that the Prophet burned the date-palms of Bani an-Nadir. Another hadith narrated by Al-Bara bin Azib states that the Prophet sent a group of men to kill Abu-Rafi, a merchant of Hijaj; Abdullah bin Atik entered his house at night and killed him while he was sleeping (Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 4, Book 52, # 264, 265). Look at another venomous hadith text:

Narrated 'Ikrima: Some Zanadiqa (atheists) were brought to 'Ali and he burnt them. The news of this event, reached Ibn 'Abbas who said, "If I had been in his place, I would not have burnt them, as Allah's Apostle forbade it, saying, 'Do not punish anybody with Allah's punishment (fire).' I would have killed them according to the statement of Allah's Apostle, 'Whoever changed his Islamic religion, then kill him.'" (Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 9, Book 84, # 57; a similar text also at Vol. 4, Book 52, # 260)

Is it believable that a highly pious companion and son-in-law of the Prophet such as Ali could burn some people? How is it believable that the Prophet said that if a Muslim discards his religion, he could be killed? Such hadith texts must be utter lies attributed to the good names of the Prophet and his close associates. The Quran nowhere speaks of punishing the renegades or apostates in such a manner; it clearly proclaims that there is no coercion in religion.

A narration attributed to Ali states that he heard the Prophet saying, "In the last days (of the world) there will appear young people with foolish thoughts and ideas. They will give good talks, but they will go out of Islam as an arrow goes out of its game, their faith will not exceed their throats. So, wherever you find them, kill them, for there will be a reward for their killers on the Day of Resurrection." (Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 6, Book 61, # 577; repeated at Vol. 9, Book 84, # 64) Needless to say, this is a horrible provocative statement falsely attributed to the good name of Ali that goes against the Quran.

Still another narration from Abu Burda recounts the story of a Jew being killed, because he converted to Islam and then reverted to Judaism (Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 9, Book 84, # 58). Still another hadith suggests that Ali killed some people among those to whom the Prophet was distributing alms, but who were accusing the Prophet as unjust (Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 9, Book 84, # 67)

Such hadith texts could not be those of the Prophet. They clearly encourage religious intolerance, violence and terror. Not surprisingly, it is from such hadith texts that the extremist groups among Muslims get their inspiration for committing intolerant, violent and terrorist acts against other communities in various parts of the world.

[1] Einstein, Albert, The Human Side, 1979, op. cit., p. 70-71.

[2] United Nations (United Nations Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)), Report of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, (held in Durban, during 31 August - 8 September 2001), January 25, 2002.

[3] The UN report cited at the preceding endnote.

[4] Some of the worst human tragedies and crimes against humanity of the last century include the Holocaust during the nineteen thirties and forties, the world's largest and most gruesome genocide, which involved, in addition to torture, killing of more than 6 million people, mostly Jews – extermination of some two thirds of the Jews of Europe - by the Nazis; the Cambodian genocide of 1975-1979, in which approximately 1.7 million people lost their lives (21% of the country's population); mass killings in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in 1971 by the Pakistan army; and those in East Timor in 1979-80 involving killing of over one fifth of its population; the Rwanda genocide in 1994 involving killing of nearly I million, mainly of the Tutsis by the Hutus; Hindu Muslim communal riots in undivided British India just prior to its independence and partition in 1947 involving arson, mass human slaughter and massive human displacements; ethnic cleansing in Bosnia; and the long-running civil war and ethnic cleansing in the Darfur region of Sudan involving genocide, torture and massive human displacements. As reported by the Wall Street Journal Online Edition (dated April 21, 2005), since 2003, government-backed militias have waged a campaign against rebels (Christians and non-Arab Muslims) in the Darfur region of Sudan, resulting in at least 180,000 deaths and leaving more than two million people homeless. In the course of their counter-insurgency, they have been accused of committing all manner of atrocities, including murder, rape and the destruction of villages. Despite recent peace efforts with ceasefire, atrocities against displaced persons put in camps and against aid workers are still continuing.

[5] Statement of Rev. Jesse Jackson at Durban Racism Conference on August 30, 2001, the day before the start of a U.N. conference against racism.

[6] Khan, M.A. Muqtedar, American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom, Amana Publications, 2002, pp. 67-68.

[7] Reference may be made of the United Nations Report cited in Endnote 2, which mentions the actions that were taken before, and the follow-up actions that are being taken afterward.

[8] Fadl, Khaled Abou El, The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists, HarperSan Francisco, A Division of Harper Collins Publishers, New York , 2005, p. 209.

[9] Esposito, John L., What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 70-71. A summarized version is available in the Internet under the title “Ten Things Everyone Needs to Know about Islam.”

[10] Where, as Esposito rightly notes, the blame for such clashes cannot always be pinned down or put on Muslims. See Esposito in the previous endnote.

[11] Esposito, John L., Islam – The Straight Path, Oxford University oppress, 1992, p. 192, the expression in parentheses is mine. He writes: “In recent years, tensions and clashes between Muslim and non-Muslim communities have increased: the Copts in Egypt, Bahai and Jews in Iran, Chinese in Malaysia, and Christians in the Sudan, Pakistan, and Nigeria. The creation of more Islamically oriented societies, especially the introduction of Islamic laws, has resulted in varying degrees of tension, conflict, violence, and killing in the name of religion. For militant Muslims, Christian minorities are often seen as those who cooperated with colonial powers, benefited from their protection, and were the fruit of Christian missions. The Bahai of Iran and the Ahmadiyya of Pakistan, on the other hand, are regarded as apostates or heretics who rejected and broke away from Islam.” Ibid, p. 192.

[12] Ahmed Subhy Mansour, “Islamic Tolerance: a Comparison Between Egypt and America,” website: www.islamicpluralism.org/texts/2005t/islamictolerance.htm. Also see his “Outline of twenty five years of persecution in Egypt”, website: http://free-minds.org/ahmad_mansour/main.htm.

[13] Khan, M.A. Muqtedar, 2002, op. cit., p. 38.

[14] Taken from American writer George Melloan, “Making Muslims Part of the Solution”, the Wall Street Journal, issue of March 29, 2005.

[15] Only a handful of people were executed due to breach of law. A few rich men were persuaded to make a contribution to compensate the poorer followers who were deprived of the booty. See G.E. von Grunebaum, Classical Islam: A History 600-1258, (Translation by Katherine Watson), Barnes and Noble Books, 1996, originally published in 1970 by Aldine Publishing Company 1970, op. cit., p. 44.

[16] Incidents of such sectarian strife, violence and killing have been recurrent notably in Pakistan, and more recently and markedly in Iraq.

[17] Fadl, Khaled Abou El et. el, The Place of Tolerance in Islam, Beacon Press, Boston, 2002, pp. 21-22.

[18] Armstrong, Karen, A History of God, Gramercy Books, New York, 1993, pp. 155-156.

[19] One hadith text refers to a killing of a sleeping man in his house by a group of Muslims sent by the Prophet (Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 4, Book 52, # 264, 265), and another text encourages Muslims to kill youths with foolish thoughts and ideas (Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 6, Book 61, # 577; repeated at Vol. 9, Book 84, # 64). There are also texts that are clearly anti-semitic. The Hadith also prescribes that apostates should be punished with killing. Examples of these hadith texts are provided in the section following. All these hadiths are contradictory to what the Quran states.

[20] http://www.iuniverse.com/bookstore/BookDetail.aspx?BookId=SKU-000063556