

Tolerant Islam

Islam

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The Nation

BY LT GEN (RETD) KHALID MAQBOOL

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In the wake of 9/11 and subsequent acts of violence committed by some religious extremists Islam is being perceived as an intolerant religion that does not believe in peaceful co-existence with other religions and cultures. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Islam was born in a multireligious society and both logically and realistically cannot be intolerant.

The very genesis and philosophy of Islam is founded on the respect for humanity and all the religions. The unity of the origin of mankind is fundamental to Islam. In the first verse of Surah Al-Nisa, Quran says: "O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul."

There is another misconception that Islam abrogates and denies the earlier religions. The reality is that Islam continues and confirms the truth revealed through Prophet Abraham and the prophets who came after him. Quran says: "And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a watcher over it."

Islam does not impose itself upon anyone. It respects the rights of the people belonging to other religions and believes in co-existence. Quran is very explicit when it says: "There is no compulsion in (professing any) religion". Quran allows Christians to live by their faith and says: "Let the people of Gospel judge by that which Allah has revealed therein, for he who judges not by that which Allah has revealed is a sinner".

Similarly, Quran exhort Jews to live by the laws revealed to them in Torah. Therefore, religious tolerance is the hallmark of Islam. The conduct of Holy Prophet (PBUH) in the city State of Madina is a splendid manifestation of peaceful co-existence of Islam with other religions and cultures. The city State of Madina had its socio-political foundation built on the Charter of Madina - a document signed by more than 44 representatives of local Jewish, Christians, Pagans and other tribes. This Charter, which incidentally is the first written constitution of the world laid the edifice of a multi religious society based on principles of equality and justice. The Charter was a social contract that guaranteed internal freedom and autonomy to the people of various religions in deciding their affairs in accordance with their own customs and shariah. The Charter made Muslims responsible for the protection of life, property and honour of all the citizens irrespective of caste, creed, colour and race.

Then the charter the Prophet (pbuh) granted to the Christian monks of Sinai in the year 628 C.E. (Common Era), is a marvelous reflection of respect and religious freedom enjoyed by the Christians in his times.

The spirit of tolerance and the principle of co-

welfare even on his death bed. The long will dictated for his successor, inter alia, said: "I instruct you on behalf of the people who have been given protection in the name of Allah and His Prophet [i.e. the minorities]. Our covenant to them must be fulfilled, we must fight to protect them, and they must not be burdened beyond their capabilities".

Let me now move on to the concept and philosophy of jihad that is unfortunately misunderstood not only by the non-Muslims but also by some of the Muslims. Jihad is not synonymous with war. It literally means struggle. This meaning of jihad has a wide connotation ranging from inward spiritual struggle to attain perfect faith to an outward material struggle to promote justice and eradicate oppression from the society. The fight against the forces of evil within one cell is the supreme form of jihad.

In Quran there is no concept of war of aggression, territorial expansion and the seeking of power. *Kita* which is only one form of jihad is allowed only to defend against aggression and protect rights of the oppressed, irrespective of the creed they belong to. This position has been accepted even by the enlightened Western authors. Karen Armstrong in her biography of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) writes: "Fighting in warfare might sometimes be necessary but it was only a minor part of the whole Jihad or struggle."

Quran is unequivocal in clarifying this concept when it says: "For had it not been for Allah's repelling some men by means of others, cloisters and churches and oratories and mosques, wherein the name of Allah is often mentioned, would assuredly have been pulled down."

Islam does not tolerate the irresponsible destructiveness that is terrorism. Such acts are irreligious and run counter to Islamic practice just as they run counter to the practice of Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism etc. In his farewell sermon the Prophet

right of the weak and the disadvantaged segments of the society. Islam strives to remove the sufferings of not only the mankind but that of animals and plants as well.

Long before the discovery of the New World, Muslim civilization was a melting pot of cultures and races. It is no romanticism to recall that the Muslim world was a place that offered assylum to the people fleeing from religious and intellectual persecution in their own lands. Jews who then had no homeland of theirs were always welcomed in Muslim controlled lands.

Abbasids in particular had a multitude of scholars from other religions. Muslim Spain and Turkey were no less behind. If Muslims look back at Muslim Spain and Turkey with pride, Jews also remember it as their golden era. Under Muslims Spain became center of civilization. Although many local Spaniards embraced Islam, Christians and Jews were free in all respects of their lives. Islam has given new dimension to the concept of life and raised humanity to a higher level. Quran says: "We have bestowed respect on the children of Adam."

It is a religion of values. Its teachings apply to the collective aspects of human life and aim at strengthening the social fabric of the society. It recognizes family as the basic unit and Islamic teachings are aimed at strengthening and protecting this precious element of society. In Islam the institution of family does not merely denote husband, wife and children but also includes other close relatives. Islam requires that Muslims take responsibility not only for their parents but also for their elderly relatives when they need care and support.

Islam also gives elaborate rights to neighbors, women, orphans, poor and needy. Through the obligatory institution of charity, it equalizes the wealth of the society. Both, when Islam stresses upon the fulfillment of obligation or when it prohibits gambling, drinking, prostitution, adultery and other social evils, it is consciously promoting and protecting the well being of the society and elevating it to the levels of high morality.

Today, despite a selective material progress, the humanity continues to suffer from poverty, injustice, ignorance, intolerance and even oppression. Unfortunately, politics is allowed to manipulate religion for vested interests. It is time that scholars from all over the world sit down and decide that all religions can co-exist and that commonalities amongst the religions are far greater than the differences. The universities in Pakistan should invite scholars and students to their Islamic Studies Departments and project the tolerant view of Islam. At the same time, through our individual and collective behaviour, we all need to present an enlightened view of Islam.

from the Torah. Islam was born in a tolerant society and both logically and realistically cannot be intolerant.

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The spirit of tolerance and the principle of co-existence enunciated by the Holy Prophet (pbuh) were strictly followed by his successors. At the time of the conquest of Jerusalem, the Caliph Umer (may Allah be pleased with him) was requested by the Christians to pray in their church. The Great Umer refused the request saying that he fears that in the future Muslims could use it as an excuse to take over the church for building a mosque.

The Caliph Umer was so conscious of his responsibilities towards minorities that he remembered their

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Islam does not tolerate the irresponsible destructiveness that is terrorism. Such acts are irreligious and run counter to Islamic practice just as they run counter to the practice of Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism etc. In his farewell sermon the Prophet (pbuh) addressing thousands of pilgrims said:

"God has made inviolable for you each others blood and each others property until you meet your Lord".

He was reminding the pilgrims of the Quranic decree that to destroy the life of one individual amounts to destroying the entire human race and to save one individual is tantamount to saving the entire human race (5:32).

Islam as a religion and philosophy stands for the

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The concept of enlightened moderation enunciated by President Musharraf clearly defines the role and obligation of every actor of the global stage who will have to perform their obligations towards world peace. Let us all support our President in his quest for achieving world peace.

The writer is Governor Punjab. This article is based on his speech to the Council of Religions' seminar on 'Inter-Religious Dialogue for Peace and Justice' on September 16 in Islamabad.