

Religious tolerance is a vital subject today, affecting everyone in terms of our safety and ability to live along with those persons who are differing religious beliefs. Islam is a religion of peace and of tolerance and inclusiveness. This is borne out in my careful review of original Islamic sources. In this article I provide three specific examples that reveal the true nature of Islam, which includes not only tolerance of those of other faiths but also a mandate to protect them. This ancient message is not heard often enough in our world today. Most of the world's news media operates on an agenda to promote strife and trouble and ignore true messages of peace.

EXAMPLE NUMBER 1 - Migration of Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, 622 AD:

Medina – the earliest inter-faith community in the world

Islam recognized and acknowledged the right of citizenship 14 centuries ago. When the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him-pbuh) migrated to Medina in 622 AD, there he found an inter-faith community comprised of various tribes – Muslims, Jews and pagan Arabs.

Due to this diversity within the Medina community, the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) wanted to establish a strong state governed by peace and cooperation to prevail among all its residents with their different inclinations. This resulted in the Medina Constitution, known as Al-Wathiqah, which is considered the earliest known written constitution

The four key provisions in this constitution were:

- 1) Security and peaceful co-existence amongst all citizens of Medina
- 2) Religious freedom
- 3) Full citizenship
- 4) Individual responsibility.

EXAMPLE NUMBER 2 - The Promise to St. Catherine, 628 AD

In 628 AD, a delegation from St. Catherine's Monastery came to Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) and requested his protection. He responded by granting them a charter of rights. For more information, see: <http://tinyurl.com/qa9vban>. St. Catherine's Monastery is located at the foot of Mt. Sinai and is the world's oldest monastery. It possess a huge collection of Christian manuscripts, second only to the Vatican, and is also a world heritage site. It also boasts the oldest collection of Christian icons. It is a treasure house of Christian history that has remained safe for 1,400 years under Muslim protection.

The charter's first line and final line are reproduced here, translated into English:

First line: "This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them."

Final line: "No one of the nation (Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world)."

These sentences are critical. They make the promise eternal and universal. The Prophet (pbuh) asserts that Muslims are with Christians near and far, clearly rejecting any future attempts to limit the promise to St. Catherine alone. By ordering Muslims to obey it until the Day of Judgment the charter again undermines any future attempts to revoke the privileges. These rights are inalienable. Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) declared Christians, all of them, as his allies and he equated ill treatment of Christians with violating God's covenant.

A remarkable aspect of the charter is that it imposes no conditions on Christians for enjoying its privileges. They are not required to alter their beliefs, they do not have to make any payments, and they do not have any obligations. This is a charter of rights without any duties!

The lessons of this charter have great relevance for all of us, particularly for those who seek to foster discord among Muslims and Christians with a focus on issues that divide and emphasize areas of conflict. When resources such as the prophet's promise to Christians is invoked and highlighted it builds bridges. It inspires Muslims to rise above communal intolerance and engenders good will in Christians who might be nursing fear of Islam or Muslims.

EXAMPLE NUMBER 3 - Treaty of Caliph Umar, Ibn-al-Khattab in Jerusalem, 637 AD:

In the early days of Islam, West Asia was under oppressive colonial rule by two empires: Byzantine and Persia. The two empires wanted to suppress Islam and eliminate it because of their religious intolerance. Muslims, in self-defense, had to take up arms to defend their freedom of religion. Within less than 20 years, had eliminated the Byzantine and Persian threats to the Arabian peninsula and proceeded to liberate other oppressed people in Iraq Syria Palestine and Egypt. This was a war of liberation to establish freedom of choosing religion and nobody was forced to convert to Islam. This explains the survival of Christian, Jewish and Saab religious communities in the past 14 centuries in West Asia

By 637, Muslims were in the vicinity of Jerusalem. In charge of Jerusalem was Patriarch Sophronius, a representative of the Byzantine government, as well as a leader in the Christian Church. Sophronius refused to surrender the city unless Caliph Umar-ibn-al-Khattab came to accept the surrender himself.

Having heard of such a condition, Umar ibn al-Khattab left Medina, travelling alone with one donkey and one servant. When he arrived in Jerusalem, he was greeted by Sophronius, who undoubtedly must have been amazed that the caliph of the Muslims, one of the most powerful people in the world at that point, was dressed in no more than simple robes and was indistinguishable from his servant.

Umar was given a tour of the city, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. When the time for prayer came, Sophronius invited Umar to pray inside the Church, but Umar refused. He insisted that if he prayed there, later Muslims would use it as an excuse to convert it into a mosque, thereby depriving Christendom of one of its holiest sites. Instead, Umar prayed outside the Church, where a mosque (called Masjid Umar – the Mosque of Umar) was later built. Umar also wrote up a treaty detailing the rights and privileges regarding the conquered people and the Muslims in Jerusalem. This treaty was signed by Umar and Patriarch Sophronius, along with some of the generals of the Muslim armies.

At the time, this was by far one of the most progressive treaties in history. For comparison, just 23 years earlier when Jerusalem was conquered by the Persians from the Byzantines, a general massacre was ordered. Another massacre ensued when Jerusalem was conquered by the Crusaders from the Muslims in 1099.

The Treaty of Umar allowed the Christians of Jerusalem religious freedom, as is dictated in the Quran and the sayings of Muhammad (pbuh). This was one of the first and most significant guarantees of religious freedom in history. What is not in question, however, was the significance of such a progressive and equitable surrender treaty, which protected minority rights. The treaty became the standard for Muslim-Christian relations throughout the former Byzantine Empire, with rights of conquered people being protected in all situations, and forced conversions never being a sanctioned act.

I am thankful to Pave the Way Foundation for highlighting and thereby educating its readers about the examples of tolerance, freedom of religion set forth by the prophet Muhammad and Caiph Umar bin Khattab. Muslims also need to implement these guidelines in their daily lives.

Respectfully Submitted By:

Prof. Faroque Ahmad Khan, MB, MACP
Trustee, Islamic Center of Long Island, Westbury, New York.
faroquekhan@yahoo.com.