

FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN ISLAM

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1. A write-up by Mr. Abdul Baqi M. Sharaf Al-Islam on the subject, not exactly under the same heading, has come to my notice. In his write-up Mr. Sharaf maintains that in a Muslim country (where majority people are Muslims, like Bangladesh) the government should not allow Hindus (or other non-Muslims) to perform publicly their religious rites and celebrate festivals (like Durga Puja) as these activities involve Shirk. As a humble Muslim I feel obliged to refute what Mr. Sharaf has tried to propagate through his write-up.
2. Islam stands for total freedom of religion and expression. Let me here quote the relevant verses from the Qur'an on the subject:
 - a. *Let there be no compulsion in religion: truth stands out clear from error (02 : 256).*
 - b. *To you be your way and to be mine (109 : 06).*
 - c. *Say, "The Truth is from your Lord." Let him who will believe, and let him who will reject (it) (18 : 29).*
 - d. *Say to those who do not believe: "Do whatever ye can: we shall do our part" (11 : 121).*
 - e. *He that receives guidance benefits his own soul: but he that strays injures his own soul. Nor art thou set a custodian over them (39 : 41).*
 - f. *If then they turn away, We have not sent thee as a guard over them. Thy duty is but to convey the message (42 : 48).*
 - g. *Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching ; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious (16 : 125).*
 - h. *Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you. But do not transgress limits ; for Allah loveth not transgressors (02 : 190).*
3. The above mentioned verses clearly indicate the position of Islam as a religion vis-a-vis other religions. Islam grants unfettered religious freedom to all those who do not believe in Islam. This freedom means that any non-Muslim has the right to worship his god(s), or any other object of worship including idols, and observe his religious rites freely, be it in private or in public, as demanded by his religion. Nowhere in the Qur'an it is said that Muslims can

take away this freedom of the non-Muslims, or apply force to refrain them from their acts of worship. Rather Muslims are directed to “*Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious*”(16 : 125).

4. Islam rejects the use of force, intimidation and coercion in the propagation of Islam. Allah commands Muslims to exercise utmost tolerance and restraint in all these matters. In Islam war is permissible in self-defense only, and under well-defined limits. When necessary war should be undertaken vigorously, not relentlessly, to restore peace and freedom for the worship of Allah. But never the limits set by Allah shall be transgressed.

5. Mr. Sharaf argues that the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) “ ... cleaned the whole land under his authority from Shirk ...”. He is not correct. Even at the life time of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) the part of the Arabia which was under Muslim rule was not one hundred per cent free from unbelievers and pagan tribes, and their worshipping of idols in public. For strategic reasons the Prophet bound himself in treaties with many of these pagan tribes. Had the Prophet tried to stop these unbelievers from openly worshipping their idols there could not be those treaties. However, at a later stage all these tribes embraced Islam not under coercion, but on being invited by the Muslims “ *with wisdom and beautiful preaching*”. Mr. Sharaf further argues that the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) “ sent Sahabah (like Ali and Khalid ibnul Waleed and others) to destroy alLat, Uzzat, and Manat other forms of Shirk. He did not agree that these statues be kept as it is in the land of Islam”. Here again Mr. Sharaf is partially right. During the life time of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) there were about 373 idols, including alLat, Uzzat and Manat, inside the Holy Ka’ba. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) at the very first opportunity decided to smash these idols for the simple and important reason that the Ka’ba was the house of Allah. It did not belong to any person or tribe. Allah Himself wanted His house to be free from the idols. Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) on being directed by his Master destroyed the idols inside the Ka’ba. This cannot be taken as an example to justifiably ban worship of idols in

public by non-Muslims in a Muslim country. The Hadith quoted by Mr. Sharaf here, “ Two religions can not stay in the Arabic peninsula simultaneously.” is not acceptable, as it contradicts the principle laid down in the Qur’an on the subject. The Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) could never say anything which contradicted the Qur’an.

6. *Did not Allah check one set of people by means of another, there would surely have been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques in which the name of Allah is commemorated in abundant measure...* (22 : 40). This verse was revealed soon after the defeat of the invading Makkan force under Abu Jehl at Badr year after the migration to Madinah. The victorious Muslims saved *monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques* and all other places of worship. This verse makes it obligatory for a Muslim to fight in defense of all such places, irrespective of the form of worship or the religious affiliation of the worshippers. In compliance to this injunction that the Muslims throughout history have contributed generously towards the construction and upkeep of the places of worship of other religions.
7. Mr. Sharaf has wrongly translated Verse 39 of Sura Al-Anfal. The correct translation as per Abdullah Yusuf Ali is: “ *And fight them (unbelievers) on until there is no more persecution, and religion becomes Allah’s in its entirety.*” If the unbelievers cease from fighting and from persecution of truth Allah would not wish that they should be harassed with further hostility.
8. Mr. Sharaf has quoted Verse 5 of Sura At-Tauba out of context to justify his standpoint. Out of context extracts like ‘*fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find them*’ and others quoted above have been grossly misused to lend religiosity to wars of aggression, banditry, indiscriminate killing of the innocent. Sura At-Tauba was revealed with reference to a special situation which is very briefly explained below. The Muslims occupied Makka in January, 630 almost unopposed. Makkans in great numbers embraced Islam. But there were pagan tribes around Makka who took the Muslim victory as a threat to their own religion and attacked the Muslims.

They were defeated by the Muslims at Hunain. This was followed by conclusion of treaties of alliance or neutrality, and freedom of religion and worship, with the pagans who had opted not to accept Islam. In late April, 630 it was strongly rumoured that the Byzantine Army, the then strongest in the world, under the personal command of Emperor Heraclius was assembling in Syria to launch an attack on the Muslims. In the face of this grave threat in a very hot summer the hypocrites and other reluctant Muslims showed their unwillingness to go for the war against the Byzantine Army. Against all these odds the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) marched ahead to Tabuk with thirty thousand dedicated followers to find that it was a hollow threat. The Muslims returned from Tabuk in September. In the absence of the Muslims the pagans thought that the Muslims would not survive, and felt free to violate their treaty obligations. It is under these post-Tabuk circumstances that Verses 01 to 29 of Sura At-Tauba were revealed, all at a time, in October, 630. The Tabuk expedition had emboldened the pagans. For Muslims it was necessary to be firm, but not haughty or aggressive with the pagans. To comprehend the message from Allah one has to read and understand all the verses of Sura At-Tauba from 01 to 29. There is no room for misguiding the Muslims just by quoting Verses 05, 07 or 29 out of context. For the understanding of the present readers let me quote all the relevant verses here:

- a. *A (declaration) of immunity from Allah and His messenger to those of the pagans with whom ye have contracted mutual alliance (09 : 01).*
- b. *Go ye (the pagans) for four months... but know that ye cannot frustrate Allah, (by your falsehood) but that Allah will cover with shame those who reject Him (09 : 02).*
- c. *An announcement on the day of the Great Pilgrimage... that Allah and His messenger dissolve (treaty) obligations with the pagans. If, then ye (pagans) repent, it were best for you, but if ye turn away, know that ye cannot frustrate Allah (09 : 03).*
- d. *(But the treaties are) not dissolved with those pagans with whom ye have entered into alliance and who have not subsequently failed you in aught nor aided anyone against you (09 : 04).*

- e. *But when the forbidden months (notice of four months given to the pagans as per 09 : 02 and 03 above) are past, then fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find them... but if they repent... then open the way for them, for Allah is oft-forgiving, most-merciful (09 : 05).*
 - f. *If one amongst the pagans asks for asylum, grant it to him... and then escort him to where can be secure,...(09 : 06).*
 - g. *How can there be covenants... with the pagans, except those with whom ye made a treaty near the Sacred Mosque, as long as these stand true to you, stand ye true to them (09 : 07).*
 - h. *How (can there be such a covenant) seeing that if they get an advantage over you, they respect not in you the ties either of kinship or of covenant... and most of them are rebellious and wicked (09 : 08).*
 - i. *But if they violate their oaths after their covenant and attack your faith: fight ye the chiefs of unfaith (09 : 12).*
 - j. *Will ye not fight people who violate their oaths... attacked you first ? ... (09 : 13).*
 - k. *Truly the pagans are unclean ; so let them not after this year of theirs approach the Sacred Mosque (09 : 28).*
 - l. *Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the last day nor hold forbidden which had been forbidden by Allah and His messenger... nor acknowledge the religion of truth from among the people of the Book, until they pay the Jizia (Poll tax) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued. (09 :29).*
9. It would be totally wrong to say, as Mr. Sharaf has done, that “ ..these and other verses abrogate the verses (quoted in sub-paras 2a to 2d) which say there is no compulsion to become Muslim.”
10. Islam is not what a Moulvi or an Ulema says on his own. Islam is what Allah says in His Book, the Qur’an. If anything said by a Moulvi or an Ulema, however exalted his position might be, is in anyway discordant with the Qur’an, it is to be straightway rejected as non-Qur’anic. Mr Sharaf has quoted a number Ahadith in support of his views without quoting their source(s). This is not acceptable. However, even if he would have quoted their sources these Ahadith still remain unacceptable as they contradict the words and the spirit of the Qur’an.

11. In the present world, specially after the 11 September incident, Islam and Muslims are two very widely misunderstood terms to the non-Muslims. Most of them think Islam and terrorism are synonymous. The non-Muslims cannot be entirely blamed for that. Muslims are also partly responsible. It is not expected that the non-Muslims will look into the Qur'an, the source of Islam, to find out what Islam really is in its true sense, and what Allah says in His Book on different earthly and divine issues. They will form their ideas on Islam and Muslims from what they find the Muslims are doing and saying. Mr. Sharaf in his write-up is propagating his idea by distorting the Qur'an and quoting those Ahadith which are discordant with the letter and spirit of the Qur'an. Mr. Sharaf, I am sure, should know as a Muslim that Qur'an is the one and only source of Islam. There is no other supplementary or complementary source of Islam. To quote any other document as a source of Islam will mean committing Shirk. Any Hadith which contradicts the Qur'an must be rejected. While sitting in a safe haven like Saudi Arabia he probably is not aware that in the name of Islam he is indulging himself in a dangerous game which will further make Islam more misunderstood and the life of Muslims all over the world, specially in the non-Muslim countries of the West, more difficult. If the government of Bangladesh, by issuing decrees, ban the holding of Durga Puja by Hindus in public, there will be serious repercussions in non-Muslim countries, specially in India where Muslims are already forbidden to slaughter cows and cannot observe many of their religious festivals openly and freely. I call upon Mr. Sharaf to kindly think twice before using his pen to write articles which will damage the cause of Islam and Muslims all over the world.