

Tolerance in Islam

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In the last few years we have witnessed a series of terrorist acts perpetrated in the name of Islam. It is hard to believe that Indonesian Islam, which was traditionally respected for its tolerance and respect for diversity and plurality, has now become tarnished with various acts of heinous violence and intolerance. Peaceful coexistence of diverse faiths and beliefs is being challenged by radicalism. It seems easy now for some Muslims to condemn others, both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, as being sinful, deviant, unbelievers or damned, as if they were little gods who can look into people's hearts. This phenomenon is worth reflecting on, as are also the factors that may have triggered this radicalism.

In Islam, diversity and plurality are part of the divine intent and purpose of God's creation.

To the radicals, the above Koranic precepts do not seem to exist. They resort to different verses, quoting them textually in isolation, and paying no attention to the socio-historical context of their revelation. Neither do they relate them to the moral and ethical values of Islam, such as mercy, justice, peace, kindness and goodness.

Verses they often use to justify their intolerant conducts are like QS al-Baqarah/2:120, "Never will the Jews and the Christians be satisfied with you unless you follow their form of religion," or QS al-Ma'idah/5:51, "O you who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies. They are allies of each other, and he among you who becomes their ally is one of them."

Another concept that needs clarification is jihad. Jihad simply means to strive hard or to struggle in pursuit of a just cause. The Prophet Muhammad said that the highest form of jihad is the struggle waged to cleanse oneself from the vices of the heart, selfish desires and ambitions.

From the Koranic point of view, jihad means a struggle on intellectual grounds against those who oppress people, treat them unjustly, subject them to torture and cruelty, and violate legitimate human rights. The purpose of this struggle is to bring about justice, peace and equality.

Apart from the ideological and spiritual meanings, struggle in the physical sense is also considered as jihad. However, this has to be carried out solely for defensive purposes. Jihad for acts of aggression against innocent people would be unjust and a great distortion of the true meaning of the term.

Jihad is often equated with "holy war." This notion, in Arabic *al-harb al-muqaddasah*, does not exist in the Koran. War is never holy; it is either justified or not. And if it is justified, those who get killed in the battle are considered martyrs.

The just and tolerant practices of the Prophet Muhammad towards "the People of the Book" (Christians and Jews) set a very good example to Muslims. The contract the Prophet made with the Christians of Najran secured peaceful religious coexistence. This is a manifestation of the Koranic injunction on religious tolerance, "Those who believe (in the Koran), and those who follow the Jewish, and the Christians and the Sabians, any who believe in Allah ... shall have their reward ... (QS al-Baqarah/2:62).

The Constitution of Madinah is the most important contract that secured justice and religious tolerance among Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and pagan communities. The Constitution ensured that everyone was free to adhere to any belief or religion or to make any political or philosophical choice.

Everyone was free to exercise his/her own justice system. But no protection would be given to anyone committing a crime. This contract, which was in force for 10 years, changed society from a tribal structure based on blood and kinship into a united social system comprising people of different cultural, ethnic and geographical backgrounds. The Constitution of Madinah secured absolute religious freedom.

In conclusion, it is necessary to stress the importance of a contextual approach in interpreting the Koran. Any text, including Koranic text, speaks through its readers. The meaning of the text is not fixed simply by the literal meaning of the words, but depends, too, on the moral construction given to it by the reader. To promote tolerance, the relevant texts should be approached with moral commitments; otherwise, they will produce nothing but discrete, legalistic and technical insights.

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