ISLAMIC PERCEPTION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Religious freedom is considered a fundamental human right and the cornerstone of human dignity. Islam, being a universal religion, protects the rights of every individual, and thus, preserves and upholds the dignity of human persons irrespective of their religious convictions. This study aims to understand Islamic perception of religious freedom from a historical point of view. It is based on textual analysis and historical interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah. It also supports its case by analysing some Muslim ruler's treatment of other religions. The study shows that Islam provides complete freedom to every individual so long as it does not violate or interfere the right of others, and explicitly prohibits all kinds of intervention in matters of religious beliefs and

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practices. Though the Prophetic tradition "whoever changes his religion, kill him" seems contradictory to freedom of religion, this has been contextualised in particular situation by contemporary Islamic scholars. The study concludes that the Qur'anic teachings, the Prophetic practices and Muslim rulers' treatment of other religions affirm that Islam provides equal opportunities to all regardless of their attachments to any religion or ideology, and Muslims can neither force any body to accept Islam nor impose anything against his/her will.

Keywords: Religious freedom, human rights, the Qur'an, the Sunnah, Islamic history

Introduction

Religion is considered to have laid the earliest sense of community in human beings. It serves the role of ideology as well as the institution for society. It is also understood as how individual deals with a Supreme being comprising beliefs and rituals (Yousif, 1998:10). Islamic scholars define religion as a special law given by God to humankind through His nominated people known as messengers and prophets for achieving success in this worldly life and hereafter (Bayram cited in Nor, et al., 2018). In recent decades, the freedom of religion has become a much-discussed area for scholars and researchers across the globe due to its contemporaneousness and increasing tensions among followers of various religions. It is the birth-right of every individual to enjoy freedom of religious beliefs and practices. It is also one of the vital components of fundamental human rights acknowledged mostly by the major religions of the world. The notion of 'human rights' in its current form is of recent origin. In the Western context, the *Treaty of Westphalia* of 1648 can be considered as

the earliest treaty of protection among religious groups (Saeed and Saeed, 2004:10). Subsequently, the *Commonwealth of Virginia's Bill of Rights* in 1776, the *Austrian Act of Religious Tolerance* in 1781, and the *Virginia Statute of Religious Liberty* in 1786 came into reality. The *French Revolution* in 1789 and the *American Bill of Rights* in 1791 are also taken as important factors for this event. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) in 1948 was the outcome of the development of these events and documents, which explicitly states that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscious and religion…." Thereafter, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1976 also emphasized on freedom of religion (Saeed and Saeed, 2004: 9-10). In 1991, in line with the statements of UDHR, the *Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights* (UIDHR) issued by Islamic Council of Europe (ICE) provides: "Every person has the right to freedom of conscience and worship in accordance with his religious beliefs" (cited in Kamali, 1994:89). This kind of provisions have become regular features of many Muslim countries today. For example, the constitution of Bangladesh provides the right to practice the religion of individual choice. According to Article 2A of the constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "the state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions" (Constitute, 2022: 6).

Long before the Treaty of Westphalia and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Islam urges all Muslims to ensure equal opportunities for all irrespective of their affiliations to any religion or ideology. That is why it proscribes intervening the practices and beliefs of any religion in the world. Many

verses of the Qur'an allow and promote religious freedom (Al-Qur'an, 2: 256; 109:1-6; 5:48; 10:99; 18:29; 13:40: 5:47). Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) fulfilled the Qur'anic instructions into practice through his words and actions. It is evident from Islamic history that devout Muslim rulers have practised liberal outlooks to the adherents of other religions. (Nor, et al. 2018; Khan et al. 2020) This study aims to analyse the concept of religious freedom and its application in Islam with special reference to the Qur'anic interpretation, the Prophet's practices as well as Muslim rulers' treatment of other religions with a view to stimulate mutual understanding among the people of diverse religions.

The Concept of Religious Freedom in Islam

The word 'freedom' is construed as a state of being independent, frank, and free in using beliefs, ideas, thoughts and opinions (Yousif, 1999:10; Nor, 2018). Religious freedom means when an individual can freely associate with any belief system without any kind of persecution or discrimination. (Mondal, 2016) The Arabic term *hurriyyah* is used for freedom which derives from the Qur'anic word, *muharram*. *Muharram* means to be free from worldly activities for God's service. Two aspects of freedom are pointed out in the Qur'an: (1) the legal aspect which deals with slavery, and (2) the ethical aspect dealing with intellectual nature of human being. Islam emphasises on protecting both legal and intellectual aspects of freedom. (Abdullah, 2014:48-49) Fethhullah Gulen is mentioned by Esposito and Yilmaz (2010) that intellect is the prime issue of freedom in Islam which is connected to free will and expression. Ghazali's understanding is very relevant when he comments that "to enslave the intellectual

freedom of men is very dangerous than actual slavery, since the enslavement of intellectual freedom aims to enslave not only man's body, but also his heart and mind" (quoted in Abdullah, 2014:49). Islam does not believe in any pressure to be imposed on human beings whether it is physical or intellectual as it is contradictory to the freedom and dignity of human persons. Again, the five basic principles of Islam are the protection of life, intellect, lineage, property and religion. (Esposito and Yilmaz, 2010)

The contemporary idea of religious freedom is considered to be familiarised by the West but fairly this concept has been the key issue of Islam since its inception (Shafiq and Aziz 2020). Islam teaches that a person is born free from sin, subjugation and inferiority. In one occasion, Umar, the second caliph of Islam, said: "How do you enslave people, whereas they were born free?" (Ali al-Muttaqi al-Hindi, 1985, quoted in Abdullah, 2014:46) Islam encourages its followers to be strict to its ideals of truth while providing freedom and respect to the followers of other religions.

It should be mentioned here that although human beings are given freedom in Islam to develop their mental faculties, it does not entitle them to violate or even interrupt the rights of others. (Kadivar, 2014) The Satanic way of freedom is to violate the rights of others, whereas the angelic way is to uphold and promote others' rights. For instance, Pharaoh enslaved the people of Israel and misused his right to freedom whereas Moses (Prophet Musa) stood against him for the cause of getting back their right to freedom. (Madani, 2011; Nor, et al., 2018) Therefore, Islam accepts every human being the freedom of expression so long it does not hamper the dignity and freedom of others. There is

no room for being invasive, and spreading evil in the name of freedom. Islam does not regard abusive or ridiculous language as part of freedom (Mandour 2010; Elius et al., 2019a). In 2005, the publication of cartoons in Denmark that generated wrong and adverse attitudes toward the Prophet of Islam (PBUH), the issue of *hijab* in France, Australia, and India's Karnataka is unfortunate, and cannot beconsidered liberty or freedom of expression. Such provocative activities are against the true spirit of religion, and are not supported by Islam. (Nor et al., 2018)

The Qur'anic Approach to Religious Freedom

Islamic teachings acknowledge a person's autonomy in choosing his or her religion or way of life. Freedom of religion is expressed in many verses of the Qur'an. The Qur'anic command of religious freedom originated in the early part of Prophetic career in Makkah. Once a group of idol worshippers proposed the Prophet (PBUH) that if he agreed to worship their gods for one year, they would be agreed to worship his God (Allah) in the next year. In response to their proposal, the Qur'anic *Surah al-Kafirun* (chapter 109) was revealed. (Nor, et al. 2018) The chapter says: "I do not worship that what you worship, nor you worship that what I worship. And I will not worship that which you worship, nor you will worship that which I worship. For you your religion, and for me mine" (Al-Qur'an, 109:2-6). This is a clear indication of freedom in practising the religion of individual choice. All the verses of this chapter emphasise on smooth functioning of each religion. It is clear from the instructions of the Qur'an that Muslims can neither impose the teachings of Islam on the people of other religions nor the people of other religions can impose the teachings of their religions on

Muslims. All human beings have the right to follow their own religion. Imam al-Qurtubi in his *Jami al-Qur'an* asserts that Muslims have no right to impose Islam upon anybody whether male or female. Every individual must have freedom in selecting and practising his/her religion. (Al-Qurtubi, 1964: 281)

According to the Qur'anic teachings, God does not like people to be converted to Islam by force, and He does not accept forceful conversion. The Qur'an has reminded that if God wanted people to accept Islam, they would have no way to escape it. As it is mentioned: "If Allah had willed He would have made you one community." (Al-Qur'an, 5: 48) The Qur'an further said: "If Allah had willed, all human beings would have believed. So will you force them to believe?" (Al-Qur'an, 10: 99) These verses seek to assure the Prophet (PBUH) that matters of faith are in the hands of God, and any endeavour to spread Islam by force would be a useless exercise (Friedmann, 2003: 89). It also reveals that God does not want people to be converted against their will. It is also clear that the presence of different religions in the world is not out of the plan of God. Therefore, Muslim must accept the prevailing diversity in the world and abstain from forceful conversion. (Kurucan and Erol, 2012: 37) That is why Islam does not support the compulsion of religion in any circumstance. The holy Qur'an ask Muslims to leave the issue on the individuals. Thus, the Qur'an says: "Let there be no compulsion in religion, for the truth stands out clearly from falsehood. (Al-Qur'an, 2: 256)"

This verse was revealed after the Prophet's migration to Madinah in the 4th year of the Hijrah. It is reported that some *Ansar* (helpers) from the Jews in Madinah accepted Islam but their children remained Jews. They attempted to force their

children to embrace Islam, and sought the permission of the Prophet in this regard. Then the verse was revealed (Nor, et al., 2018). Another narration suggests that two sons of Abu al Husayn (*Ansar*) were converted to Christianity by a group of Byzantine merchants while they were in Madinah for selling their goods. Then Abu al-Husayn requested the Prophet to pursue them and get them back to Islam. The verse was revealed in that circumstance, and the Prophet did not take any initiative for those converts (cited in Friedmann, 2003:101). This verse gives a clear ruling that no one can obligate their religion to others. The Qurʾan has just urged people to be aware of the truth and accept it. But it is up to the individuals whether they accept or reject it. Rashid Rida, the noted Qur'anic commentator, argues that faith (*iman*) is the pillar of religion which implies a sincere submission of the person, and not compulsion. (cited in Kamali, 1994: 99)

Although the propagation of Islam is one of the vital responsibilities for Muslims, it does not let them compel to Islam. As the Qurʾan reminds by stating: "your responsibility is only to convey the Message" (Al- Qurʾan 13:40). In another verse, the Qurʾan says, "If they embrace Islam, they are rightly guided, but if they turn back then your duty is only to convey (the message)" (Al- Qurʾan 3:20). Thus, the Qur'anic teachings affirm that Muslims' responsibility is only to deliver the true message and not to convert them to Islam against their will. Another verse of the Qur'an also highlights:"And say, the truth is from your Lord, so let him believe who wills and let him disbelieve who wills" (Al-Qur'an, 18: 29). So, those who claim that Islam emphasises on forceful conversion are totally wrong. There is not a single example in the entire life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) where

he forced anybody to accept Islam. He invited people to Islam wholeheartedly and left the matter on their choice. (Abdullah, 2014:53)

According to Islamic teachings, non-Muslims are entitled to be judged by the injunctions of their religion. In this connection, the Qur'anic command is: "And let those who follow the Gospel be judged by the revelation given by Allah to them" (Al-Qur'an, 5:47). Islam provides non-Muslims the right to build their houses of worship, such as temples, churches, synagogues, and the like. They have the right to carry out all kinds of activities for the propagation and circulation of their religion. They will enjoy freedom to bring up their offspring in accordance with the teachings of their religion (Yousif, 1998:38). Muslim jurists are of the opinion that the state isresponsible for providing freedom to its citizens irrespective of their religious beliefs so long as they do not become threat to the security and integrity of the state and misuse the privileges. (Bhat, 2014; Nor, et al., 2018)

Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) Approach to Religious Freedom

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was sent as a mercy for the entire world. (Al-Qur'an, 21:107) He implemented the Qur'anic instructions into practices. He did not impose Islamic rulings upon non-Muslims citizens in Madinah. (Elius, 2022; Elius et al., 2019b) It is evident from a narration that "once a group of Jewish scholars came to the Prophet (PBUH) and declared that one of them committed adultery and they wanted from him to judge the matter. The Prophet (PBUH) judged the issue in accordance with the instruction of Jewish scripture." (Al-Tabari, 2000: 303, quoted in Nor, et al., 2018) The Prophet provided complete freedom

to every individual and established a balanced community in Madinah while he was ruling. (Haque, 2010) He emphasised on religious freedom and equality in making the charter of Madinah as there were diverse religious and ethnic communities in the state. (Muhtada, 2012) Husin and Ibrahim (2016) observe that the charter is an invaluable document in safeguarding the freedom of all irrespective of their religious convictions and providing a secure environment of cooperation and harmony. The Prophet of Islam (PBUH) made many treaties with non-Muslims. His treaty with the Christian delegates of Najran isan example of how he felt the necessity of promoting religious freedom and interreligious harmony. The treaty is as follows:

> No clergy's or monk's post shall be changed, nobody shall be denied travel, their places of worship shall not be destroyed or turned into Islamic masjids or added to Muslims' buildings. Whoever fails to follow these rules will be violating God's treaty and opposing His Messenger. No taxes [*jizya* – poll tax levied on dhimmis (people living under a *dhimma*, protection treaty) or *kharaj*– land tax] shall be collected from priests, clergy, people who dedicate themselves to prayer, monks, or those who occupy themselves with worship in isolated places and mountains... No Christian shall be forced to convert to Islam…If they (Christians) need help from Muslims with repairing their churches, monasteries or any other religious or worldly business, Muslims shall help them without placing them under any obligation; help and support for their religious needs shall be provided out of abiding by the promise of God's Messenger, as a donation and as God's grace. (quoted in Kurucan & Erol, 2012: 79-80)

The Prophet made another treaty with Ibn Harith ibn Ka'b and the people of his tribe. According to this treaty, they will be

provided with freedom and equal opportunities in the affairs of religion. No Muslim will compel them to embrace Islam. Their lives and properties will stay protected. If they are subject to any kind of injustice, Muslims must come forward to help. (Khan et al., 2020) Sanni (2015) in his review on John Andrew Morrow's book *The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad With the Christians of the World,* revealed that the Prophet's agreements with the pastors of Mount Sinai, the Armenian Christians, the Assyrian Christians, and the Christians of the world provide evidences of his positive outlook to Christians. (Sanni, 2015; Khan et al., 2020) The Prophet made many other treaties and agreements between Muslims and non-Muslims during his Prophetic life. In every treaty, the Prophet (PBUH) guaranteed the security of their lives, property, and the freedom of religion for non-Muslims (Elius et al., 2019b). The Prophet also provided liberty and security of non-Muslim education in Madinah. He used to visit *Bayt al-Midras,* a Jewish religious institution, in the course of his tenure. Thereafter, Abu Bakar also visited the same institution in a number of times and guaranteed freedom in running and maintaining their educational institution. (Al-Qurtubi, 1964: 50; Nor et al., 2018)

Although the Prophet (PBUH) guaranteed freedom of religion for all, the issue of apostasy was debatable. Yohanan Friedmann (2003: 126) explains that Prophetic tradition, "whoever changes his religion, kill him." (Al-Bukhari 2001, 15) was supported by most early Jurists (Saeed and Saeed, 2004: 51). Some classical jurists like Al-Hasan b. Hayy also claim that the apostate should be given the option to repentance before execution. According to them, the option of repentance is needed because apostasy often occurs due to misunderstanding. Therefore, an attempt to be

taken to remove misunderstanding. The Prophet (PBUH) is said to have acknowledged the repentance of a number of apostates. (cited in Friedmann, 2003: 129-131)

In the contemporary period, many Islamic scholars provide opinions that those who just turn themselves from Islam to another religion, but do not take part in fighting or hostility to the Islamic state or its community cannot be executed. (Saeed and Saeed 2004: 59; Kadivar,2014) Kamali (1994: 95) observed that the Prophet (PBUH) and his companions neither compelled any body to adopt Islam, nor sentenced anybody to death only for renunciation of Islam. It is evidenced that the penalty of death was applied to those who committed other crimes along with apostasy. (Kadivar 2014; Elius et al., 2019a)

This view is defensible by two *hadiths* of the Prophet: (1) "he who leaves Islam and engages in fighting against Allah and His Prophet shall be killed." (Ibn Kathir, 1999: 363) (2) A Muslim cannot be executed except for three reasons: "a married adulterer; a person who killed another human being; and a person who has abandoned his religion, while splitting himself off from the community." (quoted in Kamali, 1994: 96) The first hadith makes it clear that changing Islam is not the only reason for execution but their engagement in fighting against Islam and Muslim community is the prime cause of execution. The second one suggests that the apostate must boycott the community and challenge its legitimate leadership for the death penalty to be implemented. (Kamali, 1994: 96) This is also supported by Selim el-Awa (1991: 52) when he argues that as the Qur'an did not prescribe any worldly penalty for the apostate, the evidence from the Sunnah needs interpretation. He also clarifies that the death penalty cannot be designed for simple renunciation of Islam

but for high treason when the apostate becomes rebellious and hostile towards the community or its leadership. (cited in Kamali, 1994: 95) An affirmative evidence is also found when Hanafi jurists connect the issue with socio-political circumstances, and are against the death penalty of women apostates. They argue that women generally do not involve with such kind of rebellion and fighting. So, they should be kept aside from the execution. If we accept the Hanafi argument, the application of death penalty is to be restricted to those who are involved with sedition and become threat to the Islamic state and its community. (Saeed and Saeed, 2004: 61)

It may be mentioned that at the beginning of the Prophet's stay in Madinah, Muslims were engrossed with various external and internal threats. In that combative situation, an individual used to belong to either with Muslims or their enemies. For a person to leave Islam meant that he had joined the enemies and would fight the Muslims. (Saeed and Saeed 2004: 60) In support of this argument, Kadivar (2014: 10) states that apostasy was closely linked to joining hands with Islam's enemies and spreading hate campaigns as well as engaging in war against Muslims. Opposing death penalty for apostasy, Ali (n. d: 591) says that Islam is against the deprivation of a person's right to live, and it is "valid not only to those who convert from Islam or those who never converted to Islam." (cited in Sumbulah and Purnomo, 2017)

Some Observations on Muslim Rulers' Treatment of other Religions

Islamic history provides many accounts that people of every religion received equitable treatment in many states under

Khulafae-Rashidun (rightly guided Caliphs). According to a narration by Abu Yusuf that many agreements were made to promote freedom and harmony between Muslims and non-Muslims during the period of Abu Bakar, Umar, Uthman, and Ali, and that they did not break such agreements. (cited in Kurucan and Erol, 2012:85) The churches, synagogues, and temples were preserved, and everybody practised their religion without restraint. Yusuf al- Qardhawi is cited in Husin and Ibrahim (2016) that it was the compassion of the Muslim caliphs that numerous churches were made and continued during the Caliphates' era. Indeed, the Muslims are obliged to maintain religious freedom for in an Islamic state and protect the rights of others. One such example of acknowledging the rights of non-Muslims is the treatment of Umar, the second caliph of Islam, to the Christians during his rule in Jerusalem. Umar ensured security and safety of their lives, religions, and did not enforce taxes beyond their abilities. (Abu-Munshar, 2007: 91-92)

During the rule of Umar, when Abu Ubaidah was the governor of Damascus, an agreement was made guaranteeing religious freedom for the Christians and Jews: "their churches and synagogues would not be changed. No party will insult others and fight against one another. No party will harm one another. The violation of the agreement will be considered as punishable." (Hamidullah, 1987:428) Describing the opportunity given by Umar to Christians in Islamic Jerusalem, Maher Y. Abu-Munshar (2006) mentioned that immediately after Umar's conquest, the Christians benefited from various angels. For example, non-Chalcedonian churches got the scope to establish themselves freely. The Armenians were able to appoint a bishop there in 650 CE. The Jacobite (Syrian Orthodox) church has

been active since 793. Furthermore, Christian pilgrimages were open to Islamic Jerusalem's holy places and continued without any interruption. The assurance given by Umar to the people *Aelia* (Islamic Jerusalem) can be mentioned:

> In the name of Allah, the most Merciful, the most Compassionate. This is the assurance of safety (*aman*) which the worshipper of Allah (the second caliph) Umar [ibn al-Khattab], the Commander of the Faithful, has granted to the people of *Aelia*. He has granted them an assurance of safety for their lives and possessions, their churches and crosses; the sick and the healthy (to everyone without exception); and for the rest of its religious communities. Their churches will not be inhabited (taken over) nor destroyed (by Muslims). Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their cross, nor their possessions will be encroached upon or partly seized…." (Al-Tabari, quoted in Abu-Munshar, 2006)

This inclusive vision that Umar adopted in Islamic Jerusalem is reflected in the words of Karen Armstrong: "When Caliph Umar conquered Jerusalem from the Byzantines, he was faithful to the Islamic inclusive vision. Unlike Jews and Christians, Muslims did not attempt to exclude others from Jerusalem's holiness. Muslims were being taught to venerate them." (Armstrong, 1997)

It should be pointed out that the Byzantine Emperor expelled the Jews in 135 CE and prevented them from entering the city of Jerusalem. The Jews, since then, had been in exile for over 500 years until the first Muslim conquest of the land in 637 CE / 16 AH. (Nor, 2012) Jews could visit the Temple Mount only once a year which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. During the last years, the 'Christians used the Temple Mount as a rubbish

dump' (Nor, 2008). When Jerusalem was liberated during the period of Umar Ibn al-Khattab in 16 AH I 637 CE., it became an open place for the people of every cultural and religious backgrounds. Karen Armstrong is described by Nor (2012) that before the crusaders' occupation, Jerusalem was a peaceful place for non-Muslims and known as a city of Dhimmis. Jews, as well as Christians, peacefully lived there. Thus, Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭab liberated Christians from the persecution and domination of the rule of Byzantine.

History shows that Ṣalah al-Din (also known as SalahuddinAyyubi) conquered Jerusalem in 1187CE after 88 years' rule of the Crusaders, and he followed the footsteps of Umar Ibn al Khattab. He ordered to reopen the churches only after three days of closing, and approved their religious practices (Abu-Munshar, 2007: 151-56). He provided safeguard to all Christians in Jerusalem and endorsed them to perform their sacramental practices. Thus, Salah al-Din liberated the members of Eastern Orthodox Church, Jews, and Muslims from the domination of Latin crusaders by the second conquest Jerusalem (Abu-Munshar, 2007: 1). It is to be mentioned that the crusader troops massacred the entire city and killed at least 70 thousand Muslims from July 17, 1099 CE to next one week. Jews who took refuge in the synagogues were burned alive. The crusader army roamed the streets in searching the survivors who might be hiding somewhere. When traced, they were dragged into an open place and slaughtered like sheep. (Abu-Munshar, 2007: 127-28) On the other hand, Salah al-Din assigned officers to ensure the safe arrivals of the crusaders to Christian-held territories who willingly left Islamic Jerusalem after his conquest (Abu-Munshar, 2006). Critics say that the golden cross was put down by order of

Ṣalah al-Din to clear al-Aqṣa Mosque. Ṣalah al-Din did not intend to do anything against Christianity. He had to restore Qubbah al-Ṣakhrah built by Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik. Ṣalah al-Din also allowed the Jews to return to Islamic Jerusalem after their exclusion by the Crusaders. (Nor, 2008) Karen Armstrong mentions that Ṣalah al-Din was known as a new Cyrus throughout the Jewish world. (Armstrong, 2005)

There had been very few isolated interruptions in the early rule of Islam. For example, the Umayyad Caliph Walid Ibn Abd al-Aziz, shattered a church for the expansion of Damascus mosque. It is also evidenced that Umar Ibn Abd al-Aziz, (after his succession) destroyed the extension of the mosque despite local Muslims' protest. (Kurucan and Erol, 2012: 89) Umar bin Abdul Aziz, also prohibited all kinds of trespassing or lowering down of churches and shrines erected by non-Muslim. A strict action was also taken against those who made mosques in the residential areas of non-Muslim or on church ruins. (Husin and Ibrahim, 2016)

Muslim Spain is another example of peaceful coexistence among various religious communities. (Al-Masud and Elius 2016) AkhtarulWasey (2010) maintains that a tradition of interaction between one another regardless of their religions took shape after Islam reached in Spain. Most of the people belonged to other faiths, yet Muslim rulers not only ensured their religious freedom but also ensured equal participants in the administration. There were no repression or religious discrimination of non-Muslims, and all the avenues were open to them. Inter religious interaction and dialogue prevailed from homes to the royal court. It was reversed after the Christians regained control and eliminated everything that was Islamic.

Jews in Spain under Muslim rule had more civil rights than Jews in any other place in the world. They lived in safety and comfortably beside Muslim and Christian neighbours. There had been a period of strong Jewish cultural expansion which was often known as the Golden Era of Judaism. (Yahiyah, 2002) Ahmed Zewail (2006) mentions that when Europe wasin the darkness, Spain was the centre of light.

The Ottoman Empire is said to have established in 1453 and ended in the 1920s with the rise of the modern Republic of Turkey. (Mughul, 2015) The Ottoman Empire was another example of harmonious coexistence among the people of different religions and cultures. There was no discrimination based on race, religion, colour, or any other identity. Non-Muslims enjoyed unrestrained self-government in the communities including the operation of their own schools (Ozturk, 2019). During the Ottoman rule, the rulers and the ruled included Turks, Arabs, Armenians, Serbs, Bulgarians, Greeks, Albanians, North Africans, Hungarians, and others. Muslims, Jews, and Christians were the major religious groups (Mughul, 2015) at that time. It was the most tolerant government of its age, which was able to unite people of different races, religions, and languages (Mughul, 2015). The Millet system in the Ottoman Empire was a unique feature which regulated and recognised the rights of various religious communities (Mughul, 2015). It is an inclusive approach which unites the people of different faiths under one nationhood. The Millet gave non-Muslims a sense of belongingness to and self-identity in the community, which includes the protection of their culture, religion, language, and traditions. (Barbieri, 2013)

Islam entered India through the Arab traders on the west coast of Kerala in a peaceful manner (Engineer, 2004). Arabs

had commercial transaction with the coastal people long before conquering the territory. (Mohsin, 2004) Muhammad Akram Khan observes that Muslim conquest in India began with the province of Sind which started during the period of Islam's second caliph Umar, and ultimately success came by Muḥammad bin Quasim in 712 (Khan, 2010). There is a misconception about the attack of Muhammad bin Quasim in India. The evidence suggests that the attack of Muhammad bin Quasim occurs when Hindu pirates working under local authority attacked a ship containing Muslim non-combatants and captured them. The pirates denied releasing the Muslim civilians upon which the governor of Iraq directed an army to attack them under the leadership of Muḥammad bin Quasim to release the civilian Muslims. (Yahiyah, 2002)

Muslims ruled Bengal near about six centuries. In Bengal, the medieval Muslim rule was based on social liberation, religious tolerance and human welfare (Siddilk and Habib, 2017; Elius et al. 2020). Zami and Lorea (2016) observed that Muslim rulers adopted a liberal course of action regarding the issues of religions. There had been no priority of Muslims in getting governmental jobs. Non-Muslims were also appointed to high posts based on their quality. By enjoying equal opportunity, an influential landlord (*zamindar*) class emerged among the Hindus. Dasgupta (2004) regarded the reign of Sultan Husain Shah (1494 CE to 1519 CE) as an excellent period in Bengal. During this period, hurting sensibilities of any religion could not be believed. Richard Eaton (1984) highlights on Ilyas Shahi Dynasty as an important period for the development of Bengali culture. He also maintains that the 17th century Mughal rule of emperor Akbar reflected the freedom of religions in Bengal.

Akbar Ali Khan (2018) complements that Islam Khan Chishti took disciplinary action against one of his lower rank officers for converting Hindus to Islam. Showing evidences for Muslim rulers' liberal approach to other religions, Akbar Ali Khan further mentions that Muslim rulers were against imposing Islam on others in Bengal. He also argues that even after three hundred years of Muslim rule, many influential Hindu landlords (*zamindars*) controlled different parts of Bengal. e.g. Ram Chandra and Kandarpa Narayana in Barishal, Lakkhan Manikya in Noakhali, Pratapditya in Jessore, and Binod Ray in Manikgonj, etc. (Khan, 2018; Elius et al., 2020) Sri Ram Sharma observes that the overall position of Hindus was much higher than that of the people of many European countries whose beliefs were different from the rulersduring the Muslim rule in India. (Sharma, 1988)

Conclusion

The study concludes that Islam acknowledges religious freedom as one of the fundamental rights of human beings. Though the idea of religious freedom is considered to be adopted by the West, it has been the core issue of Islam since its beginning in the 7th Century Arabia. According to Islamic teachings, a person is born free from any kind of inferiority, sin or subjugation. The Qur'an teaches that all human beings must enjoy freedom in accepting and maintaining their religion of choice. Nobody has the right to impose anything against their will. Many Qur'anic verses highlight on the freedom of individuals in choosing and practising their religions. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)) implemented the Qur'anic directives into practices. He did not apply Islamic laws upon the people of other religions. His rule

in Madinah is a burning example of the exercise of religious freedom in Islam. The charter of Madinah and the farewell address of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) granted the highest dignity for all human beings irrespective of their religions and provided them with complete freedom. The Prophet (PBUH) also made many agreements with non-Muslims granting them complete freedom. Despite the Prophets' guarantee to freedom of religion, the concept of apostasy has created huge controversy as the Prophetic tradition, "whoever changes his religion, kill him" was supported by the earliest jurists. (Saeed and Saeed, 2004:51) Today, many contemporary Islamic scholars has expressed their opinions that those who simply convert to another religion and do not engage in fighting or hostility to the Islamic state or its community cannot be executed. (Saeed and Saeed 2004: 59; Kadivar, 2014) The proponents of this argument say that the Prophet (PBUH) did not apply death penalty to any body solely for leaving Islam. In some cases, death penalty was applied to those who committed other crimes along with apostasy. History shows that people of other religions received equitable treatment in many Islamic territories during the rule of rightly guided caliphs, the Umayyad, the Abbasid, the Seljuk and the Ottoman and the Mughals. They (Muslim rulers) protected the sacred places of all religions including synagogues, churches, and temples, and ensured their freedom of worship. One instance of granting the freedom of non-Muslims is Umar's treatment of Christians in Islamic Jerusalem. Umar ensured safety and security of their lives, possessions, places of worship, and religious symbols, and did not enforce taxes beyond their abilities. There are comparatively limited counterexamples of alienation and prejudice in early history of Islam which do not outweigh the true Islamic stance of religious freedom.

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