

A REVIVAL OF 'A LETTER CONCERNING TOLERATION' FOR MUSLIMS

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Abstract. West with increasing hatred for Muslims due to extremisms, Islam is seen as religion of terrorism rather than religion of peace. Although, we can enumerate the reasons of this misperception of Islam ranging from political to religious factors; but rather than crying for change from outside why not we start from within ourselves. This change to bring peace is solely achievable by means of toleration in our religious ideas and not by spilling blood in the name of Allah. The following two sections would summarize Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration*; discuss the current situation of Muslims and the negative image of Islam. The third section would consider the possibilities of how a revival of this letter in Muslim countries would enable them to alternate their situation or at least demolish the clash between extremisms. The fourth section would compare the consequences of religious freedom and pluralism and would analyze how that could be a threat to Islam. The last section would be a bird's eye view of 23 years old woman who feels within her heart that faith and religion cannot be imposed; in order to live in global peace an act of toleration is required.

Key Words: Extremism, Terrorism, Pluralism, Religion, Toleration, Peace

Section 1: Summary of Locke's Letter to Toleration

Today, in March 2014, I read this letter before going to bed that took away my sleep. I live in Pakistan and was born in a Muslim family. What kept nagging me was the fact that if I alter Christianity to Muslim and England to Pakistan the letter would depict the same scenarios that probably had haunted Locke at his own time. Probably a western would have seen this letter in a critical light because their prevailing circumstances are different from the time Locke wrote it; but I can hardly criticize it when it is the sheer reflection of current Muslims condition. It is here that I felt this inner urge to revive this letter for Muslim nations regardless of which country they belong.

Locke wrote *A Letter Concerning Toleration* in late 16th century when a cold animosity between government and religion has been flourishing. After Golden Revolution, a shift from divine authority to civil government has been evident. In his letterⁱ, Locke vehemently opposed the idea of unifying religion and government because by doing so politics would be injected into religion. he explained that by doing so the ruler would gradually start making biased decisions and favors one's own religion to an extent that he would narrow down the practices of the alternative religion. Locke's was anxious that Catholicism might take over England; this fear drove him to respond to the former problem that toleration is key feature rather than trying to unify religion and government. These two cannot go hand in hand because each performs different functions in a society and have different goals. While Church interests are internal for instance, salvation, but it is sheer voluntary and optional; and governmental interests are external like securing life, liberty and commonwealth.ⁱⁱ

To be brief, he is strongly convinced of individual's right to freedom, so the purpose of government lies solely in protecting that right rather than enforcing morality. Locke, therefore, defended religious toleration and open the door to a perspective that religious matters are subjective; they shall not be imposed upon individuals or societies just because some or group of people think that our religion is the best and it is incumbent upon us to alter other people thought and convert them to our own.ⁱⁱⁱThe problem increases tenfold when the beliefs are diverse within a religion. He proposed that it is in our best interests to isolate morality from religion.^{iv}Besides toleration is vital in Christianity since Christianity is based on charity and the pious must practice it because

salvation and communion is only possible through it. The spirit of Christianity implies that charity calls for benevolence of all humanity, persisting on others salvation in his heart as he persist his own. Henceforth, on one hand Locke isolated private good from public (governmental) good; and on the other explained how private good is an individual's concern, the church can only help them choose the right path. This assistance by no means gave any power to church that if the person follow a wrong path he ought to be convicted or forced to choose something against his will. Locke, therefore, restrained the roles performed by government and church in an individual life to a restricted boundary.

Once this is decided Locke proceeded further that how a government and church should interact. They too are separated as their goals are different one strive for salvation and another strive for securing life and property.^v So long they don't interfere with each other they are free to believe what they may but if religious beliefs violate civil interests they are liable to be abolished by the government. Yet the church cannot do the converse because it does not act in accordance with the civil interest but with salvation.^{vi} Therefore, the isolation of religion and government could be comprehended only via reason.

Section 2: Image of Islam

Like Hobbes, many of Islamic scholars believe that religious and governmental uniformity plays a vital role for a well-functioning society. After the death of Prophet (P.B.U.H), the Caliphs in their reign tried to uniform Islam and government together. However, alien practices started flourishing in their reigns gradually despite their efforts. For e.g. fights for the gain of power; polygamy, assassination of Caliphates, the tragedy of Karbala are known to common folks. Next came a series of renewed sects and traditions that weren't Islamic: Shi'a-Sunni clash that resulted into God knows how many sub sects as ahl-e-hadith, Ismaili, Brailvi, Deobandi and so forth. I and many like me cannot answer to questions like what is the difference when Islam has been divided in as many sects as Christianity say Catholics, Protestants, and Pentecostals etc. Unfortunately, I have never seen any Muslim scholar addressing such issues. Perhaps we don't want unity within Islam or any other religion for that matter. Why invoke tolerance when people could be manipulated for personal gains of power seekers?

Then there were Turkish and Mughal empires and it was commonly said that one of the chief factor of their demise was isolation of Islam among the emperors. I disagree with this; the chief cause was their lack of education. They build tombs and palaces in lavish extravagance but no schools and colleges. After al-Ghazali philosophy was banned and this became the real cause of malaise of Muslims. Before millennium Muslims were merely considered orthodox and conservative, now after reign of Taliban of Afghanistan, al-Qaeda, the incident of 9/11 and Taliban of Pakistan the image of Islam is buried under the name of terrorism and extremism. The way Taliban of Afghanistan portrayed the image of Islamic country abolished any further desire of uniting religion and government. Following is one of numerous reports by humanitarians that the Afghan women are whipped severely for violating Taliban rules. When the Taliban take over Kabul in 1996, the women were stripped from their basic rights which put Afghanistan into a brutal state of gender apartheid. The Feminist Majority Foundation states that Taliban imposed strict rules to expatriate women from the work, from acquiring education. They are coerced to stay in their homes, and should leave their homes only if they are accompanied by a close male relative; and they imposed on women to veil. Attaining any medical attention by male physicians was prohibited on one hand while on the other they refused to allow female doctors and nurses to work. If any women violate these rules severe actions were taken by the Taliban. This was one of the most excruciating times for Afghanistan's women.^{vii}

Likewise, honor killing and blasphemy law prevailing in Muslim countries promotes extremism. The lack of tolerance exceeds not only within Muslim communities but non-Muslim communities as well.

Taliban attacked on All Saints church in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after a service on Sunday. It is believed to be the deadliest ever to target the country's small Christian minority. Doctor ArshadJavedreported that 81 people were killed and 131 injured, their ages range from 20-22. Reports said two suicide bombers carrying hand-grenades and pistols entered the church and targeted the worshippers. Pakistan's Christians protested in the country against the violence and demand better protection from the authorities.(Dawn 2013, September 23)

Similar incident happened in 2009, where a mob burned 77 Christian homes in Gojra and murdered 7 people after rumors that a copy of the

holy Quran had been desecrated during a Matrimonial ceremony of Christians.^{viii}

The point to ponder here is does Islam ever promoted intolerance towards non-Muslims (includes Theists of all other religions as well as deists and atheists)? To this I shall return later. The worst part is, it is these incidents that are staining the name of Islam. While the West is in utter delusion by this picture of Islam as true they remain unaware to comprehend the true spirit and teachings of Islam that forbade acts of extremism. Thus, extremism not only prevails from Islamic side but also from secular-western side.^{ix}

I endeavor here to sketch the current situation of Muslims where the concept of tolerance is rather needed badly. Locke's letter has to be revived to overcome these dire circumstances and to illuminate hope and power to strive against extremists.

Section 3: Toleration_ a key to demolish clash of extremisms

Slaughtering Muslims and non-Muslim communities, being at war with the west and enforcing Islam without one's consent would only add fuel to the fire. It would drive people away from Islam and invoke a hatred in the hearts of non-Muslims. The sole peace delving idea is toleration in religious matters and that would only be possible by isolating religion and government as Locke suggested. Perhaps Locke proposal fail in the west today as it is a new Age^x; but Muslim countries are living in exactly the age which Locke opposed and with few alterations the proposal seem to me the best remedy in prevailing scenario. I, thereby, advocate religious freedom and tolerance that encompass the entire humanity because the path towards salvation and religious authority is neither in the hands of Mullahs, theologians, politicians or religious scholars. Locke argued in the following passage in similar vein that Religion and faith are subjective and no authority can force us to believe or not to believe.^{xi} However, Locke's belief in morality was strongly associated with religion and so he was intolerant towards atheists. Partial reason to this intolerance was the belief that they are devoid of moral values. Perhaps, being an atheist was unthinkable in Locke's era, but now we know that people can be good moral agents even if they are not believer of any particular deity. Jonathan Shelley criticized Locke's

program of tolerance for similar reasons, as it is based on his own developed definitions that seem to be flawed and limited.^{xii}

By amending Locke's view (intolerance towards atheists) I will widen the scope of toleration as we are in dire need of it. Thus, toleration acts two-way: for extremists and fundamentalists it invokes an idea to realize that our religion is one among many, we can preach religion but not via force. The battle of 'us against them' ought to be altered into a debate of 'us and them'; for humanity as a whole toleration evolves love, friendship and peace. I termed humanity as a whole because Islam prohibits many deeds that are prevailing in the west and we severely criticize them, although we fail to address issues like adultery, misuse of Blasphemy law, incest, honor killings, harassments and rapes in our Muslim societies as well. If we comprehend this two-way functioning of toleration the clash between extremisms^{xiii} would vanish. Although, secular ideas promote toleration to an extent but they too are rigid in a sense to convert everybody against religions. For instance, West have missionaries to preach religion and Muslims TableeghiJamat strive for similar purpose, yet due to terrorism the ill repute of Islam jeopardized existence of TableeghiJamat as well. In *A Critical Appraisal of the Tableeghi Jamat*, Maryam Sakeenah explained a detailed account on life, purpose and perspective of TableeghiJamat. Hence, another adverse effect of extremism and activism is posed on these loyal and peace-loving preachers of Islam. So, a secular beholder should also understand the vast concept of toleration that encompasses his or her hatred of extremism as well. Toleration is a key that beholds to embrace humanity through love and freedom.

Section 4: Religious pluralism and religious freedom_ a threat to religion?

Toleration is a key to love and peaceful coexistence yet it is often assumed that one of its aspects, namely, religious freedom turns out to unshackle people from their religious beliefs and promotes atheism and irreligiousness. It is being considered by theologians and many religious scholars that humanity is becoming demoralized; the rapid growth in technology leads to seclusion and loss of moral values. Thus religion is endangered by religious freedom and religious pluralism. I shall dismiss the former since I already discussed how religious people could be amoral at times (incest, adultery, stealing, lying, corruption became so common in Muslim societies as well); as to the latter so-called threat of

religious pluralism, I would prove that the concept of pluralism is not new to Islam.

First of all it is to be understood that pluralism is comprised of diverse^{xiv} definitions. The definition I am proceeding here doesn't unify all religions rather it just promotes the idea of tolerance that our religion is one among many so everybody have a right to practice his or her own religion and salvation is a matter that lies between man and God (one ought not to worry for others salvation). Qur'an clearly proclaims in *Al-e-Imran*:

Then if they dispute with you, say: I have surrendered my whole being unto Allah and so have those who follow me. And say to those who have been granted the Book and to the Umiyun: Accept Islam. If they accept Islam, then they have surely received guidance but if they turn away, then your duty is only to deliver the message and Allah is watching His servants. Al-Quran (3: 20)

It entails that Islam allows peaceful co-existence with non-Muslims and also favors their rights on equal grounds as that of Muslims. Moreover, men cannot distribute salvation like vegetables; the right belongs solely to Almighty. Therefore, my concept of toleration devalues clash of extremisms both prevailing in East and West.

Section 5: Concluding Remarks:

The point is to utilize Locke's positive approach towards toleration (through few amends) that could save Muslim from their malaise and chaotic situation. Human rights cannot be crushed in the name of Islam. Islam has never allowed it. One should refrain oneself from misinterpretation of Islam and ill-conceived practices. My ideas might seem secular to fundamentalists, but I bore no apology to them, because toleration and peace is what our upcoming generation demands. What extremists' mindset is doing is only driving Muslim youth away from Islam and portraying bad image of Islam in the West. I am at loss to understand which Islam they harbor whose spirit is not in the least Islamic? The true spirit of Islam is peace, love, toleration and forgiveness.

War and bloodshed of innocents never bring peace; forcing people towards faith will never lead them to the right path. But yes the so-called authorities of religion (Islam) are themselves away from the spiritual path. In a research paper, Afshari wrote:

Then came the volcanic-like eruption of Islamist fundamentalism whose ashes have poisoned the religio-political landscape of many Iranians. The original image began to fade, or rather to be overlaid by a violent one. Nothing is more disturbing than the image, now often with me, of prison guards of the Islamic Republic of Iran raping a very young woman before her execution. In their perverted, patriarchal imagination, the Islamist executioners were resolving God's dilemma in the case of an "enemy of Islam" who happened to be a virgin (it is believed that virgins go to heaven). (Afshari 1994, 1)

These shallow men are devoid of virtue and every vice could be seen growing inside them. Moreover, Morality should be independent of religion otherwise it would become too bound to let people breathe. One could argue that the problem here is not with religion but with its interpretation. The point is who would decide upon the authenticity that what he understood is indeed the real interpretation. My voice for toleration and peace is a voice of many who are unable to raise their voices in fear of being killed, thanks to our Blasphemy Law!

In closing I would like to add that Individual is the only authority, who could decide what to believe or not to believe. Everyone could make choices in the field of religion, they have right to express their religious as well as non-religious views, they have also the right to criticize or challenge the role of religious institutions and dominant religious ideas, because human individual has the sufficient rational capacity and ability. Freedom to practice one's own religion or freedom from religion must be the products of individual choice. Furthermore, love is the essential characteristic of faith; it enables humanity to coexist in peace and harmony because freedom promotes tolerance. It further promotes the importance of realization of self and to live as a better individual within a society with honesty and dignity. Honesty with one's own self, with one's faith and religion and honesty with entire humanity. As a proverb in Bible goes 'An Honest answer is like a kiss on lips.' Likewise, the task of a government should be focused on public good rather than on private good. My project to toleration that I initiated with Locke's letter implored humanity, specifically the Muslim world, that toleration, peace and love is the true spirit of Islam.

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End Notes:

ⁱ The letter was originally written in Latin in 1689 which was addressed to an anonymous. However it was said that Locke wrote it to his friend Philip von Limborch who published it without Locke's knowledge. It was later translated in Dutch and French when it gains popularity. It is translated in English by William Popple.

ⁱⁱ See (Locke, A Letter Concerning Toleration 2003)

ⁱⁱⁱ I am not against preaching one's religion. Of course missionaries and tableghijamat can play their part in promoting religion as long as they remain within the peaceful boundary as suggested by their Holy books. But what of extremism and activism that later get injected into this preaching. Consider e.g. of Taliban of Afghanistan and Catholic popes.

^{iv} Locke believed in natural morality based on reason rather than revelation. For the idea behind isolation of religion and morality see Socratic dilemma on morality. See (Norman 2008)

^v For Locke, Civil interests are public and open.

^{vi} This clause would be critically analyzed later, because Islam relates an individual to society and civil interests are its concern. I would later argue how we can avoid the argument and still remain intact with tolerance.

^{vii} See (Women in Afghanistan 2007)

^{viii} RimshaMasih, a Christian girl who was arrested for alleged blasphemy last year, fled to Canada with her family in June after the charges were dropped.

^{ix} See (Sakeenah, the Clash of Extremisms 2012)

^x Locke may be dismayed at how modern society takes religious freedom for granted almost to the extent that we have become un-religious. He was also unaware of non-Theo centric religions. He was intolerant towards Atheists.

^{xi} The mistake arose from the fact that God ought to be publicly worshipped. Why otherwise do they compel one another unto the public assemblies?

^{xii} See (Shelley 1983)

^{xiii} The idea is not to accept others religion on belief system or leave practicing one's own. But to be tolerant to listen and to accept that we cannot coerce others into our mode of worship.

^{xiv} One definition of religious Pluralism is acceptance of various religions. It is understood in following ways: harmonious co-existence of different religions, as an endeavor to unify various religions. Also See (Religious Diversity (Pluralism) 2004)