

INTERRELIGIOUS

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Freedom of religion in Muslim countries

GUEST EDITORIAL BY IQBAL ANSARI

The Afghan national, Abdul Rahman, who was charged with apostasy for having embraced Christianity and subsequently released under the plea that he was not mentally sound enough to stand trial, seems to have been forced to go in exile.

This episode needs to be discussed openly in all Muslim countries and societies. Attention needs to be given as to why criminalizing the act of changing one's religion – to the point of treating such dissent as a capital offense – represents the ultimate cruelty. If Muslim countries provide such deterrent punishment for conversion to any other religion as a result of personal conviction, will other faith communities not be justified in putting a ban on conversion, especially to Islam?

Islam as a proselytizing religion began by preaching the basic doctrine of the right of the individual to choose his religion freely. It was insistence by the tribal lords of Makkah on adherence to the ancestral creed, and the rejection of this insistence by Muhammad, that led to conflict and to Muhammad's prolonged persecution – including the plot to assassinate him – which itself drove him to seek asylum in Madina.

Muhammad was forced to build up defenses against the continuing Makkan onslaught on his new libertarian creed. Significantly, the Covenant of the State of Madina drawn up by Muhammad provided for a confederation of Jewish, pagan and Muslim tribes, who were guaranteed complete autonomy in their religious affairs.

It was one of the refrains of Muhammad's message that it was not the fact of belonging to any particular religious fold that would guarantee salvation. Instead the emphasis was shifted to dependency on sincerity of belief in God, human fraternity, and righteous conduct based on the core values of justice and compassion.

Acceptance of religious pluralism as part of God's will, has been validated by the holy Qur'an, which also authenticates places of worship built by other faith communities as spaces where God is remembered. However, given the situation of determined active hostility by the pagan tribes of Makkah against Islam as a liberation movement, the nascent community did acquire the characteristics of a besieged community with defined boundaries, but they were ones where membership entailed rights and responsibilities, including military service. In this situation of belligerence and feeling besieged, changing faith and joining the "enemy camp" was bound to be viewed as desertion and treated as an act of treason. This is the context for recommending capital punishment for "renegades". In later ages, heretics

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were on occasions executed by rulers who were politically motivated and who used religion as a pretext.

It is not only the issue of the right to change one's religion that needs rethinking in the Muslim world, restrictions on the right of persons belonging to minority sects and religions to practise their religion freely, including building places of worship by citizens as well as immigrants, needs to be removed.

The Holy Book and the Prophet's traditions do not stand in the way of the enjoyment of freedom of religion by all persons and communities in Muslim countries, as is also required by human rights norms. It is the modes of thought of some interpreters in the theological class, and their non-contextual literal-deductionist reasoning, together with a total unconcern for justice and fairness as the basis of law, which has made Muslim peoples project an image of extreme bigotry and intolerance.

Even if Muslim theologians are not yet ready to change their thinking in any major way, the mere application of the pragmatic principle of mutuality and reciprocity in dealing with others should help them to guarantee others the same rights and freedoms that Muslims largely enjoy in most Western democracies and in India. Some hardliners, even among modern educated Muslims, are trying to explain away the core message of Islamic tolerance contained in the Qur'anic verses that "there is no coercion in religion" and that "for you, your religion, and for me, my religion". However, does this move not entail that Islam accepts the proposition that religion is not a matter of choice, but is only inherited as a tradition by birth?

It is time that the commitment made by the third extraordinary Islamic Summit Conference of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (the inter-governmental group linking 57 Muslim state), through the Makkah Declaration adopted on December 7-8, 2005 in Jeddah, to undertake a reform of the Ummah (the Muslim community). This could be achieved within an Islamic framework and "in harmony with the achievements of human civilization" including "the rule of law and protection of human rights", and could be translated into a programme of action. Such a commitment would establish priorities, one of which should be the full freedom of religion – including the freedom by all persons, citizens, minorities and migrants in Muslim countries, to change one's religion.

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