

Islam and Religious Pluralism

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Abstract

Under the UN system the relevant articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981) and the Human Rights Committee's General Comment Number 22 (1993), require States parties to ensure adequate and effective guarantee of freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief to all without any distinction.

This right includes the right to manifest one's religion or belief, alone or in community with others and in public or in private, and to establish and maintain religious, charitable or humanitarian institutions.

It also includes the right to change one's religion. However it is also required to guarantee that change of religion is not effected among vulnerable groups of people in situation of conflicts, war, displacement, dispossession, migration and asylum by inducement, coercion or fraud.

The other significant dimension of the right to freedom of religion in the system is the guarantee of non-discrimination in the enjoyment of all human rights by all persons without any distinction based on their religious affiliation.

This scheme of universal human rights rests on the primacy and centrality of the human person, apparently relativizing religion, though not ignoring it but

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treating it as “one of the fundamental elements in the conception of life” of those who profess religion (A/C3/60/1.54).

How to reconcile such a scheme of universality of religious freedom, which requires wholehearted acceptance of religious pluralism, and claim of religions, especially Islam, to exclusive truth?

In this regard guaranteeing equal right to non-Muslims to freely profess and practise their religion has not been so problematic in Muslim societies, though current practices require changes to bring them into conformity with human rights norms. But extending the right to Muslims to change their religion has been problematic.

None of the Islamic Declarations (Universal Islamic Declaration, 1981 and Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, 1990) and the Arab Charter on Human Rights 1994, has finally settled this issue.

I propose to argue that the Quran and Sunnah do not criminalize the mere act of change of religion by a Muslim person, if it is done by free choice. The paper will also deal with reasons for acceptance of religious pluralism by Muslim societies, without giving up affirmation of their belief that Islam is the only religion ordained by Allah for the entire mankind.

Such an attempt will be in conformity with the Quranic verses and Prophets' (PBUH) traditions which accord recognition to religions other than Islam as parts of His Will. It may involve “undertaking reform of the Ummah, though within Islamic framework, but in harmony with the achievements of Human Civilization ” including “rule of law and human rights” as affirmed by the Makkah Declaration adopted by Extraordinary Islamic Summit Conference, Jeddah on 7-8 December. 2005.

Keywords: Islam; Religious Pluralism; The Right to Freedom of Religion; Civilization.

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