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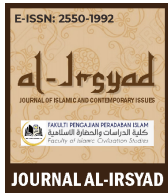
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## Does Islam tolerate other religions? A Quranic perspective

### [*Adakah Islam bertolak ansur dengan agama lain? Satu perspektif al-Quran*]

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**Keywords:**

Tolerance, Religion, Islam, Society, Conflicts

**ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the Islamic tolerance of other faiths and belief systems. Islam also advocates tolerance of diversity. The conflict between religions can be avoided through tolerance; thus, harmony and unity between religions can be fostered in a pluralistic society. Therefore, the discussion of this article focuses on the Quranic view of practical tolerance to avoid conflicts which are a direct result of failure to appreciate the values of tolerance which underpin Islamic teachings. Using the documentation research method, this article found that problems or misunderstandings are common in all religions but their teachings, especially Islam, must be interpreted in ways that nurture unity and understanding between various cultures and religious communities. The implications of this study show that Allah has told his servant to be fair to Muslims and non-Muslims, no matter who they are or where they come from, and to let them practice their faith. Tolerance in the Quran is based on the belief that good is more vital than evil. Because of this, the Quran teaches its followers to always forgive, especially about other religions, to have a noble mind, a forgiving attitude, and humane values, and to accept the rights of others. Tolerating differences in Islam involves coming to terms with history, understanding, and differences between Islam and modernity, which must first come from within Islam.

**Kata Kunci:**

Toleransi, Agama, Islam, Masyarakat, Konflik

**ABSTRAK**

Artikel ini membincangkan tentang toleransi Islam terhadap keimanan dan sistem kepercayaan agama lain. Islam juga menganjurkan sikap bertoleransi dalam kepelbagaian. Melalui toleransi, konflik antara agama dapat dielakkan dan keharmonian serta perpaduan antara agama dalam disuburkan dalam masyarakat majmuk. Oleh itu perbincangan artikel ini menumpukan kepada pandangan al-Quran mengenai toleransi secara praktikal bagi mengelakkan konflik yang berpunca daripada kegagalan menghayati nilai-nilai toleransi yang menjadi asas kepada ajaran Islam. Menerusi metode kajian dokumentasi, artikel ini mendapati masalah atau perselisihan faham adalah perkara biasa dalam semua agama tetapi ajaran mereka, khususnya Islam, mesti ditafsirkan dengan

*cara menyuburkan perpaduan, persefahaman antara pelbagai budaya dan masyarakat agama. Implikasi kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa Allah SWT telah memerintahkan hamba-Nya untuk berlaku adil kepada orang Islam dan bukan Islam, tidak kira siapa mereka atau dari mana berasal, dan membenarkan mereka mengamalkan kepercayaan agama. Toleransi dalam al-Quran adalah berdasarkan kepercayaan bahawa kebaikan lebih penting daripada kejahatan. Oleh sebab itu, al-Quran mengajarkan supaya sentiasa memaafkan, terutama tentang agama lain, berakhlak mulia, sikap pemaaf, nilai kemanusiaan, serta menerima hak orang lain. Bertolak ansur dengan perbezaan dalam Islam melibatkan memahami sejarah, pemahaman, dan perbezaan antara Islam dan kemodenan yang mesti datang dari dalam Islam.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS TOLERANCE?

In much contemporary public debate, ideas of hate and terror have become synonymous with Islam. It is difficult to talk about how justified these associations might or might not be, as protagonists are readily accused of promoting Islamophobia or of a naïve and dangerous tolerance (Dalal, 2008). In the Quran, tolerance is a prerequisite for coexistence even if accommodating those social, cultural and religious differences does not meet the 'approval' of Muslims. Tolerance without greater acceptance indicates a sense of conditioned approval. However, the Quran views tolerance as an important starting point in establishing greater peace. Its teachings seek to establish peace between various religious communities and acknowledge differences in beliefs and cultures, emphasising on maintaining good relations between adherents of different faiths (Barry, 1995; Hicks, 2002). Islam is emphatic that religious freedom is vital for sustainable peace. The Quran calls on all Muslims, "If anyone from the polytheists asks for your protection, grant it to them so they may hear the Word of Allah, then escort them to a place of safety, for they are a people who do not know," (*al-Tawbah* [9] verse 6). This aspect is highlighted in the Quranic discourse on tolerance.

The word tolerance literally means 'to bear'; as a concept, it refers to respect and acceptance (Baktiari & Norton, 2005). In Arabic, the equivalent term is *tasāmuḥ* which means soft and easy (Ibn Manẓūr, 2003). Hence, tolerance means a deliberate decision to refrain from prohibiting, hindering or otherwise coercively interfering with the conduct of which one disapproves, although one has the power to do so (Horton, 1998; Engelen & Nys, 2008; Kodelja, 2006; Uahin, 2007).

The violence which toleration historically aimed at containing remains a constant in present-day recourses to its relevancy, while the negative valuations of human interrelations that underlie such assessments are passed over (Varsamopoulou, 2015). Suwarno (2005) argued that religion-related conflicts could easily arise when people believe their sacrosanct religious doctrines, teachings, traditions, and values are under attack. Although provocateurs and certain political elites instigate some religious conflicts, religious conflicts can also arise due to limited interreligious communication and a lack of mutual understanding between religious groups. Indirectly or directly, the increasingly exclusive religious rhetoric that emphasises purification rather than compassion can persuade adherents to combat the evils observed in other religions. This type of rhetoric can lead to the depiction of other groups as infidels who must be converted or, worse, as adversaries who must be subjugated or eliminated. As a result, escalating religious conflicts in Indonesia will imperil religious freedom and interreligious relationships, which can extend beyond Indonesia and affect other nations. From this point,

tolerance is a way of managing conflicts in a diverse society. Not everyone can accept religious, ethnic, cultural, or moral differences (Kasmo, Hamdi, Taha, Salleh, & Alias, 2015). Hence, conflicts or crises in life occur when there is coercion. Tolerance is a prerequisite for peace (Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2005) based on sound interactions and understanding among religious communities.

The definition of tolerance in terms of respect and willingness to accept different views may be appropriate in the context of an interaction between multi-religious communities. Most religious codes emphasise principles of tolerance and respect for others (Kerestes & Youniss, 2003). Religious tolerance does not mean that one should be subjected to claims of other faiths or force other believers to accept any specific religion. It is an attitude of respect for other religions and understanding other religious teachings or principles through discussions, dialogues and reading (Usman, Wazir, Mutalib, & Ibrahim, 2017). It can be the basis of a good and long-term relationship between different religions worldwide. Moreover, we highlight that tolerance has four main components, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
Tolerance main components

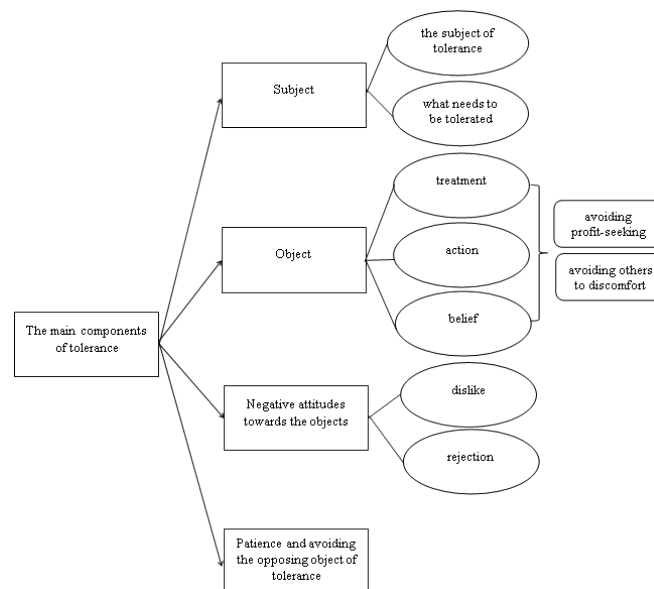


Figure 1 shows that tolerance has four main components. First, the subject of tolerance and what needs to be tolerated. Second, the object of tolerance associated with treatment, action or belief can be analysed based on two approaches: avoiding profit-seeking and any action that causes discomfort to others. Third, negative attitudes towards the objects either in dislike or rejection, and fourth, patience and avoiding the opposing object of tolerance. It means tolerance is not merely based on thought, insight or understanding, but more importantly, it relates to individual behaviour, organisation or group in relation to what should be tolerated (Awang, 2007). Hence, this framework of tolerance's main components is based on the discussion of tolerance in the Quran. For example in *surāhs al-Naḥl* [16]:125, *al-Kāfirūn* [109]:1-6, *al-Shūrā* [42]:15, and *al-An'ām* [6]:108. These verses from the Holy Quran demonstrate that Islam's tolerant attitude is profoundly rooted in its sacred texts. In contrast, religious intolerance, extremism, and violence are contrary to the sacred Quran's teachings (Akhtar et al., 2016).

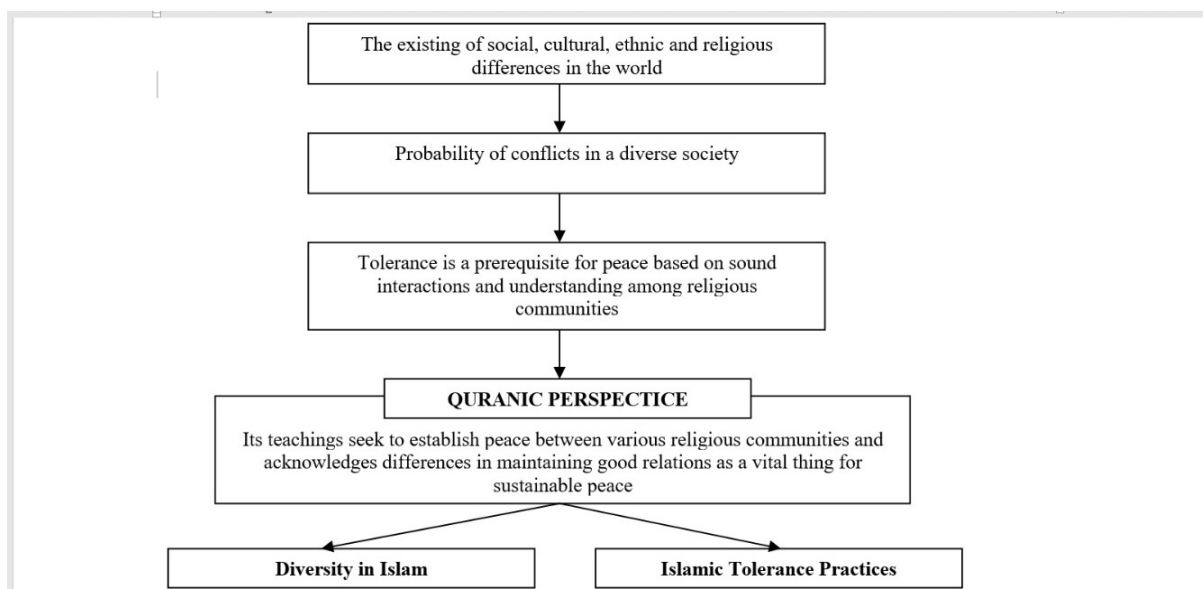
Kurth and Glasbergen (2017) argued that the subject and object of tolerance and the power to interfere are directly derived from conceptualisation. The hierarchy of value is derived from the idea that an objection occurs as well as the voluntary decision not to interfere. Both are based on values, whereby the objection is valued less than the voluntary decision not to interfere. The last aspect of limits of tolerance is included in the framework as it appeared to be an important element of tolerance from the data analysis. Below is a description of each aspect of the framework. In short, tolerance contains compelling, balanced, gentle, alert and thoughtful traits. It is an attitude of openness in various forms, such as reforming leaders to guide the community by respecting the diversity of ideas, cultures and religions and being generous and open to different views (Saeed, 1999). Therefore, respecting the plurality of viewpoints and avoiding the use of force to influence behaviours or beliefs is crucial in a multi-religious society.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This paper discusses the Islamic tolerance of other faiths and belief systems based on Quranic views. This paper uses a descriptive qualitative approach which is an attempt to understand various concepts found in the research process using content analysis techniques and library research. Qualitative content analysis is one of the several qualitative methods currently available for analysing data and interpreting its meaning (Schreier, 2012). As a research method, it represents a systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Schreier, 2012). For the prerequisite and successful content analysis, the data of this study was reduced to concepts that describe the research phenomenon (Cavanagh, 1997; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) by creating categories, concepts, a model, conceptual system, or conceptual map (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Morgan, 1993; Weber, 1990). At the same time, the research library in this research uses the types and sources of secondary data obtained from research results, articles and reference books that discuss topics related to the research theme (Creswell, 2014; Iskandar & Aqbar, 2019). Based on the literature reviews and inquiries above, this paper proposes a conceptual framework to develop the idea as follows:

**Figure 2**

*Islamic tolerance based on Quranic perspective*



## 3. DIVERSITY IN ISLAM: IDENTITY AND INFLUENCE

Promoting Islamic ethos is key to acknowledging differences and diversity, and in this regard, the Quran outlines a firm standard for all, Muslim and non-Muslims alike, based on the universal values of justice and equality (Dewji, 2022; Johns, Mansouri, & Lobo, 2015). Peace is the ultimate goal, and if there is to be peace, there must first be tolerance (Haddad, 1983; Koynu, 2004). Diversity relates to physical features, social and cultural phenomena, and the freedom to choose one's religion (Gole, 2003).

Diversity is recognised and is highly praised in the Quran. Thus, *sūrah al-Rūm* [30] verse 22 asserts, "And one of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours; most surely there are signs in this for the learned." This implies that differences must be expected and tolerated (Brubaker, 2013). They are viewed as a cause for celebration. Hence *al-Ḥujurāt* [49] verse 13 recognises diversity and difference in terms of gender, skin, colour, language and belief, as well as of that rank. In short, the Quran acknowledges differences are inherent and a law of God (*sumatullah*) as reflected in *Hūd* [11] verse 18.

Quranic verses explicitly state that religious coercion is unfeasible or forbidden; other verses may express the same view. These underwent substantial development during Muhammad's prophetic career. The earliest reference to religious tolerance is seen in *al-Kāfirūn* [109] verse 6, a *sūrah* that recognises the unbridgeable gap between Islam and the religion of Meccans and concludes by saying, "You shall have your religion and I shall have

my religion.” This is best interpreted as a plea to the Meccans to refrain from religious coercion (al-Zamakhsharī, 1998). Since it does not demand any action to suppress polytheism in Mecca, it has sometimes been understood as reflecting an attitude of religious tolerance on the part of Muslims. Again, the Quran asserts in *al-Qaṣaṣ* [28] verse 55, “We shall have our deeds and you shall have your deeds; peace be on you, we do not desire the ignorant.”

*Sūrah al-Ḥijr* [15] verse 85 and *al-Zukhrūf* [43] verse 89 are also relevant in this context. These verses are clearly addressed to the Prophet to turn away from those who do not believe. The injunction *fasfaḥ safḥ al-jamīl* (so turn away with kindly forgiveness) in *sūrah al-Ḥijr* verse 85 is related to the imminent approach of the last day. The verse implies that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) may leave the unbelievers alone because God will soon judge and inflict on them a just punishment. It will be the fault of the idolaters when they insult him and reject the message that he brings to them (Ibn Kathīr, 2000).

*Sūrah Yūnus* [10] verses 99 and 100 convince the Prophet that matters of religious beliefs are in the hands of God and that any attempt to spread his faith by coercion would be an exercise in futility. It was an attempt to allay the Prophet's distress due to his initial failure to attract most Meccans to Islam; people believe only as a result of divine intervention, and the Prophet should not blame himself for their rejection of the true faith (Usman & Ibrahim, 2014). Despite prophetic efforts to the contrary, most people opt for unbelief (*Yūsuf* [12]: 103; *al-Naḥl* [16]: 37). The Quran declares in numerous passages that prophets can only deliver the divine message; it is not within their power to assure its acceptance or implementation (*al-Naḥl* [16]: 35 & 82; *al-Qaṣaṣ* [28]: 56; *al-Ankabūt* [29]: 18). This argument is compatible with the responsibility of Muslims to convey the message of Islam to other people. Although Muslims recognise diversity worldwide, the guidance (*hidāyah*) depends on Allah.

Consider the Constitution of Medina (post hijra), which has a clause recognising that Jews have a distinct and legitimate religion of their own – “The Jews have their religion and the believers have theirs” (Zanjawiyyah, nd.). It accepts the existence of religions other than Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. It stands to reason that this passage reflects very early attitudes of nascent Islam, which had been willing, at that time, to tolerate the existence of other religions in the peninsula.

In *sūrah al-Baqarah* [2] verse 256, “There is no compulsion in religion” has become evidence for discussions of religious tolerance in Islam. It was revealed in connection with the expulsion of the Jewish tribe of Banu Nadir from Medina (al-Wahīdī, 2000). In the earliest work of exegesis, the verse is understood as an injunction to refrain from the forcible imposition of Islam. However, there is no unanimity of opinion regarding the precise group of infidels to which the injunction has initially applied. Commentators who maintain that the verse was originally meant as applicable to all people consider it as abrogated (*mansūkh*) by *al-Tawbah* [9] verse 73 (al-Sa’dī, 2005). This perspective is necessary to avoid the glaring contradiction between the idea of tolerance and the policies of early Islam, which did not allow the existence of polytheism or any other religion in the Arabian Peninsula (Lewis, 2013). Those who think the verse was intended from the very beginning only for the People of the Book need to consider it as abrogated. Though Islam did not allow the existence of any religion in most of the peninsula, the purpose of *jihad* against them according to *sūrah al-Tawbah* verse 29 is their submission and humiliation rather than their forcible conversion to Islam (Sulaiman, 2016). As is well known, Islam does not practice religious coercion against Jews and Christians outside the Arabian Peninsula (Friedmann, 2003), though substantial limitations were placed in various periods on the public aspects of their worship.

Later commentators, some of whom are characterised by a pronounced theological bent of thought, treat the verse in an entirely different manner. According to them, *sūrah al-Baqarah* verse 256 is not a command. Instead, it ought to be understood as a piece of information or to put it differently, a description of the human condition: it conveys the idea that embracing a religious faith can only be the result of empowerment and free choice. It cannot be the outcome of constraint and coercion. Religious coercion would also create a theologically unacceptable situation - if people were coerced into true belief, their positive response to prophetic teaching would become devoid of value and the world would cease to be ‘an abode of trial’ (al-Rāzī, 2004). Consequently, the moral basis for the idea of reward and punishment would be destroyed. This supports the idea of free will.

These tolerant attitudes toward the non-Muslims of Arabia were not destined to last. After the Muslim victory in the battle of Badr, the Quran began promoting religious uniformity in the Arabian Peninsula. *Sūrah al-Anfāl* [8] verse 39 urges the Muslims to fight with them until there is no more persecution and religion should be only for Allah. Once this development occurred, the clauses in the Constitution of Medina bestowing legitimacy on the existence of the Jewish religion in Medina had to undergo substantial reinterpretation. The clause stipulating that, “The Jews have their religion and the believers have theirs” was now taken to mean that the Jewish religion is worthless (Rahman, 2012; Rose, 2011; Yildirim, 2006). Thus, despite the differences, various ethnic and religious groups were urged to see the bigger picture and to rise above the ‘tribal’ loyalties that divide them. The Quran also notes blessings of diversity (Bouma, Haidar, Nyland & Smith, 2003); in *sūrah al-Baqarah* [2] verse 136 and *al-Shūrā* [42] verse 13, it specifically acknowledges other prophets, such as Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

#### 4. ISLAMIC TOLERANCE: SOME PRACTICES BASED ON THE QURAN

Tolerance of out-group members is essential for harmonious and peaceful social existence and democratic survival, especially in heterogeneous societies (Altinoğlu, 2018). Hundreds of verses in the Quran relate directly or indirectly to the issue of tolerance and intolerance of systems of belief (Hashmi, 2003); also, the Quran recognises various religious communities and encourages tolerance (Quṭb, 1980). In *Sūrah al-Isrā'* [17] verse 70 speaks of human beings as being given honourable positions among all creations. This is followed by the responsibility to care for all creation through mankind's role as *khalifah* (vicegerent) of God on earth (Nasr, 2009). Similarly, *al-Mā'idah* [5] verse 32 and *al-An'ām* [6] verse 98 are about the common origins of humanity, which means all human beings are related to each other (Bazna & Hatab, 2005).

Tolerance is linked to justice and equality (Ji, Ibrahim & Kim, 2009). Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was commanded by the Quran to be just among people and for his example to be upheld and imitated faithfully by Muslims (Aksoy & Elmali, 2002). Thus, *al-Nisā'* [4] verse 135 emphasises that justice and equality are a must for Muslims. No human being is capable of and is in a position to judge others. According to *al-Nahl* [16] verse 124, judgment belongs to God alone, and each person will receive their reward from the Lord based on their works. The emphasis on justice does not place limits on the tolerance of others. Indeed, Prophet Muhammad is a role model for tolerance (Ramadan, 2007; Usman, Ismail, Daud, & Wazir, 2016). His many policies reflect the Quranic view of tolerance of others. An example is Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) years in Medina. One day he was sitting with some of his companions and watched a funeral procession. The Prophet stood up as a sign of respect. When one companion remarked, "O Prophet of God, this was a Jewish person's funeral! The Prophet replied, "Was he not a human being?" (al-Bukhārī, 1993). Another example is the crafting and implementing the so-called Constitution of Medina which protected Muslims, Jews and pagan groups from external aggression while each group retained its right to freedom of religion (Demirel, 2013; Nielsen, 2003).

Tolerance in the Quran is only the beginning of a realisation of sustained peace between communities (Umaru, 2013). Thus, the Quran asks Muslims to engage in dialogue with others, especially the *Ahl al-Kitāb* (People of the Book). *Sūrah Āli' Imrān* [3] verse 64 instructs Muslims to "Come to an equitable proposition between us and you that we shall not serve any but Allah and (that) we shall not associate aught with Him."

Multicultural tolerance is greatly emphasised in the Quran (Endresen, 2015). In its early years, Islam's popularity and survival depended on its flexibility and tolerance of different cultures in various regions that came under Muslim rule. Historians pointed to one example of such an approach in the eighth and ninth centuries when the vast majority of non-Muslims retained their religious, cultural, and ethnic privileges for centuries without feeling the need to convert to the religion of their rulers. According to Islamic Jurists, *Jizya* (head tax) is imposed upon non-Muslims as a badge of humiliation for their unbelief or by way of mercy for protection given to them by the Muslims. Some Jurists (Shāfi'ī and Aḥmad) consider this tax as punishment for their unbelief. There is no economic motive behind its imposition, because their continued stay in a Muslim land is a crime, so they have no escape from being humiliated (Ahmed, 1975). It is beyond doubt that Islam would never impose *Jizya* as a punishment or compensation for non-Muslims for their lack of belief in God (Abu-Munshar, 2012). Like all legislative verses of the Quran, the ultimate purpose of *Sūrah al-Tawbah* [9] verse 29 is not legislation but moral and religious guidance. This may be inferred from the many conditions and qualifiers which the Quran attaches to its legal sanctions and prohibitions (Ayoub, 1991).

Another group against whom religious coercion may be practised are apostates. As a rule, classical Muslim law demands apostates repent or be put to death if they refuse (Griffel, 2001). It has to be pointed out that the Quran includes references to capital punishments for apostasy, like in *sūrah al-Baqarah* [2] verse 217. However, a person forced to abandon Islam has not considered an apostate, as clearly reflected in *al-Nahl* [16] verse 106. Most jurists maintain that apostates should be allowed to repent (Kamali, 1998); there are differing views concerning the time allowed for this purpose.

Hence, tolerance and coercion have developed substantially in the Quran and are characterised by different interpretations in the Islamic tradition and jurisprudence (Fadzil, 2011). Yet, whatever the original meaning of *al-Baqarah* [2] verse 256 may have been, it is more compatible with religious tolerance than with any other approach. Muslims who want to practise religious toleration throughout the centuries of Islamic history could use *al-Baqarah* verse 256 and *al-Kāfirūn* [109] verse 6 as a divine sanction to support their stance. According to al-Qaradāwī (1989), religious tolerance in Islam is divided into three stages. The first stage is the lowest level, which allows people of different faiths to choose their religion or belief (freedom of religion). This means there is no coercion to convert to Islam via threats of killing, torture or deprivation of property. The second stage is simple, giving the right to embrace religion or choosing the beliefs one loves while not pushing for something one does not believe in, even if it is obligatory. The third stage is the highest level of religious tolerance. It does not



prohibit those who profess other religions from performing rituals sanctioned by their religion, even though they contradict Islamic teachings. In sum, Islam emphasises tolerance in social life by allowing every man and woman the freedom to embrace religion.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Islamic teachings are founded on Godliness (*rabbāniyah*) and holistic (*shumūl*) in all aspects of human beings. This does not mean Islam accepts all, only things that do not conflict with its teachings. If the practices are against Islamic principles, they must be abandoned. The values of forgiveness and generosity inherent in Islam prove that a human being's inner strength (soul) can control his passion so that it does not negatively affect their actions. Specifically, the soul has the power that can subdue and defeat the enemy with wisdom and functions as a fortress that can withstand Satan's temptations. Thus, Islamic tolerance of non-Muslims in matters of religion is that non-Muslims are allowed to practise their beliefs and religious duties and live according to their customs, even if they are forbidden in Islam.

Islam admits it is a true religion (which is assumed by Allah), as reflected in *sūrah Āli 'Imrān* [3] verse 19. In reality, though, Islam accepts all the world's different religions. Moreover, in *sūrah al-Hujurāt* [49] verse 10 indicates that differences in race, colour, and creed are not a barrier to living together as a family. In this regard, every human has the same right and is entitled to live and achieve what is possible by their potential ability. However, their actions must be responsible and guided by shared values and norms.

Regarding the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, Allah has instructed his servant to be fair irrespective of one's background allowing them to practice their own religion. The basis of tolerance in the Quran is a belief in goodness over evil; hence, the Quran teaches its adherents to be always forgiving, particularly about other faiths, and to have a noble mind, forgiving attitude, and humane attitude values and respect the rights of others. The politics of tolerating differences in Islam requires reconciliation with history as well as an understanding and reconciliation (as in the relationship between Islam and modernity) that must first come from within Islam.

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