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Love and Religious Harmony as Reflected in Sir Syed's *Tafsīr al-Quran*

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Article History: Published Online: _Published_	Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) was keenly interested in the study of comparative religion. His writings on the scriptures became a turning point in the history of religions in India. He had developed his views on religious scriptures on the basis of his own study of Quran. Sir Syed wrote several treatises to establish communal and religious harmony. He had a desire to patch up between Muslims and Christians. To this he had tried his best through biblical studies
Keywords: Comparative religion, Scriptures, Sir Syed, Religious harmony	

According to him, a true and just study of combative religions may pave the way for good relations in a pluralistic society. According to him, human act should be judged in the light of true religion

rather than religion judged in the light of human action. Human actions are not responsible to malign any religion.

Freedom of Religion

According to Sir Syed, Islam does not give permission to forceful conversion whereas Muslims are instructed only to guide and to preach Islamic teachings in a very polite way and nicely. In support of his stand, he gives many verses of the Holy Quran as follows:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ فَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِالطَّاغُوتِ وَيُؤْمِنْ بِاللَّهِ فَقَدِ اسْتَمْسَكَ
بِالْعُرْوَةِ الْوُثْقَىٰ لَا انْفِصَامَ لَهَا وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ (٢٥٦)

There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the Right Path has become distinct from the wrong path. Whoever disbelieves in Tâghût and beliefs in Allâh, then he has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that will never break. And Allâh is All-Hearer, All-Knower. [\[i\]](#)

ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ
بِمَنْ ضَلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ (١٢٥)

Invite (mankind, O Muhammad SAW) to the Way of your Lord (i.e. Islâm) with wisdom (i.e. with the Divine Revelation and the Qur'ân) and fair preaching, and argue with them in a way that is better. Truly, your Lord knows best who has gone astray from His Path, and He is the Best Aware of those who are guided. [\[ii\]](#)

فَلْ أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْهِ مَا حُمِّلَ وَعَلَيْكُمْ مَا حُمِّلْتُمْ وَإِن تُطِيعُوهُ تَهْتَدُوا وَمَا عَلَى الرَّسُولِ إِلَّا الْبَلْغُ الْمُبِينُ (٥٤)

Say: "Obey Allâh and obey the Messenger, but if you turn away, he (Messenger Muhammad SAW) is only responsible for the duty placed on him (i.e. to convey Allâh's Message) and you for that placed on you. If you obey him, you shall be on the right guidance. The Messenger's duty is only to convey (the message) in a clear way (i.e. to preach in a plain way)."[\[iii\]](#)

وَأَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ فَإِن تَوَلَّيْتُمْ فَإِنَّمَا عَلَى رَسُولِنَا الْبَلْغُ الْمُبِينُ (١٢)

Obey Allâh, and obey the Messenger (Muhammad SAW), but if you turn away, then the duty of Our Messenger is only to convey (the Message) clearly.[\[iv\]](#)

نَحْنُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَقُولُونَ وَمَا أَنْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ بِجَبَّارٍ فَذَكِّرْ بِالْقُرْآنِ مَن يَخَافُ وَعِيدِ (٤٥)

We know of best what they say, and you (O Muhammad SAW) are not the ones to force them (to Belief). But warn by the Qur'ân, him who fears My Threat.[\[v\]](#)

فَذَكِّرْ إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مُذَكِّرٌ (٢١)

So remind them (O Muhammad (SAW)) – you are only a one who reminds.[\[vi\]](#)

وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَأَمَنَّ مِنَ فِي الْأَرْضِ كُلُّهُمْ جَمِيعًا أَفَأَنْتَ تُكْرَهُ النَّاسَ حَتَّى يَكُونُوا مُؤْمِنِينَ (٩٩)

And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed, all of them together. So, will you (O Muhammad SAW) then compel mankind, until they become believers?[\[vii\]](#)



Love and Harmony

According to Sir Syed, human being is composed of two elements: his faith which he belongs to Allah and his moral sympathy which he owes to his fellow-being. Allah's part i.e. religion of man should leave to Allah. He says, religion of man and his choice should be free to choose whatever he or she likes, for which man is accountable to Allah alone. The other part i.e. relationship of man with the human being in the society where he is living should establish irrespective of religion. In this society we all, irrespective of religion should help, cooperate and love to each other to be harmonic society. Here, in this society we all should create environment to progress all sections of so society, irrespective of religion.[\[viii\]](#)

In his Tafsir, Sir Syed says friendship with non-Muslims in respect of religion is totally prohibited by Allah. But apart from their religion, Muslims may establish friendship with non-Muslims.



According to him, there is no problem to help them and even to love them because all are human being. The verse is as follows:

لَا يَتَّخِذِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ فَلَيْسَ مِنَ اللَّهِ فِي شَيْءٍ إِلَّا أَنْ تَتَّقُوا مِنْهُمْ تُقَاتُوا وَاللَّهُ نَفْسَهُ طَّوَّافٌ عَلَيْكُمْ وَبِحَدِيثِهِ إِلَى اللَّهِ الْمَصِيرُ (٢٨)

Let not the believers take the disbelievers as Auliyâ (supporters, helpers) instead of the believers, and whoever does that will never be helped by Allâh in any way, except if you indeed fear a danger from them. And Allâh warns you against Himself (His Punishment) and to Allâh is the final return. [\[ix\]](#)

By many renowned scholars, Sir Syed was entitled a champion of Hindu-Muslim unity in India because in his reformative policies he had been objective. [\[x\]](#) In his Tafsir, speeches and other writings he emphasises on the love and harmony among all Indians irrespective of religion. Addressing a meeting at Gurdaspur on January 27, 1884, Sir Syed said, “By the grace of God, two nations live in India at the moment and they are so placed that the house of the one adjoins that of the other. The shadow of one’s wall falls in the house of the other. They share the same climate; take water from the same river or well. In death and life as also in joys and grieves of others everyone is participant. One cannot live without



the cooperation of other. If, united we can sustain each other, if we are disunited, it would lead to the destruction and downfall of both.”[\[xi\]](#)

Islamic teachings about love and intolerance, Sir Syed quotes some distinguished Christian authors’ remarks who had written this subject in a supporting way. Sir Syed says that, in this saying, we do not mean to deny that some of the later Mohammadan conquerors were guilty of cruelty and intolerance, but that the doctrines of our religion should not be judged from their actions. It must be inquired, in order to discover whether they acted according to it or not, and we shall then arrive at an undeniable conclusion that their actions were in oppositions to the doctrines of their religion. But, at the same time, we find that those conquerors that were anxious to act according to the doctrines of their religion did practice tolerance, and granted amnesty, security and protection to all their subjects, irrespective of cast or creed. History furnishes us with innumerable instances of the tolerance of Muslim conquerors.[\[xii\]](#)



Sir Syed says that, there are many remarks of Christian writers, by that prove tolerant spirit of Islam. In an article upon the *General History of Spain*, a Christian writer holds: “The Umayyad of Spain rule deserves to mention, as it contrasts them so favour ably with the contemporary and subsequent rules of Spain, even to the present time (19th century), and that is their universal toleration in religious matters” (*Chambers’s Cyclopaedia*).[\[xiii\]](#)

Godfrey Higgins writes on the same issue that follows:

Nothing is as common as to hear the Christian priests abuse the religion of Muhammad (Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) for its bigotry and intolerance. Wonderful assurance and hypocrisy! Who was it expelled the Muslims from Spain, because they would not turn Christians? Who was it killed the millions of Mexico and Peru, and gave them all away as slaves because they were not Christians? What a contrast have the Muslims exhibited in Greece! For many centuries the Christians have been permitted to live in the peaceable possession of their properties, bishops, patriarchs, and churches; and the present moment the war between the Greeks and Turks is no more waged on account of religion than was the late war between the Negroes in Demerara and the English. The Greeks and the Negroes want to through of the yoke of their conquerors, and they are both justified in so



doing. Wherever the caliphs conquered, if the inhabitants turned Muslims, they were instantly on a footing of perfect equality with the conquerors. An ingenious and learned Dissenter, speaking of the Saracens, says, 'they persecuted nobody; Jews and Christians all lived happy among them i.e. Muslims. But though we are told that the Morescoes were banished, because they would not turn Christian, I suspect they, by their arguments, so gained upon the Christians, that the ignorant monks thought that the only way their argument could be answered was by the inquisition and the sword; and I have no doubt they were right as far as their wretched powers of answering them extended. In the countries conquered by the caliphs, the peaceable inhabitants, whether Greeks, Persians, Sabians, or Hindus; were not put to the sword as the Christians have represented; but after the conquest was terminated, were left in the peaceable possession of their properties and religion, paying a tax for the enjoyment of this latter privilege, so trifling as to be an oppression to none. In all the history of Caliphs, there cannot be shown anything half so infamous as the inquisition, or a single instance of an individual burnt for his religious opinion; nor do, I believe, put to death in a time of peace for simply not embracing the religion of Islam. No doubt the later Muslim conquerors in their expeditions have been guilty of great cruelties, these Christian writers have sedulously laid to the charge of their religion; but this is not just. Assuredly,



religious bigotry increased the evils of War, but in this the Muslims were not worse than the Christians.[\[xiv\]](#)

The same author remarks thus:

The efforts of the missionaries of the Christians, though evidently allowed the greatest latitude, do not appear to have had any great success. I have some doubt as to what would happen, even in this enlightened age as it calls itself, if grand seignior were to send (as our missionaries did a Mr. Drummond to Geneva, to teach their peculiar doctrines) one of the richest of his Muftis to build a mosque, and to preach the doctrines of the Quran in the centre cause a renewal, under the auspices of the priests, of the fires of the year eighty, or of those of more recent date at Birmingham, would cause our ministers to answer him by the mouth of one of our admirals, who might entertain an opinion that it was possible to bombard Constantinople.[\[xv\]](#)

On this same subject, another distinguished author, John Davenport in his apology writes in the following:

It was at the council of Nicea that Constantine invested the priesthood with that power whence flowed the most disastrous consequences as the following summery will show: the massacres and devastations of nine mad crusades of Christians against unoffending Turks, during nearly two hundred years, in which many millions of people perished,



the massacre of the Anabaptists; the massacre of the Lutherance and Papists, from the Rhine to the extremities of the North, the massacre ordered by Henery III and his daughter Marry, the massacre of St. Bartholomew in France , and forty years more of other massacres, between the time of Francis-I, and the entry of the Henery-IV into Paris, the massacres of the inquisition , which are more execrable still, as being judicially committed ; to say nothing of the innumerable schisms, and twenty years of the Popes against popes, bishops against bishops, the poisonings, assassinations,, the cruel rapines and insolent pretentions of more than a dozen Popes, who far exceeded a Nero or a Caligula in every species of crime, rice and wickedness, and lastly to conclude this frightful list, the massacre of the twelve millions of the inhabitants of the New World, executed crucifix in hand! It surely must be confessed that so hideous and almost uninterrupted a chain of religious wars, for fourteen centuries never subsisted but among Christians, and that none of the numerous nations, stigmatized as heathen, ever spilled a drop of blood on the score of theological arguments. [\[xvi\]](#)

Another celebrated Christian Writer Edward Gibbon, greatest among the modern historians and whose authority cannot be doubted or questioned, writes as follows:

The wars of the Muslims were sanctified by the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), but



among the various precepts and examples of his life, the caliphs selected the lessons of the toleration that might tend to disarm the resistance of the unbelieving. Arabia was the temple and patrimony of the God of Muhammad (Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him); but he beheld with less jealousy and affection the other nations of the earth. The polytheists and idolaters who were ignorant of his name might be lawfully extirpated, but a wise policy supplied the obligations of justice and after some acts of intolerant zeal, the Muslim conquerors of Hindustan have spared the pagodas of the devout a populous country. The disciples of Ibrāhīm (AS), of Mūsā (AS) and Īsā (AS) were solemnly invited to accept the more perfect revelation of Muhammad (Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him); but if they preferred the payment of a moderate tribute, they were entitled to the freedom of conscience and religious worship.[\[xvii\]](#)

The author of an article, entitled, Islam as a Political System inserted in The East and West writes on the same subject as following:

Mahomet was the only founder of a religion who was at the same time temporal prince and a warrior. Their power lay exclusively in restraining violence and ambition; his temptation was ambition, and the sword as at his disposal. It is therefore to be expected that, making religion a means to temporal power and having obtained that sway over the



minds of his followers by which they accepted the law and right whatever he chose to promulgate, his code should be found at variance with all others, and even in opposition to those dictates of justice which are implemented in the breasts of all men. If, then, we find that, it is not so- if we find him establishing maxims of rights in international dealings, of clemency in the use of victory, moderation in that of power above all, of Toleration in Religion we must acknowledge that, among men who have run a distinguished course, he possesses peculiar claims to the admiration of his fellow creators". Again he says that, "Islam has never interfered with the dogmas of any faith, never persecuted, never established an inquisition, never aimed at Proselytism. It offered its religion, but never enforced it; and the acceptance of that religion conferred co-equal rights with the conquering body and emancipated the vanquished states from the conditions which every conqueror, since the world existed, up to the period of Muhammad, has invariably imposed. For its Proselytes, there was no obligation of denial and revilement of their former creed; the repetition of a single phrase was the only form required or pledge exacted.[\[xviii\]](#)

The same author, "is evinced in every page of the history of Islam, in every county to which it has extended; so that in Palestine a Christian poet (Lamartine) has exclaimed, twelve centuries after the events to which we are referring, The Mohammadans are only



tolerant people on the face of the earth, and an English traveller (Slade) reproaches them with being too tolerant".[\[xix\]](#)

Sir Syed delivered a speech at Jaalandhar on 04 February 1884 emphasizing the need for love and cooperation between Hindus and Muslims for progress and welfare of India. He said, "I intend that whatever is useful and advantageous to Indians and on which Indians should concentrate and which is in fact more useful for the whole country".[\[xx\]](#)

Nation and Nationality

Sir Syed is denounced as the father of the two-nation theory on the basis of the word "nation" used frequently in his speeches. Some relevant extracts from his speeches having a bearing on this much too important subject are as follows:

By the grace of God, two nations live in India at the moment and they are so placed that the house of the one adjoins that of the other. The shadow of one's wall falls in the house of the other. They share the same climate; take water from the same river or well. In death and life, joys, and grieves of others, everyone is a participant. One cannot live without the



cooperation of others, if united we can sustain each other; if, we disunited it would lead to great destruction and downfall of both (Hindu and Muslim). To me, the meaning of the word *Qaum* (nation) applied to the people who live in the same country. All people living in Afghanistan are called one nation (*Qaum*).[\[xxi\]](#)

Conclusion

By many renowned scholars, Sir Syed called as a champion of Hindu-Muslim unity in India because in his reformative policies he had been secular. In his Tafsir, speeches, and other writings he emphasizes the love and religious harmony among all Indians irrespective of Religion. To him, without love and mutual cooperation in society no one can achieve success and the right goals. He never made a difference between communities irrespective of religion. To him, religion is one's personal matter.

Notes and References

[\[i\]](#) The Quran, 2: 256

[\[ii\]](#) The Quran, 16: 125

[\[iii\]](#) The Quran, 24: 54

[\[iv\]](#) The Quran, 64: 12



[v] The Quran, 50: 45

[vi] The Quran, 88: 21

[vii] The Quran, 10: 99

[viii] Khan, Sir Syed Ahmad, *Tafsir al-Quran wa huwa al-Huda wa al-Furqaan*, Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library, Patna 1995, Vol. 2, pp. 8-9

[ix] The Quran, 3: 28

[x] Sir Syed delivered a speech at Patna on 27 January 1883 emphasizing the need for cordial relations between Hindus and Muslims. He said, " India is home we ignore that aspect of ours which we owe to God, both of us on the basis of being common inhabitants of India actually constitute one nation: and the progress of this country and that of both of us is possible through mutual cooperation, sympathy, and love. We shall only destroy ourselves by mutual disunity and animosity and ill-will to each other. It is pitiable to see those who do not understand this point and create a feeling of disunity among these two nations and fail to see that they themselves will be the victims of such a situation and inflict injury to themselves. My friends, I have repeatedly said and say it again that India is like a bride who got two beautiful eyes i.e. Hindus and Musalmans. If they quarrel with each other that beautiful bride will become ugly and if one destroys the other, she will lose one eye. Therefore, the people of Hindustan you have now the right to make this bride either squint eyes or one-eyed"

[xi] Mohammad, Shan. (Ed.) *Writings and Speeches of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan*, Nachiketa Publications Limited, Bombay, 1972, p. 265

[xii] Khan, Sir Syed Ahmad, *Life of Mohammed*, New Delhi, Cosmos Books, 2002, p. 435

[xiii] *Ibid.*, p. 435

[xiv] *Ibid.*, pp. 435-436

[xv] *Ibid.*, pp. 436-37

[xvi] *Ibid.*, pp. 437-38

[xvii] *Ibid.*, p. 438

[xviii] *Ibid.*, p. 438-39



[xix] *Ibid.*, p. 439

[xx] Mohammad, Shan. (Ed.) Writings and Speeches of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Op. Cit., p. 174

[xxi] *Ibid.*, pp. 265-66