Speaking up for religious tolerance

Differences of religion should not make people fight one another, rather they should cooperate in doing good and ward off evil.

As a Muslim I am deeply distressed and perplexed at the incendiary view, allegedly emanating from the Saudi Grand Mufti, that all churches in the Arab peninsula be destroyed.

This view, if it were really expressed, is offensive. It violates all canons of decency, international law and the human rights of our Christian brothers.

It contradicts many exquisite passages in the Quran and the practices of Prophet Muhammad. It runs contrary to centuries of Islamic history of peaceful co-existence with other religions. The syariah gives ample guidance on inter-faith relations.

Multiplicity of faiths: In innumerable passages, the Quran recognises religious pluralism. In 2:256, it is stated: “There is no compulsion in religion.” In 109:6, there is the exquisite passage: “Unto you your religion, unto me mine.”

In Surah 11:118, it is declared: “If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people: but they will not cease to dispute.”

In Surah 10:99, Allah gave this admonition: “Had your Lord willed, those on Earth would have believed, all of them together. Will you then compel people against their will to believe?”

In 18:29, it is commanded: “Let
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**Media Title**
The Star

**Date**
18 Apr 2012

**Section**
Nation

**Page No**
1,26

**Language**
English

**Article Size**
443 cm²

**Readership**
1,026,812

**Circulation**
304,904

**PR Value**
RM 61,654

**Ad Value**
RM 20,551

**Color**
Full Color

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him who will, believe; and let him who will, disbelieve.”

Common fountain: In the Quran 42:13, it is implied that the divinely-revealed religions all stemmed from the same source. “He has ordained for you the same religion which He ordained for Nooh (Noah) ... and which He ordained for Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses) and Esa (Jesus) saying you should establish religion and make no divisions in it.”

“Every nation has its messenger” – 10:47. “Nothing has been said to you save what was said to the messengers before you” – 41:43.

Respect for all prophets: Plurality of prophets and multiplicity of revelations reflect a divine will. The Prophets of all revealed religions are brothers and there is no difference between them with regard to the message. Muslims are obliged to believe in them all.

In Surah 2:136, it is stated: “We believe in Allah and that which has been sent down to us and that which has been sent down to Ibrahim (Abraham), Ismail (Ishmael), Ishaq (Isaac), Yaqoob (Jacob), and to Al-Asbaat (the offspring of the 12 sons of Yaqoob), and that which has been given to Musa (Moses) and Esa (Jesus), and that which has been given to the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we are Muslims in submission to Him.”

According to the renowned Malaysia-based Afghan scholar Hashim Kamali, “Islam sees itself as the third of the Abrahamic religions. “The Hebrew prophets and Christ are deeply respected by Muslims. The Virgin Mary is given the most exalted spiritual position in the Quran: a chapter of the Quran is named after her, and she is the only woman mentioned by name.

“The tombs of the Hebrew prophets, who are also Islamic prophets, are revered by Muslims to this day.”

All Christians and Jews are given the special status of ahle-kitab (believers in a book).

Respect for places of worship: All places of worship are sacred and must be defended. In Surah 22:40, the Quran speaks of monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques “as places in which God is commemorated in abundant measure”. In Islamic history, the clergy in the churches were given full authority over their flocks with regard to all religious and church matters. Mosques were often built next to churches. When the Muslims conquered Egypt, they gave the Coptic churches back to the Copts and restored their rights.

In the early history of Islam, Muslims and Christians often prayed simultaneously in many churches, e.g. at the Cathedral of Saint John in Damascus. Likewise, Prophet Muhammad allowed the Christians of Najran to pray in Muslim mosques. When Prophet Muhammad migrated to Madinah, there was a large number of Jews in the city. One of the first affairs of state that he dealt with was to establish a treaty with them, according to which their beliefs were to be respected and the state was obliged to ward off harm from them.

Duty of civility: In the book *Civilisation of Faith* by Mustafa as-Sibaa’ie, it is stated that the Quran obliges the Muslim to believe in all the Prophets and Messengers of Allah, to speak of all of them with respect, not to mistreat their followers, to deal with them all in a good and gentle manner, speaking kindly to them, being a good neighbour to them and accepting their hospitality.

Differences of religion should not make people fight one another or commit aggression, rather they should cooperate in doing good and warding off evil (Quran 5:2, 5:5).

“Allah alone is the One who will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection” – Quran 2:113.

“And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best” – Quran 29:46. “And insult not those who invoke other than Allah, lest they should insult Allah wrongfully without knowledge” – Quran 6:108.

In the light of the above, it is obvious that any view that exhorts Muslims to destroy Christian places of worship is in serious conflict with the letter and spirit of tolerance in the Quran.

The Malaysian Constitution honours this spirit. Article 3 states: “Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony.”

The alleged view of the Saudi Mufti has been repudiated by the top Muslim cleric in Turkey, Mehmet Gormez, who has stated categorically that the Islamic civilisation is not hostile towards previous religions.

Those whose hearts are filled with hate and whose lips drip the blood of vengeance must remind themselves of the caution administered by Kamali that fanaticism is not part of Islam, as the Prophet confirmed in a hadith: “One who promotes fanaticism (asabiyyah) is not one of us, nor is one who fights for asabiyyah, nor the one who dies for asabiyyah.”

*Shad Saleem Faruqi is Emeritus Professor of Law at UiTM and a consultant to USM.*