**Religious Peace and Tolerance:**

**Lessons from the Medina Charter**

By Mohamed Bin Ali

**Synopsis**

*The Medina Charter constituted by Prophet Muhammad in 622 in Arabia was intended to end inter-tribal conflicts and maintain peace and cooperation among the Medinan people. Many lessons can be drawn from the charter to enhance peaceful inter-religious relations today.*

**Commentary**

The Medina Charter (Arabic: *Sahifah Medina* or *Dustur Medina*) is arguably known to be the first constitution ever written incorporating religion and politics. The Charter which was drawn up by Prophet Muhammad was intended to end inter-tribal conflicts and maintain peace and cooperation among the people of Medina. It constituted a formal agreement between Prophet Muhammad and all of the significant tribes and families of Yathrib (the old name for Medina) including Muslims, Jews, Christians and pagans.

The Charter serves as an example of finding resolve in a dispute where peace and pluralism were achieved not through violence but rather respect, tolerance, and peaceful means. Many lessons could be drawn from the charter to enhance religious pluralism in the contemporary world.

The charter has also been acknowledged by Muslim scholars as a useful document that can be used to deconstruct contemporary extremist discourse. Importantly, the charter reflects Islam’s protection of human life and religious minorities and reiterates that these notions have always been fundamental in the Islamic tradition.

**The Charter**

The Medina Charter was drawn up by Prophet Muhammad upon his migration from Mecca to Medina in 622. The constitution establishes rights and obligations among the people of Medina known as the *Ansar* and those who migrated with the Prophet (the *Muhajirun*), and the Jewish tribes of Medina. This was initiated as they embarked upon a new journey of co-existence and co-operation in the nascent polity founded in Medina.

Prophet Muhammad's inspiration for this pluralistic model was the Quran, which makes it incumbent upon Muslims to accept and respect all of the previous messengers without distinction and honor their communities. Using the Quran as the supreme guide, the Prophet attempted to spread peace and establish unity in Medina. He created a community or *ummah* that was made up of diverse communities and faiths.

The Charter gave equality to all its citizens and accepted the coexistence of different religions in the community .Under the constitution, all religious, ethnic and tribal groups had equal protection, rights and dignity. They would live by their own beliefs and judge themselves by their own laws.

It is worth noting that the Medina Charter is not the only document drafted by Prophet Muhammad to establish peace with the people of medina. In 628, Prophet Muhammad granted a Charter of Privileges to the Christian monks of St. Catherine Monastery in Mount Sinai. This charter consisted of several articles covering issues such as protection of Christians, freedom of worship and movement, and the right to protection in war.

**All communities as one nation**

When Prophet Muhammad entered Medina upon his migration, he discovered a diverse population consisting of many different tribal communities, who had also been fighting each other for nearly a century. During that time the Arabian community was facing a civil strife resulted in division, conflict and violence.

One of the most significant features or contents of the charter is the recognition of all different communities as one nation (*ummah*) regardless of religions and tribes. The first clause in the charter started with the statement “They are a single or community” or “They form one nation”. This is seen as a very important first step taken by Prophet Muhammad to unite the Medinan communities. Such a unity reflects the nature of God’s creation of human beings that are made up of different races and religions. In this respect the Quran says that God created human beings from different tribes and communities so that they get to know each other (Quran 49:13). This is the essence of unity in Islam which translates into mutual cooperation and a sense of belonging and ownership.

The other important value that could be drawn from the charter is tolerance. Prophet Muhammad successfully inculcated the value of tolerance in the hearts of all the different communities in Medina. Article 30 of the charter highlights the value of religious tolerance. It says that the “Jews of Banu Awf shall be considered a community along with the believers (Muslims). They shall be guaranteed the right of religious freedom along with the Muslims. The right shall be conferred on their associates except those who are guilty of oppression or violators of treaties. They will bring evil only on themselves and their family”.

This notion of religious tolerance is also in the rooted in the Quran in several verses - “there is no compulsion in religion” (Quran 2:256), "To you your religion and to me mine" (Quran 109:6) and “Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans - those [among them] who believed in God and the Last Day and did righteousness - will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve” (Quran 2:62)

**Importance of the Medina Charter today**

The Medina Charter has set out many of the principles essential to the peaceful functioning of a pluralistic society. Essentially, the charter has established many important values and lessons that are really needed today for enhancing religious pluralism and tolerance as well as finding resolutions to deal with inter-religious conflicts.

Through the Charter, Prophet Muhammad has drawn upon the essence of unity, respect, tolerance, and love to combine and create a pluralistic community. This attributes are deemed important in the context of living in a plural society. For instance, the concept of unity as it refers to nations can be translated into putting one’s country above all other considerations when it comes to issues of security and defence. Hence, for example, Singaporeans should abide by the law of their country as long as they live in it as “one united people.” They should be proud to defend it from any harm or threat against their country. They should jealously guard their homeland from foreign threats because they are first and foremost Singaporeans.

The other key lessons that could be drawn from the Medina Charter includes areas to enhance religious freedom, security of the community, acceptance of followers of religions as one nation, and the need for all religious communities to protect one another from any threats, discrimination and oppression. It is about giving space and understanding for both majority and minority citizens to enjoy their rights, pertinent to their needs in areas of faith, socio-political circumstances and other unique needs. The aim is not just to tolerate but to truly build a one united people who are familiar, comfortable and feelings of being safe with each other.

**Revival of the Charter**

In light of the atrocities by ISIS and the persecution of religious minorities by ISIS and the like-minded groups, Muslim scholars have called for the revival of the Medina Charter. They have come together in a conference that was convened in January 2016. Marakesh, Morocco. The main objective of the conference was to reaffirm the Constitution of Madinah and discussed legal frameworks around the premise of ‘The Rights of Minorities in Predominately Muslim Lands‘.

Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah, President of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies and King Mohammed VI of Morocco who hosted the conference said that the Medina Charter affirmed the unity of the society in terms of religious pluralism and freedom of religion, but despite its obvious importance, it has not garnered much study. Hence, it is time the Medina Charter is studied, analysed and its contents are revived and applied in order to build a more tolerant, inclusive and peaceful global community.

In the current times, many people are grappling with finding solutions to inter-religious conflicts and tensions. The Medina Charter is seen as a useful guide to help mediating conflicts in the world today that seems to be driven by politics, economics and religious ideologies.

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