# 11 Tolerance

**Summary** 11.1 The Origins of Islamic Tolerance. – 11.2 Islamic Tolerance and European Intolerance. – 11.3 Universal Tolerance. – 11.4 Beyond Tolerance.

In recent times, particularly since 9/11 but also earlier, many Muslim intellectuals have debated the existence and eventual form of an Islamic tolerance. Among them: the theologian ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Ibrāhīm Maṭaʿnī (d. 2008), of al-Azhar University, who as early as 1993 published in Cairo *Samāḥat al-Islām fī l-daʿwa ilā Allāh wa-l-ʿalāqāt al-insāniyya manhāj*$^{an}$ *wa-sīra* or 'The Tolerance of Islam in the Appeal to God and in Human Relations, as a Method and a Way of Life';[1] the Saudi ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Laḥīdān, of the Imām Muḥammad Ibn Saʿūd University in Riyadh, with his *Samāḥat al-Islām fī muʿāmalat ghayr al-muslimīn* or 'The Tolerance of Islam in Relations with Non-Muslims';[2] Muḥsin al-ʿAzzāzī, with *Samāḥat al-Islām wa-nabdhi-hi li-l-ʿunf* or 'Islam's Tolerance and Its Rejection of Violence';[3] and two homonymous texts, entitled *Al-yusr wa-l-samāḥat fī l-Islām* or 'Facilitation and Tolerance in Islam', one by Fāliḥ Ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr[4] and the other by Muḥammad Ibn ʿUmar Bāzmūl;[5] and again, ʿAbd al-Wāsiʿ al-Ghashīmī and Amīr Fāḍil Saʿd, of the Yemeni University of Judayda, with their *Al-tasāmuḥ al-islāmī. Qirāʾat fī muʿṭayāti-hi al-fikriyya wa-āthāri-hi al-wāqiʿiyya fī ḍawʾ al-Kitāb wa-l-Sunna* or 'Islamic Tolerance: An Interpretation of Its Speculative Aspects and Practical Effects in the Light of the Book and the

1 Maṭaʿnī 1993.
2 Al-Laḥīdān 2014.
3 Al-ʿAzzāzī 2015.
4 Al-Ṣaghīr 2016.
5 Bāzmūl s.d.


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Sunna';[6] and ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ Ibn Yūsuf al-Gharīb with *Tasāmuḥ al-Islām maʿa ghayr al-muslimīn* or 'Islam's Tolerance towards Non-Muslims'.[7]

The authors of these various works employ the Arabic term *samāḥa* سماحة for tolerance; or the related *tasāmuḥ* تسامح, which embraces a sense of reciprocity and comes to mean 'mutual tolerance'. And if we consult the dictionaries, ancient or modern, we see that the terms chosen by contemporary Muslim intellectuals to denote tolerance – specifically the Arabic words *samāḥa* and *tasāmuḥ* – speak primarily of generosity and nobility of spirit, forbearance and kindness. The modern dictionaries have added 'simplification' or 'facilitation' (*taysīr* تَيْسِير), and gloss the expression 'the tolerance of Islam' (*samāḥat al-Islām*), for example, as 'facilitation in religion'. They also often employ as a synonym the term *yusr*, which means easiness but also abundance, comfort and wealth. Clearly there is no trace in these Arabic terms of the idea of endurance, and they have nothing to do with suffering and affliction as is the case in Latin *tolerantia*: their scope touches rather on the great Islamic value of mercy or clemency, *raḥma* – the will to good that, as we have seen, necessarily proceeds from the greater to the lesser. They are not far from judiciousness or *ḥilm*, which is first and foremost the ability to meet evil with good and not to take revenge when given the chance. Islamic tolerance is also nourished by goodness, in spirit and in action, what Muslims of all periods have called *iḥsān*.

## 11.1 The Origins of Islamic Tolerance

Islamic thought invariably takes its cue from the foundational literature; and this is the case even today for tolerance. In the Qur'ān, the two Arabic terms just considered – *samāḥa* and *tasāmuḥ* – are nowhere to be found, nor in fact is their verbal root; yet the notion of tolerance is by no means alien to the Holy Book. Among the passages most often quoted by contemporaries in support of their theses are: "To you be your religion and to me my religion", from the sura *al-Kāfirūn* 'The Disbelievers' (Qur'ān XCIX,6); and, from the sura *Yūnus* 'Jonah': "Had your Lord wished, the whole of mankind would have believed in Him. Would you force people to have faith?" (X,99-100). Also frequently quoted, from the sura 'The Cow' is the verse that says: "Let there be no compulsion in religion [*lā ikrāh fī l-dīn*]" (II,256), brandished as an iconic declaration of tolerance according to Islam,[8] to the extent that it appears in the various declarations that Arab and Islamic countries have formulated since the 1980s in response to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Tolerance recurs regularly in the Prophetic Tradition:

> A man came to the Prophet and asked him: – Messenger of God, who is the best believer in his faith? He answered: – He who has the finest character qualities.
>
> The man asked again: – And what is the best part of faith? He answered: – Patience and tolerance [*al-ṣabr wa-l-samāḥa*].[9]

6 Al-Ghashīmī, Saʿd 1434/2013.

7 Al-Gharīb s.d.

8 Today, but not in the past: cf. Zilio-Grandi 2008.

9 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Muṣnad, muṣnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 19002.

Another famous example, again from the Sunna, belongs to the already mentioned category of Prophetic sayings that the Tradition calls 'holy' (*qudsī*) because, as in the Qur'ān, it is God who speaks to the Prophet in the first person. According to the story in question, God, ever the Most Merciful of the merciful, promised the Prophet He would welcome all obedient monotheists into paradise and, once that was done, that he would also bring up out of hell the disobedient who had nevertheless showed tolerance towards their neighbours. He will command the angels: "Be tolerant with this servant of Mine as he has been tolerant with My servants".[10]

Again according to the Tradition, when the ancient jurist Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767) saw a naked man washing his genitals and anus in the ritual ablution basin, he told him: "Go ahead with your ablutions, religion is tolerance, and the Prophet used to say 'be tolerant towards others that they may be tolerant towards you'".[11] The Prophet's own tolerance was proverbial: his Companion Anas Ibn Mālik testified that Muḥammad was among the most tolerant of men, and also among the best and most courageous.[12]

Another saying from the Tradition, important because it refers to the typical criterion of Islamic ethics of virtue, which is divine love: "God loves tolerance in selling, tolerance in buying and tolerance in judging".[13] And lastly a negative example: the Prophet described one of his bitter enemies, the apostate al-Aswad, as a man devoid of tolerance and courage.[14]

The accounts of the Prophet's life dedicated to tolerance, not infrequently combined with courage and therefore indicating indulgence and not deference, let alone cowardice, are numerous, and they all allude to a practical tolerance, which is in the last resort the ability to live with others without creating complications. As in the following story reported by a Companion:

> While I was walking with the Prophet who was wearing a Najrani outer garment with a thick hem, a Bedouin came upon the Prophet and pulled his garment so violently that I could see the impress of the hem of the garment on his shoulder, caused by the violence of his pull. Then the Bedouin said: – Order for me something from God's fortune which you have. The Prophet turned to him and smiled, then ordered that a gift be given to him.[15]

Tolerant behaviour is therefore a cornerstone of Islamic ethics according to both the Qur'ān and the Prophetic Tradition, and contemporary authors continually remind us of this: whatever their doctrinal standpoint, the method they all share is a continual reference back to the foundational texts, the Qur'ān and Sunna, however variously explained and interpreted. In so doing, of course, the authors confine their investigations to accounts of the early Islamic community, ignoring later history. And here we should remember

10 Al-Isfarā'inī, *Mustakhraj*, no. 329.

11 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣnad, kitāb al-ṭahāra*, no. 233.

12 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tahdhīb al-āthār*, no. 125.

13 Al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, *Al-Mustadrak 'alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, no. 2275.

14 Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu'jam al-awsaṭ*, no. 4193.

15 E.g. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb farḍ al-khumus, bāb mā kāna al-nabī [...] yuṭī al-mu'allafat qulūbu-hum [...] min al-khumus*, no. 3149; on the authority of Anas Ibn Mālik. English Translation on https://sunnah.com/bukhari:3149.

that the exclusive focus on origins, a remarkable peculiarity from a comparative point of view, is actually quite unsurprising, in the case of tolerance as in other cases: the idea that 'true Islam' is the 'original Islam' goes beyond the so-called Salafist doctrine, which insists on the good example of the ancestors, or *salaf*, the first three generations of Muslims, as the best embodiment of the religion. It has, on the contrary, always been present in Islamic thought on man and the world. Hence the absence of a historical perspective in Muslim theological thinking: history has its importance, but it concerns historians, and not theologians or preachers. From a theological perspective, history is merely a sequence of cases that conform or fail to conform to the Islam of the origins. Investigating individual dynasties, or governments, or even individuals in the light of their obedience or disobedience to fundamental criteria, might well prove useless, or at least redundant, for the edification of the mass of Muslims.

## 11.2 Islamic Tolerance and European Intolerance

Apart from the temporal limitation deriving by the exclusive use of foundational literature, most contemporary Islamic works on tolerance share the same intent, which is apologetic and defensive, not infrequently accompanied by accusations against European countries and the United States. A good example of this line is offered by the Egyptian ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Ibrāhīm Maṭaʿnī. His book *The Tolerance of Islam in the Appeal to God and in Human Relation*s seeks precisely to respond to those in Europe who accuse Islam of being

> a bloodthirsty, terrorist and violent religion, which disallows liberty and for which the only alternative to conversion is death […], a creed that has trained its followers in aggression, so that Islam has become the enemy of humanity and human civilisations and should therefore be defeated or eliminated altogether.[16]

But the strange thing is, the author continues, becoming quite heated, that Europe, while describing Islam in such a scathing manner, forgets or pretends to forget the blood it has shed everywhere throughout history and even in modern times: Maṭaʿnī then enumerates the Crusader expeditions, Zionism, communism, the Balkan wars and the violence perpetrated against the Bosnians. "Shamelessly amnesiac", Europe accuses Islam of being the religion of terrorism and violence, of "confiscating liberties" if not of "total inhumanity",[17] he writes, and notes that some of his own compatriots, Arabs and Muslims of Egypt, side with these European beliefs and air them in the media. In response to these attacks, the author is at pains to illustrate for a good portion of his book that, on the contrary, the call to Islam involves non-violent methods and that the religion allows little or no space for coercion and killing. He also strongly emphasises the importance of patience and forgiveness, as well as Islam's fundamental conformity to tolerance and mercy towards all mankind and not just towards believers. He concludes

16 Maṭaʿnī 1993, 3.

17 Maṭaʿnī 1993, 3-4.

that relations between Muslims and others have, from the beginning, been those of peace and not war:

> Any killing that took place between Muslims and non-Muslims during the Prophetic era, the period to which we have limited this study, was caused by the belligerence of non-Muslims towards Muslims, and not simply by their unbelief […], as those who claim that the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is one of war and not peace, would like to believe.[18]

## 11.3 Universal Tolerance

Of a different orientation is the work by the Yemenis ʿAbd al-Wāsiʿ al-Ghashīmī and Amīr Fāḍil Saʿd, published in Kuwait in 2013 under the title *Islamic Tolerance*: *An Interpretation of Its Speculative Aspects and Practical Effects in the Light of the Qurʾān and the Sunna*, referred to above.

The authors' intention is no longer defensive but instead proactive and dynamic – to promote Islamic tolerance, to illuminate its rational principles and not only its traditional ones, with the concrete aim of building a shared humanitarianism, the heritage of all beyond or despite the confessional perspectives of each. The book's structure is also less traditional and more rational: to be sure, these authors also continually invoke the Qurʾān and Sunna as keystones, but their discourse often proceeds autonomously, with quotations from diverse theologians and philosophers, medieval and also contemporary, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

It is a nimble but at the same time a rigorous work, reviewing the etymology and definitions of tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*), its religious bases, its legal regulation, its practical aspects and real-life applications, as well as its effects on individuals and communities. The authors also make a point of insisting on the tolerance always shown by Muslim thinkers for the philosophical ideas of others. As prerequisites for this all-too-rare perspective, the authors identify on the one hand humanity, that is, the fact of being human, with the characteristics that necessarily predispose us to humanitarianism, and on the other hand "the fullest self-realisation of man".[19]

Alongside the familiar "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (Qurʾān II,256), al-Ghashīmī and Saʿd quote a passage from the sura *al-Ḥujurāt* 'The Dwellings': "O mankind, We have made you […] races and tribes, that you may know one another, but the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most godfearing of you" (XLIX,13); in their commentary on this verse, they highlight that the reference is to people in general (cf. *yā ayyuhā al-nās*), and not to Muslims alone. Inserting themselves neatly into the field of contemporary religious pluralism,[20] and in particular into the sphere of interreligious dialogue, they also draw attention to the well-known verse that calls other monotheists – 'the people of the Book' – to "a common word

18 Maṭaʿnī 1993, 167.

19 Al-Ghashīmī, Saʿd 1434/2013, 31-6.

20 Al-Ghashīmī, Saʿd 1434/2013, 34-5. It might be opportune here to add a further terminological note: when Arab authors speak of 'pluralism', they employ the expression *taʿaddudiyya*, which does not, in itself, mean the belief that reality is formed by equally valid first principles, but rather, simply, plurality, multiplicity, the fact of being many and diverse; moreover, *taʿaddudiyya* can even mean increase and growth, without any value content.

[*kalima sawāʾ* كلمة سواء ] between us and you" (Qurʾān III,64);[21] and they add that it is precisely that crucial Islamic trait which is tolerance that has inspired many Western thinkers and writers. They point among others to the example of the German Enlightenment scholar Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (d. 1781) who, struck by the rationality of Islam and in particular of its tolerance, is said to have devoted himself to promoting that faith.[22]

Thanks not least to its speculative content and use of non-Islamic sources, al-Ghashīmī and Saʿd's work marks a successful departure from the restricted classical reading of Islamic tolerance as forbearance and facilitation, to the recognition of the dignity and rights of all, an interpretation of tolerance more common in Western thought.

## 11.4 Beyond Tolerance

The Tradition, or Sunna, records that in 390 CE the Prophet Muḥammad, well before the Prophetic vision that occurred in 610 marking the beginning of the Qurʾānic revelation, signed, together with some notables of his powerful tribe the Quraysh, a pact called the 'alliance of virtues' or 'of the virtuous' (*ḥilf al-fuḍūl* حلف الفضول) with the aim of healing the hatred and violence stirred up by previous intertribal conflicts. In memory of this ancient accord, the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, based in Abu Dhabi, in 2018 hosted a conference in Washington entitled 'Alliance of Virtue for the Common Good', attended by more than four hundred delegates representing the three Abrahamic religions. Largely responsible for this initiative was a prominent figure in the contemporary Islamic world, Abdallah Bin Bayyah (ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Maḥfūẓ Ibn Bayya), born in Mauritania in 1935.

The Washington discussions resulted in a document, *Alliance of Virtue for the Common Good. The Washington Declaration* (7 February 2018),[23] which proposed "a renewed alliance of virtue, global in nature, open to men and women of all faiths, ethnicities and nationalities, dedicated to joint action for the sustainability of peace, justice, compassion and mutual respect". The signatories recognised that the values shared by the three monotheisms are, especially in today's world, more important than their respective formal differences, and that it was therefore necessary to disseminate and support the ethical convictions central to all three traditions by opposing attempts to misrepresent or vilify different cultures and ethnicities. To this end, the Declaration urgently called on every sector, public service, religion, business, academia, civil society, and the arts, to share responsibility for fostering international and intercultural understanding, with a view to reconciliation that, working across denominational divides, went beyond mere tolerance.

The Declaration expressly claimed continuity with a slightly earlier conference held in Marrakesh in 2016 under the auspices of King Mohammed VI and in cooperation with Morocco's Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Once again,

21 Al-Ghashīmī, Saʿd 1434/2013, 33-4.

22 On Lessing's actual attitude towards Islam and religions in general, cf. the recent study by Jan Loop (2019, particularly 16-17).

23 The original text is on `https://www.abc-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/WashingtonDeclaration-Final-02-12-18.pdf`.

the meeting took place at the initiative of Bin Bayyah and was global in reach, albeit limited to the Muslim world. The proceedings centred around the rights of religious minorities in majority-Muslim countries and their full recognition, but also pressed for the development of an Islamic jurisprudence certainly rooted in Tradition and its principles, but responsive to global changes and based on the concept of citizenship (*muwāṭana* مواطنة). On this occasion too, the work of the conference culminated with the signing of a document, *The Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in the Muslim World*, which emphasised the need to move well beyond mere tolerance for religions and cultures other than Islam, going also beyond the notion of respect (*iḥtirām* احترام) – a more mature and complex form that includes effective recognition – and rather enjoined cooperation (*taʿāwun* تعاون) which is shared action and mutual support, together with a commitment on the part of culture, the arts, and civil society as a whole, to work on the basis of the Family of ʿImrān sura's 'common word', *kalima sawāʾ* (Qurʾān III,64) for the necessary affirmation of the rights and freedoms of all, without constraints, without fanatical intransigence and without arrogance. The document closed with the uncompromising assertion: "The use of religion to justify any claims that violate the rights of religious minorities in Muslim countries is inadmissible". As was the case later in Washington with the 'alliance of virtue', here too reference was made to that ancient 'Charter (*ṣaḥīfa* صحيفة) of Medina', that some today see as an expression of protoconstitutionalism.

It is worth recalling that Bin Bayyah, promoter of both the above-mentioned Declarations – Marrakesh (2016) and Washington (2018) –, was among the most convinced signatories of another pivotal document, the *Amman Message* (2006),[24] in which two hundred of the most respected Muslim scholars agreed first of all on the definition of 'Muslim', and affirmed the legitimacy of the main Islamic schools of thought[25] – prohibiting their murder, anathemas (*takfīr* تكفير), the dishonouring or financial disadvantaging of any of their members. Evoking a well-known saying attributed to the Prophet about divine mercy being the basis of divergence – "divergence in my community is Mercy"[26] – the drafters of the Message also insisted on the rightness of internal diversity. The document concludes with a call for its decisions to be widely disseminated, via their inclusion in the educational curricula of imams and in sermons at mosques; quoting in support a passage in the sura 'The Women', where it is said:

> There is no good in most of their private conversations [*najwā-hum*] but only in the enjoining of charity [*ṣadaqa*] or of what is known to be right [*maʿrūf*], or reconciliation [*iṣlāḥ* إصلاح] between people; and whoever does this seeking God's pleasure, We will give him a mighty reward. (Qurʾān IV,114)

**24** Cf. `http://ammanmessage.com/?lang=ar`; an English version – not always entirely consonant with the Arabic one – is also available at `https://ammanmessage.com/?option=com_content%20&task=view&id=74&Itemid=42`.

**25** The four Sunni legal schools, and then the Jaʿfarī, Zaydī, Ibāḍī and Ẓāhirī.

**26** In Arabic: *ikhtilāf fī ummatī raḥma*.