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## THE QUR'ĀN AND TOLERANCE

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### Introduction:

The following discussion proceeds, in part, from an assumption that tolerance in society is a good thing, that the more a society is tolerant of the various groups and elements it comprises, the more productive and creative that society is. Further, it is assumed that such productivity and creativity will nourish themselves and issue in unforeseen achievements touching upon the range of human experience, making the whole even more pleasant, perhaps even in an aesthetic way. Fortunately, I do not have the task of proving these assumptions. The task I do have is infinitely easier. Namely, to emphasize those parts of the Qur'ān that encourage of tolerance and mutuality.

Before turning to that, I would like to mention another unspoken assumption that I sense behind this conference: Most of us feel that the words "tolerance" or "toleration" represent a concept or idea that does not ask enough of us, that these ideas are susceptible of being thought of as mere toleration. The response to such an observation might run: Yes, quite so, but until humanity learns "toleration" regardless of its "mereness", it can never hope to advance to anything more worthy of the human spirit. For a working definition of the human spirit, I choose to rely on the words of Vaclav Havel:

The human spirit is not a matter of the human intellect alone. It is also deliberation and forethought as well as conscience and decency, taste and love for one's neighbour, courage and detachment from oneself as well as doubt and even humour.<sup>1</sup>

The human spirit is most vigorously exercised by the kinds of challenges presented to it in religious Holy Books. While the demands set forth by Scripture are not always met in practice, a certain degree of compliance is usually achieved. This is as true of Islam as it is of other religious traditions. The Qur'ān seems to set high standards of tolerance even though Islamic history at times reflects a failure on the part of Muslims to fulfil the Qur'anic vision perfectly. In spite of this failure, Muslim society realized a previously unknown degree of tolerance toward other religions, notably toward Christianity and Judaism. In short, the pluralistic society that was the distinctive feature of Islamic civilization was institutionalized, perhaps even sanctified by the Qur'ān.

I have chosen to speak on the topic of tolerance and the Qur'ān because it is relatively easy to do inasmuch as I read that Book as a blueprint or constitution for the running of a pluralistic, multicultural society. Granted, the pluralism here has a different tone and history than our contemporary multicultural Canadian society. But it remains that ethnic and religious diversity has been a problem for rulers, political leaders and society in general for a very long

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<sup>1</sup>Vaclav Havel, quoted in *Financial Times* March 19, 1990, p.36.

time. It is not a phenomenon of the post industrial, technological, not to mention the post-modern age. A large portion of the Qur'anic message, in fact, speaks to the "problem" of this diversity.

### **ISLAM: a religion of community**

Islam is, par excellence, the religion of community. This is so to such a degree that it may be safely said that Islam requires a community in order to be expressed, or in order to exist: no community, no Islam. Muhammad was, par excellence, the Prophet of community. This calls attention to his great achievement, singles it out, and distinguishes it from the achievements of other great founders of religions in a much more satisfactory and ultimately intellectually satisfying way than referring to him as, for example, the Prophet with a sword. As religious history tells us, there have been many sworded prophets, beginning with Moses. But history does not present a religion so preoccupied with the establishment of a godly community as Islam.

Doubtless, the nature of Islam is intimately bound up with the basic world-view obtaining at the time of its appearance. To a large degree, the Qur'ān speaks about a whole series of topics common to the sectarian milieu of seventh century civilization as it had come to be articulated in the habitable regions between the Nile and Oxus rivers. As the Qur'ān itself affirms, God speaks to people in a language that they are most likely to understand: their own.

We have sent no Messenger save with the tongue of his people (*qawm*), that he might make all clear to them.[Qur'ān 14:4]

From a very early period, Muslim intellectuals recognized that by "tongue" is implied the various images and symbols known to a specific people because of their separate histories and geographies. Thus, the tenth century Muslim philosopher, al-Farabi, suggested that all differences amongst religions were in fact due to the variety of these symbols, linguistic or otherwise. In reality, in the essential nature of these religions, there is no difference at all.<sup>2</sup> Again, such a view is supported by other Qur'anic statements, particularly those on the nature of prophecy, which suggest that all the prophets represent a single brotherhood. But we will return to this topic below. More importantly, while it is far from true that this universalist doctrine was shared by all Muslims of the early (or any other) period, it is suggested that such a view point could not have developed in any but a multicultural or pluralistic society. As it happened, the society which fostered such a viewpoint, however elite its source in this particular instance, was Muslim.

The argument adopted here is not new. Ever since Goldziher it has become acceptable to speak of the spread of Islam as a marking off of territory in which the new divine program could be put into practice. This is quite different from the old erroneous view that Islam is the

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<sup>2</sup>al-Farabi: *The Political Regime*, translated by Fauzi M. Najjar in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, edited by R. Lerner & M. Mahdi. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1986, p.41.

religion of the sword and was spread by the sword. Yes, Muslims committed crimes against humanity during this period of expansion. In this they are no different from any other group that has set forth on an "imperialistic" or "expansionist" adventure. However, to appreciate the essentially Islamic contribution to world history, it is necessary to attempt to gauge differences in a social mood both before and after the conquests. These conquests were not meant to force conversion. The Qur'ān is quite explicit on this matter: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" [Qur'ān 2:256].

The conquests were meant to establish a territory in which the communal paradigm envisioned in the Qur'ān could be put into practice.

There was no attempt at converting the peoples of the imperial territories, who practically all adhered to some form of confessional religion already. Islam was felt to be primarily, if not exclusively, meant for Arabs, and only within the Peninsula was there any sense that all ought to be Muslims. Yet even Christian Arab tribes were still allowed to participate actively in the conquests. In the chiefly non-Arab agricultural lands, the object was not conversion but rule. The limited example of Muhammad in subjecting settled Jews and Christians in western Arabia was extended beyond Arabia to all lands within reach. The superiority of Islam as religion, and therefore in providing for social order, would justify Muslim rule: would justify the simple, fair-dealing Muslims in replacing the privileged and oppressive representatives of the older, corrupted allegiances.<sup>3</sup>

### The World before Islam

Had thy Lord willed, He would have made mankind one nation; but they continue in their differences excepting those on whom thy Lord has mercy. To that end He created them, and perfectly is fulfilled the word of thy Lord: 'I shall assuredly fill Gehenna with jinn and men all together.' [Qur'ān 11:118]<sup>4</sup>

The people were one nation; then God sent forth the Prophets, good tidings to bear and warning, and He sent down with them the Book with the truth, that He might decide between the people touching their differences; and only those who had been given it were at variance upon it, after the clear signs had come to them, being insolent one to another; then God guided those who believed to the truth, touching which they were at variance, by His leave; and God guides whomsoever He will to a straight path. [Qur'ān 2:213]

Mankind were only one nation, then they fell into variance. But for a word that preceded from thy Lord, it had been decided between them already touching

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<sup>3</sup>Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1974, vol. 1, p.199.

<sup>4</sup>All translations of the Qur'ān are taken from Arberry. The verse numberings are slightly different from Arberry's, being based on the Standard Egyptian method.

their differences. They say, 'Why has a sign not been sent down upon him from his Lord?' Say: 'The Unseen belongs only to God. Then watch and wait; I shall be with you watching and waiting.' [Qur'ān 10:19]

Why this preoccupation with religious difference exists in the Qur'ān is not far to seek. But we must seek an answer, for the moment, outside the text of the Qur'ān and look to the events and developments of history. It may be pointed out that both history and the Qur'ān are seen as a kind of scripture by the Muslim inasmuch as both are charged with the "signs" (*āyāt*) of God. That is, both represent a kind of text to be pondered and meditated upon by the believer in order that a fuller appreciation or deeper understanding of the divine will be achieved. Without going into more detail, it may be added that not only the Qur'ān and history, but also the natural order and the individual human self represent separate "books" or collections of "signs" to be reflected upon.

We will show them our signs in the horizons and in themselves that they may know that this is the Truth. [Qur'ān 41:53]

At the time of Muhammad's birth, the world was in great travail. Geographically, this world corresponds to what we sometimes annoyingly refer to as the Middle East. Muhammad was, of course, born in Mecca 1,000 kilometres to the south of Damascus and 1500 kilometres southwest of the capital of the Sasanian empire, Ctesiphon. At the time of his birth, religion was very much alive, to such a degree that two of them, Christianity and Zoroastrian Mazdeism served as something of political ideology for their respective "states". Both empires claimed to be the protectors and propagators of a religion with an absolute claim to universal truth and applicability. Moreover, we know that each empire enforced a respective orthodox form of their respective religions upon their people. And even more interestingly, the enforcement of these religious laws date from approximately the same time. Zoroastrian Mazdeism was given official status during the reign of Bahrām II (275-292 CE); Christianity became official in the Eastern Roman Empire during the reign of Constantine I (324-337 CE). Both religions were legally enforced and dissenters and heretics punished by the government. Between the years 603-628 CE the last major series of military conflicts between the Roman and Sasanian empires occurred. During this period the military strength of both empires was greatly reduced rendering each vulnerable to the eventual Muslim conquests.

The Eastern Roman Empire and the Persian Empire had of course been at war with each other for generations. Christianity and Zoroastrianism were badges of loyalty. But these were not the only religions. Dissenters from either state, known to history as heretics, were tolerated and even sometimes encouraged by a rival: Nestorian "Syriac" Christians were thus allowed to establish and maintain communities within the Persian Empire, not least because of their opposition to the official religion of Constantinople. Jews were also a populous community in Persia. In fact, it was through a series of Jewish uprisings that the Sasanian forces were enabled eventually to conquer Jerusalem and remove the True Cross to Ctesiphon in 612-614 CE.

Those who could not find a home safely in either camp often found themselves marginalized off to the nether regions of contested territory between the two great Empires. The

various religious communities scattered throughout the general area consisted of Jews, Christians, Manicheans, Pagans, Mandeans, and various sub species thereof. Indeed, so rich was this diversity that one scholar has suggested that it represents a true cultural expression of this area in the same way that the great lettered traditions of the Hellenic, Indic, and Chinese are to be seen as a coherent cultural achievement. "Whether in esoteric, or more usually, in exoteric form, it was in terms of religious communities that the Nile-to-Oxus region was maintained as one of the four core areas of high culture after the Axial Age."<sup>5</sup> The implications of this distinctive cultural achievement are described succinctly in the following quotation.

Between Nile and Oxus ... the rise of the confessional allegiances soon meant the organization of the whole population into many mutually exclusive rival religious bodies; that is, into *communities* which were religious rather than primarily territorial. It was as socially unthinkable to be associated with two or more such communities as to be associated with none.<sup>6</sup>

These two confessional empires had been the major world powers for many generations and had also been engaged for this period in a series of military campaigns, wars, and skirmishes in which those who were unfortunate enough to be caught in the middle were forced not only to take sides, but to support this allegiance with their substance. With the coming of Islam, the theoretical or ideological basis for this divisiveness was removed. Whereas formerly an untraversable barrier existed between the citizens of the two great empires, within a hundred years or less of the revelation of the Qur'an, an individual could feel free to travel throughout the vast territories of the *Pax Islamica*. Granted, there was a strong degree of Islamic triumphalism involved. To assume that it could have been otherwise requires an absence of historical perspective. The universal state established and nurtured by Muslims replaced and in some ways combined two mutually exclusive universalisms and transformed their several populations into citizens of Muslims lands, the *dār al-Islām*; they were now citizens of a new world. The "engine" of such triumphalism generated the establishment of a society which recognized as divine law the following statements:

And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation) unless it be with those of them that inflict wrong (and injury). But say: "We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you. Our God and your God is One. And it is to him we bow in Islam." [Qur'an 29:45-6]

Humanity! Truly We have created you male and female and made you to be nations and tribes in order that you might know each other. Truly the noblest among you in God's sight are those who fear Him most. God knows and

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<sup>5</sup>The "Axial Age" = 800BC-200BC. Hodgson, 1,p.137.

<sup>6</sup>Hodgson, 1, p. 135.

observes all. [Qur'ān 49:13]

Had God so willed He could have made you one single community. But whom He will He lets go astray and whom he will he guides aright. [Qur'ān 16:93]

The very creation of the heavens and of the earth are signs of His, and the diversity of your languages and colour — signs truly for all that lives. [Qur'ān 30:22]

While such statements strike us as being abstract, verging on the platitudinous, it should be remembered that there are concrete directives in the Qur'ān which appealed directly to the exhausted populations of the two empires. One example will suffice, namely that of the Qur'anic taxation.

The population of the area had been subjected to onerous, debilitating taxation in the name of the generations-old conflicts that characterized the general mood of the times. Respective empires taxed their subjects mercilessly and quite arbitrarily, partly to pay for the military machine required to perpetuate the ruinous wars to which this world had by now become inured. By comparison, the taxation suggested by the Qur'ān is humane because, in the first place, it is fixed. Yes, those who do not become Muslim are assigned a special payment (*jizya*). Although it is possible to view such a tax from our "privileged" vantage point as discriminatory, in reality, the fixed tax expected from the Peoples of the Book was more a relief than it was a new burden. It is much more useful to view this tax as an attempt to ameliorate an existing situation, particularly in light of the strong Qur'anic theme of social and economic justice. The Qur'ān does allow taxation on the basis of religious belief, (something which scandalizes the Thomas Jefferson in us all); but it cannot be forgotten that the Qur'ān as the inerrant and immediate word of God sets limits (*hadd / hudūd*) upon such taxation, limits which no mere human can presume to tamper with or redefine. Mere humans can and of course did contravene, transgress, and abuse the Qur'anic guidance. But surely this is another problem.

Having once paid this fixed tax, non-Muslims acquired the status of *dhimmi* or protected person. Not everyone was permitted the opportunity. In theory, polytheists (*mushrikūn*) were not allowed to continue in their ways under the protection of Islam. But People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) were most certainly accorded this status. In later years considerable effort would be exerted to see just how far this category, People of the Book, could be taken. Whereas originally it seems to have indicated Christians and Jews, eventually Zoroastrians and Hindus would also be included in the category. But this was a matter of interpretation. What is not a matter of interpretation is that the Qur'ān established the category of "protected subject" who were permitted to follow their religions, and were protected by the law. The difference in attitude to religious diversity from the time of the confessional empires to the time of Islamic sovereignty — a very short period of time from the point of view of historical development — deserves our notice and admiration. A non-Qur'anic textual witness to such tolerance is found in the famous edict of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second Caliph (reigned 634-644).

In the name of God the Merciful and the Compassionate.

This is the safe-conduct accorded by the servant of God 'Umar, the Commander of the Faithful, to the people of [Jerusalem]. He accords them safe-conduct for their persons, their property, their churches, their crosses, their sound and their sick, and the rest of their worship. Their churches shall neither be used as dwellings nor destroyed. They shall not suffer any impairment, nor shall their dependencies, their crosses, nor any of their property. No constraint shall be exercised against them in religion nor shall any harm be done to any among them. No Jew shall live with them in [Jerusalem]. The people of [Jerusalem] must pay the *jizya* in the same way as the people of other cities. They must expel the Romans and the brigands [?] from the city. Those who leave shall have safe-conduct for their persons and property until they reach safety. Those who stay shall have safe-conduct and must pay the *jizya* like the people of [Jerusalem]. Those of the people of Aelia who wish to remove their persons and effects and depart with the Romans and abandon their churches and their crosses shall have safe-conduct for their persons, their churches, and their crosses, until they reach safety. The country people who were already in the city before the killing of so-and-so may, as they wish, remain and pay the *jizya* the same way as the people of [Jerusalem] or leave with the Romans or return to their families. Nothing shall be taken from them until they have gathered their harvest.

This document is placed under the surety of God and the protection [*dhimma*] of the Prophet, the Caliphs and the believers, on condition that the inhabitants of [Jerusalem] pay the *jizya* that is due from them.

Witnessed by Khālid ibn al-Walīd, 'Amr ibn al-'Ās, 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn 'Awf, Mu'āwiyā ibn Abī Sufyān, the last of whom wrote this document in the year 15 [636].<sup>7</sup>

## Prophets

Another aspect of the Qur'anic message pertaining to this theme of tolerance is bound up with the basic theory of prophethood found in the Qur'an — another Qur'anic teaching which acquires important meaning when set against the background of competing religious and confessional ideologies. Briefly, the Qur'an states in unequivocal terms that all communities of human beings have been sent prophets at some point in their history. It may be that individual communities have themselves forgotten an original prophetic event. It may be (and usually is) the case that communities have kept alive the sacred memory of the original prophetic event, but have nonetheless strayed from the original intent of that revelation.

Prophets in the Qur'an represent a single, special brotherhood. [Qur'an 23:52-4]. They are all of equal status in the eyes of God:

Those who disbelieve in God and His Messengers and desire to make division between God and His Messengers, and say, "We believe in part, and disbelieve in part," desiring to take between this and that a way — those in truth are the

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<sup>7</sup>Translated the text as found in Tabari translated by Bernard Lewis. *Islam from Prophet Muhammed to the Capture of Constantinople*, Volume 1: *Politics and War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp.235-236.

unbelievers; and We have prepared for the unbelievers a humbling chastisement. And those who believe in God and His Messengers and make no division between any of them,

Those — We shall surely give them their wages; God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate. [Qur'ān 4:150-52]

The purpose of prophets is to warn and instruct [Qur'ān 6:48]. They are conveyers of the divine will, a will that is, among other things, merciful, compassionate, and loving. The Qur'ān mentions several of these messengers and also says that it does not mention all of them.

We sent Messengers before thee; of some We have related to thee, and some We have not related to thee. [Qur'ān 40:78]

Indeed, Islamic tradition came eventually to speak of thousands of prophets (*anbiyā'*) and over 300 messengers (*rusul*). The Qur'anic theory of prophethood and messengership posits that prophets are sent by God to communities in order to make known to them the divine command or cause (*amr*), to establish a way of life based on a revealed Book which implies also a divine law (*shar'ā*). So far we are on fairly familiar territory. An important emphasis of the Qur'ān, however is that there is no community on the face of the earth now or in the past that has not had the blessing of one of these prophets or messengers. The implication here is a kind of spiritual egalitarianism.

Every nation has its Messenger; then, when their Messenger comes, justly the issue is decided between them, and they are not wronged. [Qur'ān 10:47]

Indeed, We sent forth among every nation a Messenger, saying: 'Serve you God, and eschew idols.' [Qur'ān 16:36]

The general ethos of Islam, in this regard, is that human beings are spiritually related. But this has also often been ignored in favour of concentrating on those aspects of Islam which reinforce a negative judgement. The world into which Islam asserted itself was a world of communities, each, as has been amply stated, with its own claim to The Truth. The great Empires provide good examples as to how religion served as founding and sustaining "myth". The Qur'ān, however, offered a rather daring perspective on this communalism, a perspective which did indeed cause the world to sit up and take notice precisely because the implications were at once exciting and frightening. The Qur'ān says that no community may claim, on the strength of having been sent a prophet or messenger, a special status apart from all other communities. Jews, Magians, Christians, Sabians, are all the same from the point of view of having at one time or another been privy and privilege by the receipt of divine guidance.

Even so, We have sent it down as signs, clear signs, and for that God guides whom He desires. Surely they that believe, and those of Jewry, the Sabaeans, the Christians, the Magians and the idolaters—God shall distinguish between them on the Day of Resurrection; assuredly God is witness over everything.



[Qur'an 22:17]

Consider the opposite view: One people has been selected to receive divine guidance. This the Qur'an explicitly condemns:

Say: "You of Jewry, if you assert that you are the friends of God, apart from other men, then do you long for death, if you speak truly." [Qur'an 62:6]

All other nations and families are, therefore judged *de facto* as being unworthy of such "friendship". (Rarely does the alternate and inverse interpretation get applied: A people is given divine guidance exclusively because they are the ones who need it most.<sup>8</sup>) Prophecy in Islam comes to a people as a means of educating them. Not necessarily as a reward for some meritorious collective cultural achievement. Thus the Qur'an's statement reflects a belief that all communities are in need of guidance.

Such commonality should not be mistaken for equality however. The Qur'an also speaks of several groups that form theoretical classes: *mu'min*, *muslim*, *kafir*, *mushrik*, *munāfiq*, *ahl al-kitāb*, *dhimmi* and so on. Some classes are more preferable than others, but this is not a natural circumstance. All humanity has had an equal opportunity at one time or another to choose to be among the righteous. No community can claim to be more "blessed" than any other, as all have had the same blessing of prophecy at some time or another in their history. A community can, however, claim to be the most recently blessed.

The attitude of the Qur'an is therefore somewhat different from the attitude often attributed to missionaries who have gone forth to save a spiritually impoverished heathen community. No Muslim dare view another community as having no "spiritual history". God is the God of all humanity:

And thy Lord knows very well all who are in the heavens and the earth [Qur'an 17:60]

Whatsoever is in the heavens and the earth implore Him; every day He is upon some labour. [Qur'an 55:29]

Thus the unity established by Muhammad amongst the warring and factious tribes of Arabia through the preaching of one God and rendering obsolete the various objects of worship of the Time of Ignorance, was an expanding unity bound to take within it traditions and creeds unanticipated by the Hijazi Prophet. According to the Qur'an all people have been given the true faith. There is therefore perhaps an unprecedented predisposition in Islam to "respect" an alien culture or community, to "understand" another culture and beyond that understanding to see that culture as a lamp, however besmirched, protecting the vestige of divine light within it that marks a revelation from God through a chosen messenger. Witness, for example, the great effort on

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<sup>8</sup>This was held by the tenth century group known as the *Ihkwān al-Safā'*. My thanks to Prof. M.E. Marmura for drawing this to my attention.

the part of early Muslim historians to learn as much as possible about the previous divine messengers in writing down their universal histories.

As we know, Islamic culture has had an enormous influence on our own Western one. There have been periods in history when huge increments of that culture were received to the bosom of Europe. The ideas were scientific, medical, architectural, theological, philosophical, mystical, aesthetic, religious. They helped make Europe ready for the Renaissance. In the process, Europeans of the time became, to a degree, cultural "Muslims". (Aquinas wrote his theology at a desk on which rested books which represented the apex of Islamic intellectual life as it had developed by his time.) And because they are our ancestors, our own cultural DNA, if you will, carries an Islamic component: We are all a bit Muslim, a bit shaped by the Qur'ān. As regards the basic Qur'anic attitude towards diversity, or more precisely the advance in the attitude to diversity which the Qur'anic teachings both represent and stimulated, might I leave us with the hope that we will, sooner rather than later, be permitted to become who we are.

It cannot be upheld that our attitude here in "the West" towards Islam has been one which might permit us to see in it a valid approach to the overwhelming problem of The Truth. Rather, the situation has been quite otherwise. We have been conditioned, inclined, propagandized, since at least the time of the First Crusade, to view Islam as a threat. Recent history has illustrated how quickly and in what comparative painlessness, such threats may be transformed into more benign postures. Gorbachev has, after all, been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It seems that a great deal depends upon whether or not our collective will can be coerced, cajoled, seduced or otherwise stimulated to transform a dark perspective into a more luminous or optimistic one.

I am not saying that Islam ever produced a Shangrila of tolerance. I am saying simply that Islam elevated the level of tolerance across religious lines above what it had been heretofore. That excesses were committed against members of various religious communities by individual members of the Muslim community, either singly or en masse, is not denied. It would be foolish to do so. But it is surely fitting in this forum to call to mind these irenic, tolerance tending themes in Islam's holy book, particularly in view of the current unfortunate state of affairs in the Middle East. The preceding, then, is more about a Qur'anic ethos, what Fazlur Rahman calls the élan of the Qur'ān — its social morality and ethics, than post Qur'anic history "on the ground".