

# A PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

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## ABSTRACT

Human nature displays a complicated structure which includes a rich state of mind with a huge number of moods and dispositions. Some of these moods and dispositions, if not tamed and limited with wisdom, may be dangerous to the individual in the first place and to the society and social order in the second place. In my paper I shall take tolerance as one such mood in human nature. My purpose is not to analyze the psychological roots of this mood; I shall rather concentrate and try to provide a philosophical analysis of how Islamic approach offers a solution to develop tolerance as a good character. In order to do that, however, I will try to analyze human nature in order to locate the ground where such an analysis may be established. Then I shall attempt to present the Islamic perspective and remedies offered for intolerance. But of course this would not be sufficient; for, after this exposition I shall also try to show what kind of an education Islam offers for the development of a tolerant attitude.

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Tolerance is like many other moral concepts belongs to human nature as a mood. It is possible to develop this mood through education in one's state of mind. But for this kind of education it is essential to understand that "tolerance" must be developed as a doctrine in the first place so that it can be applied in education. In that case we may argue philosophically that there is a potential tolerance in human nature as a mood belonging to one's state of mind and on the other hand there is a need for doctrinal development of this concept in order to actualize that potential mood. I shall try to argue in this presentation that Islam as a religion develops this general understanding of tolerance and in particular religious tolerance. In this presentation I shall also give historical evidence that religious tolerance developed in Islam not only as a doctrine but also as practice. In other words, in all Muslim lands non-Muslims lived peacefully together with Muslims without being persecuted or discriminated against. I shall try to do this from two perspectives as I have argued here: The first one is from the perspective of human nature which will lead to the potential existence of tolerance; and the second is from the perspective of Islam as a doctrine of religious tolerance.

Human being is defined as "rational animal" which is supposed to express his/her nature. This definition brings to fore two main aspects of human beings: animality and rationality. However, it neglects another significant aspect which can be represented by emotions. In that case the actual expression of human nature should be as "an animal, emotional and rational being." By this definition we are claiming that the animality of human beings is different from the animality of animals, just as both their emotionality and rationality are different from the animal emotions and rationality. It is because of this difference that humans can transcend their physical being and rise to the level of spirituality which is not possible for other species of lower ranks. As a result, we need to modify our definition by including a fourth aspect in the classical definitions of man; spirituality which is the characteristic of angels. The first three aspects, namely animality, emotionality and rationality, belong to man as his own nature; whereas the fourth one, namely the spirituality, is given to him as a potentiality which he may or may not develop. But from every aspect there is a connection to spirituality. For example, if tolerance is a potential mood that may be manifested at the animal level may have a link to the spiritual aspect and so on with other aspects and moods. Each of these aspects is endowed with certain potentialities and capacities that are given to humans for certain purposes. When they are used outside the limits of these purposes then problems arise. For instance, the tendency to preserve one's life is given in order to protect oneself against outside dangers. But if this tendency is used excessively it may turn into violence and intolerance against other's life. In

that case a meticulous analysis of these aspects of human beings must be carried out in order to avoid these problems.

The animal aspect, being endowed with life, has two basic characteristics: one is doing whatever is necessary to preserve life, such as nutrition, reproduction and defense; the other is to hold these activities within the humanly sphere, which is the link between animality and emotionality. This is the difference between human animality and animal animality. The link is found in the fact that humans are weak animals; they do not have the physical power or other defensive mechanism found in other animals. Therefore, at the level of animality they need "togetherness" in order to survive. Even if this characteristic is found in other animals still it is the main characteristic of human animality because it leads to emotionality. That is why we add an emotional aspect to "being together" and thus raise to the level of emotions.

The emotional aspect of human beings represents all human emotions as a whole. When we say that we add an emotional aspect to "being together" and thus raise to the level of emotions we do not mean that this aspect arises as a result of the animal aspect. All human aspects are already given and in this sense they form a unity. What we mean is that each aspect can be analyzed at their lower levels but cannot be distinguished at their higher levels. The basic characteristic of the emotional aspect is to give breath to all human activities whether animal or rational or spiritual. If the animal aspect is able to perceive our biological and physical needs then the emotional aspect is able to perceive our non-physical needs. Since the spiritual aspect is totally non-physical the emotional aspect is the closest to human spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

The rational aspect includes the human characteristic which according to Aristotle defines man's real nature because this is the aspect of conceptual thinking which no other animal has. The rational aspect analyzes and evaluates all the data that it receives from the lower aspects, namely the animal and emotional. It is as such the seat of scientific knowledge.

All of these aspects have their faculties to perform their functions; the faculties of animality are the five senses at the lower level and the concupiscence in general (which means it is not taken merely in the sexual connotation) at the higher level which represents the passage from animality to emotionality. The lower faculty of emotions is the heart as the seat of emotions and at the higher level it is conscience which is the moral faculty that provides the first step into the intellectual thinking. But since this thinking is supposed to be conceptual

1 Most of my evaluation of human nature is based on my previous paper "Difference is Beautiful: A Philosophical Evaluation" presented in *Globalization for the Common Good Conference*, Fatih University, Istanbul, 5-9 July 2007. Published in *Non-Violent Path to Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding*, ed. Kamran Mofid, Alparslan Açıkgenc, Kevin J. McGinley, Şammas Salur (İstanbul: Fatih University Press, 2008), 7-12.

we need a faculty at the rational aspect that converts all these data into the raw material that is convenient for our mind to digest. That faculty which provides this conceptual conversion is imagination which is the lower faculty of our rational aspect and intuition is the higher faculty of our rational aspect which also provides the first step into spirituality. These are certainly not the only faculties belonging to human nature. The ones mentioned here are important for our purpose to evaluate the ground of human differences and the mood to bear these differences as tolerance. Although the nature with three biological aspects and a spiritual aspect are one and the same in all humans with varying degrees of intensity, the outcome of these aspects are many. Let us try to see how those differences arise.

What I have outlined here provide a rich inner world for a human being. At the animal level, for example, a piece of land is perceived as mere “territory” which provides livelihood for us. The land is defended only for this purpose and is seen precious as long as it provides livelihood. But at the emotional level a human being is passionately attached to the land. As such he may write poems and sing love songs for the land where he lives. We may thus argue that “territory” is perceived at the emotional aspect as a “country” or “homeland”. Yet at the rational level a human being will try to conceptualize the land and call it his “government”, “state”, “commonwealth” or “Leviathan”, etc. Moreover, he may intellectually idealize the land where he is living. The same approach by the three human aspects can be applied to everything he encounters in this world: his belongings, his friends, his family, his relationships, his actions and so on. Every human being will have the same aspects, namely an animal aspect, an emotional and a rational aspect in so far as a human being looks at things. As a result a human being will have a rich inner world. It is this inner world that is reflected outside. That reflection may have a variety of modalities. For example as a mode of action, it is her/his behaviour; what s/he does to others and in fact to herself /himself. But as a mode of new being it is an achievement, which could be an art work, or a product. When it is in the conceptual mode it is knowledge, which is perhaps the highest achievement for a human being.

All these achievements are reflections and manifestations of the inner world of a human being. These manifestations occur in a social context called “culture”. With such a diversified nature man turns in a sense inside out within a social context and turning its entire inner world into what we call “culture.” Now here the system that turns an inner world into a culture is one; but that which is turned inside out is not one but many. This is in a sense resembling a system of production that is one in its structure but diversified in its output. Let us consider only two systems that belong to our nature: the digestive system and the knowledge system,

by which I mean the human epistemology. Our digestive system is the same, having a mouth, tongue, teeth, stomach and the rest of the organs. We know from anatomy the way they all work is the same and that is why when there is a problem a Turk does not have to go to a Turkish doctor but can go to any human doctor. On the other hand, quite contrary to the unity of our digestive system our culinary culture is immensely diversified. In the same way, our knowledge system also is one, having one logic and epistemology with all similar faculties. Yet the knowledge generated from that system is not one but multiple. This shows the great cultural diversity. We may ask here why only one human being but diversified output?

Let us pass from here to another human dimension which may enable us to evaluate what we referred to above as the spiritual aspect. As we have seen the need to be together with other fellow human beings is grounded in our animal aspect. It is therefore our inner nature to form groups to live together. But this *togetherness* is only a primitive collection of human beings. When the emotional aspect is added the togetherness gradually turns into a community. In a community bonds are established with strong feelings because they are evaluated emotionally and hence emotional stories of relationships are created. As a result of this the community may be organized on the basis of a “feeling relationship”. There may be an elderly group that is respected and obeyed. There will also be other groups that are defined on the basis of feelings which in turn they also contribute to the organization of the community. But with the addition of the rational aspect the organization is maintained with reason. Therefore, a political system is developed according to which the community is governed. Now the community is a society in the true sense and the rational organization of the community is given a name, such as a state or government. In such an organization man is able to exhibit and develop all his potentialities. He can find everything in the society. By using his reason he is also able to find the reason for existence and the cause of the universe. But he is utterly unable to reach to an all comprehensive concept which can provide meaning to all the aspects he reflects. Moreover he finds some potentialities in himself which he is not able to develop. At this juncture he finds “Revelation” defined as religion. Upon an investigation of religion he finds that he is now able to develop some of his potentialities which he could not even imagine. This aspect which is based upon the development of these potentialities with the help of religion we call the “spiritual aspect” of human beings.

Religion is in fact the Divine Guidance for humanity. Therefore, religion is God-given. There is no seat or ground in human nature to provide a foundation for the rise of religion. There are only, if my phrase is clear enough, “receptive points” which I have called

“potentialities” in human nature that may receive religion but cannot make or unmake religion. Human beings may invent religion by imitating the true religion that has been revealed. But that is a different case. I believe that man is not given the authority to invent religion because those inventions will not find the receptive points in human nature and as a result will be dangerous to humanity. There are such instances in human history. Therefore, by definition human beings do not have an authority to establish religion. Although religion is a Divine Guidance for humanity, it is not the kind of guidance that gives us an exhaustive list of how we should behave in any given situation. If this were done by religion we would have had to act as robots according to that list, in which case there would be no room for human intellectual creativity in any field, including sciences. In that case, religion as a Divine Guidance bestows upon us two fundamental states of mind: one is the consciousness of the Divine Presence in all; the other is the moral sensitivity in our behaviors. Both states of mind are expressed in general principles by religion. We therefore feel the need to interpret these principles in order to apply them to certain situations in our life. This need of interpretation gradually gives rise to a systematic exposition of religion as a system of guidance. In that case, this second intellectual understanding is also defined as religion. We thus need to distinguish between these two phenomena: Religion as Divine Guidance and Religion as the interpretation of this Divine Guidance; the former is Pure Religion and the latter is the religion within a certain cultural context. I believe that there is no harm in interpreting the Pure Religion in a certain cultural context. On the contrary, it is inevitable and indeed required by God; a requirement that is clear in the fact that He does not send His Guidance as a complete set of rules readily available to be applied to human life. It is as a result of this that we develop our spiritual potentialities.

When we consider these aspects of human nature we realize that humans have a very rich inner world. When this inner world, as we have seen, is projected within a social context then it gives rise to human culture. In this sense the human being is depicted in Islamic thought as the *microcosm* because s/he includes in its being representations of all the worlds in the universe. In this sense a human being can be called a “mini universe”. It is therefore natural for him to reflect all these diverse universes in the mirror of society. That is why we have so many diversified cultures and civilizations. It is this aspect of man that is taken as the locus of revelation by religion which means it is also a God-given right for humans to have diverse cultures, societies and communities. This diversified nature of man makes him a valuable creature as the Qur’an also points out:

We have honored the children of Adam, provided them transport on land and sea and given them for sustenance good and pure food and conferred upon them special favor above many of our creation. (17/Al-Isra’, 70)

Therefore, the abundance of different cultures makes life enjoyable and breaks the monotonous flow of events in history. But the beauty of diverse cultures has another aspect; it lays the burden of bearing differences. This is because each aspect of human nature is left free without any boundaries. Therefore if they are not controlled there will arise injustice and violations. That is why each aspect of human nature must be kept under control. I think this can be done by taming the lower aspect with the good use of its next higher aspect. In that case, the animal aspect is controlled by the good use of the emotional aspect and the emotional aspect is controlled by the good use of the rational aspect; and in turn the rational aspect is controlled by the spiritual aspect which is nourished by divine revelation. If the final phase is the greatest good then religion as the divine revelation is the greatest good providing tolerance for differences. Therefore, if different cultures arise within a civilization of religion then we can tell that the religion is fulfilling its function as cared by divine will. But human beings must also perform accordingly to tolerate different cultures, religions or rather differences in general.

We may then briefly express our point: human nature is diversified giving him a rich inner world to be realized within a social context. When it is realized it leads to rich cultures which may eventually turn into a significant civilization. But since the realization of the inner world would be manifested at different planes in different communities there will be necessarily differences which open a challenge for humanity to face. Today the world is moving towards globalization which poses a greater challenge for the diversity of cultures. In the past people knew of different cultures but today we face and live with different cultures. That presents a challenge every day at every place. This puts on us greater moral responsibility to tolerate cultures and differences within even the same culture. It is this diverse goodness in our nature that is reflected into our social contexts with the formidable challenge which may be expressed as the beauty of difference. I believe that the human destiny depends on our realization of this beauty to face it with the challenge to accept and tolerate cultural variety. That is why I would like to express this with a romantic motto with its philosophical connotation: difference is beautiful.

Difference is beautiful because the consciousness of difference will help I believe world

peace yet it also lays the burden of a moral responsibility on all of us. This moral responsibility is to accept and bear the cultural differences of one another. Are we ready to accept and appreciate the difference of our fellow human beings? This is the real issue. Our university aims at the realization of this moral responsibility. For, unless we realize our differences and appreciate the cultural variety of human existence we will not be able to see the beauty of difference; and again unless we see the beauty of our cultural existence we will not be able to establish peace on earth. We hope that civilizational dialogue will help in manifesting the beauty of difference in the human mosaic. Let us hope that this will be a beautiful beginning for realizing the beauty of difference, the significance of world peace and a happy human coexistence.

It is on this kind of a philosophy that Islamic understanding is based. We may confidently say that Islam developed this understanding of peace, tolerance and peaceful coexistence throughout history.<sup>2</sup> As such our community leaders and past ancestors of the straight path urge us to see two vehicles utilized in the approach for religious tolerance: one is to see humans as “God’s honored creature” as stressed in the Sacred book of Islam, the Qur’an (17/al-Isrâ, 70, which is quoted above). As such humans are to be respected as humans. The other is the Qur’anic declaration that “there is no compulsion in the religion, [because] truly the right way has become clearly distinct from error.” (2/al-Baqarah, 256). This fact is also expressed as “(And as for My messenger,) there is no (obligation) on him except to deliver (the message). God knows what you expose and what conceal”. (5/al-Mâ’idah, 99). This means that the Prophet (SAAW) cannot force people to accept the message he brings. He is in charge of only explaining what he receives through Revelation.

These verses express the basis of the Qur’anic *weltanschauung* concerning tolerance. It is possible to observe this historically as well in the life of the Prophet (SAAW) who faced much difficulty and opposition in his hometown, Mecca. He was eventually forced to migrate to Medina. But in spite of the severe opposition and even physical torture, agony, distress caused by his neighbors and friends and even relatives that the Prophet (SAAW) and his followers suffered in Mecca, he always approached the unbelievers with tolerance. This is clearly reflected even in revelation which instructs patience and tolerance:

<sup>2</sup> See also Yohanan Friedmann. *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relationships in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

O you who do not believe! I worship not what you worship, and you are not worshipping what I worship; nor am I worshipping what you worship; neither are you worshipping what I worship. Therefore, your religion is for you and to me my religion!” (109/al-Kâfirûn)

When the Prophet (SAAW) migrated to Medina, where there was a multi-religious society including a large Jewish community in that, he did not force others to accept Islam. Instead, he made a peace agreement with them which is called today, “Medinan Constitution”.<sup>3</sup> Christians and Jews were given a special status with the title “the people of the Scripture” (*ahl al-kitâb*). This document is an excellent historical evidence of tolerance shown towards the followers of other religions. For, this “Constitution was not a treaty in the modern sense, but a unilateral proclamation by Muslims”, claims Lewis.<sup>4</sup> But Ali Khan interprets the Constitution of Medina as a social contract derived from a treaty and not from any fictional state of nature, as claimed by Hobbes and Rousseau. It was built on the contrary upon “the concept of one community of diverse tribes living under the sovereignty of one God.”<sup>5</sup> It thus instituted peaceful and tolerant methods of conflict resolution among diverse groups living as a community but without assimilating into one religion, language, or culture. We may thus interpret the earliest Muslim community established in Medina as the first legally declared plural society on the basis of legitimate law.

Let us see the articles 25-35 which “mention a legion of Jewish tribes, such as ‘Auf, Najjar, Harith, Sai’ida, Jusham, Aus, Tha’laba, and Jafna, granting each tribe the right to be “one community with the believers.” This expansive concept of the community is most significant because an Islamic Free State is no longer conceived as an exclusively Muslim nation. In modern terms, an Islamic state can be a religiously pluralistic state. Any attempts to cleanse an Islamic state of the peoples of other religions would be incompatible with the dictates of the Medina Constitution.”<sup>6</sup> These articles may be taken as a universal declaration of religious freedom and freedom of belief because they clearly safeguard the Jewish community and free practice of their religion freely. We also know historically that Muslims never violated this agreement in Medina.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956); also Ali Khan, “The Medina Constitution: Understanding Islamic Law”, 2006. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=945458>; and Michael Lecker, *The ‘Constitution of Medina: Muhammad’s First Legal Document* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Lewis. *The Arabs in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 42.

<sup>5</sup> Ali Khan, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Khan, op. cit.

We may observe this tolerance in Islamic law also because the same attitude of religious freedom was preserved with law which was taken as a fundamental human right. For, Islamic law declares that there five fundamental principles of law to be followed universally by all Muslims: **the right to live**, which protects the life of any person living under the rule of Muslims; **the right to belief, the right to think**, which is expressed as the obligation of the state to preserve all people's faculty of thinking (*al-'aql*); **the right to have property**, and finally **the right for dignity**. Muslim jurists argue that these fundamental rights are based on the Qur'anic injunctions and therefore, inviolable. It is clear therefore that Islam even historically prepared to live in peace and tolerance with the followers of other religions.

I think it would be sufficient to quote Roderic H. Davison, a prominent Western historian of the Ottoman Empire. On the issue of tolerance towards the minorities, Davison writes:

It might in fact have been argued that the Turks were less oppressive of their subject people than were Prussians of the Poles, the English of the Irish, or the Americans of the Negroes. There is evidence to show that in this period {late 19th century}, there was emigration from independent Greece into the Ottoman Empire, since some Greeks found the Ottoman government more indulgent master than their own Greek government.<sup>7</sup>

One more example may suffice to show religious tolerance of Muslims in history. I would like to present below the result of Haim Gerber's research as he summarizes in his own words:

As raw material I have used the collection of court cases by Dabbagzade Numan. On inspection, the collection was found to contain 140 cases of real litigation - that is, cases that had one plaintiff and one defendant and that were resolved judicially. I have analyzed all these cases in terms of the status of the litigants within Ottoman society, which means that a person would be classified according to one of the following categories: (1) as an *askeri* - that is, a member of the official class; (2) as an *alim* - that is, a religious functionary of some sort; (3) as a commoner - that is, an ordinary Muslim; (4) as a woman; and (5) as a non-Muslim. Mary Baumgartner's conclusion was emphatic that in New Haven it was mainly aristocrats who initiated lawsuits. But in the society under

study, in all but a few cases, it was the social underdog who initiated the case - women versus men, non-Muslims versus Muslims, commoners versus members of the elite. The court is seen mainly as a tool of the common people to defend a modicum of legal rights. Of course, the most important question to be considered here is the outcome of such lawsuits in terms of social class. Whereas in colonial New Haven the upper class had a clear advantage, this is distinctly not so here. Women won seventeen of twenty-two cases against men; non-Muslims won seven of eight cases against Muslims; commoners won six of eight cases against *askeris*. Only in the category of commoners against religious doctors do we find a tie of ten cases each. Thus the *shari'a* court in the area under study cannot be said to have been a tool of the upper class. On the contrary, it seems more proper to view it as a means for people of the lower classes to defend themselves against possible encroachments by the elite.<sup>8</sup>

We may conclude from this that Islamic law may also be viewed as a means for non-Muslims to defend themselves against possible encroachments by the Muslims. In fact, one of the most significant factors of Islamic law, as we stated above, is expressed as the "protection of religion" which is taken as the "intention of Islamic law". It was because of this basic religious principle that when some of the small communities of Christians were persecuted they applied the Ottoman Sultan for protection. The Sultan asked the religious opinion of the Chief Judge (*Shaykh al-Islam*) who then issued a ruling (*fatwâ*) that as the guardian of the right to belief he can declare war to protect the rights of Christians because this is a fundamental human right. Therefore, Muslims always tried to protect religious tolerance even in history. We must on the other hand accept the fact that there were undoubtedly isolated cases of misuse by both some Muslim rulers in the past and present on the one hand; and by individual Muslims on the other hand.

<sup>7</sup> Roderic H. Davison. *Reform of the Ottoman Empire 1856-1876*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1963, 116.

<sup>8</sup> Haim Gerber. *State, Society and Law in Islam: Ottoman Law in Comparative Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 55-57.