

Treatise on Tolerance

First and foremost, I would like to pay tribute to the soul of Erasmus, who was the master of tolerance and pluralism. Next, I would like to thank the board of the Erasmus Prize Foundation which selected me as one of the three winners of the Foundation's 2004 award. I commend their record of cultural and humanitarian service and wish them ever greater success in this endeavor.

I have no first hand information about the criteria that were used to select this year's winners, but I suspect that, in the selection of an Iranian Shi'i Muslim such as myself, the book *Tolerance and Governance* and, perhaps, the tale of its publication, were significant in the eyes of the boardmembers of the Erasmus Prize Foundation. As its title suggests, the book tries to present democracy as a way of governance that is based on tolerance, and to persuade the post-revolution Muslim community of Iran that it is possible for them both to safeguard their Muslim values and norms and to live in a democratic system; that they need not acquire one at the cost of the other. Not only tolerance, but also criticizing officials and holding them to account are religious values, and both these notions are firm pillars of democracy. The points that need greater emphasis at this juncture are giving precedence to rights over duties and substituting interpretive pluralism for an interpretive monopoly or the official interpretation of religion by rulers.

At any rate, the book was being put forward for publication at a time (1995) when Iran was experiencing its most severe period of political asphyxiation since the revolution. The book's author had been forced to leave the country, having been subjected to savage, physical assaults at universities and public venues, as well as fierce attacks by newspapers. He had lost his job and security and – far away from his family – spent his time fleeing from country to country (Germany, Britain, Canada). The Culture Ministry had fallen into the hands of a minister who harked from the ranks of extremist conservatives; a minister who would not allow the publication of the slightest shred of 'un-Islamic' material. The newspaper and book market was undergoing an unparalleled slump, and no-one was being given the chance to defend himself against the insults and calumnies directed at him. My students had also been banned from writing or explaining anything. In these oppressive conditions, one of my audacious students and friends (who is now serving a six years prison term because of his courage in revealing the secrets behind the killing of a number of writers) had the courage to push through the publication of my book, *Tolerance and Governance*. However, the book did not contain only pieces written by me. It was a collection of my writings and scholarly critiques of them that had appeared in various publications. This approach was in itself almost unprecedented in the history of Iran's book industry, but a subsequent development was to make it truly unprecedented. The amazing development was that the Culture Ministry was preventing the publication of the book as it stood and that it high-handedly added to the book a long critical piece written by one of the agents behind the regime's policy of cultural repression who happened to be a leading member of the Ansar-e Hezbollah vigilante group. The book now bears within it that unwanted article like an illegitimate child. And the bitter-sweet irony of it all is that this illegitimate element has become the cause of the book's legitimacy!

You can see that the book is not only entitled *Tolerance and Governance*, it is the living embodiment of it.

But setting aside these introductory remarks, tolerance, which we are in great need of in Iran today, is not by any means alien to our Iranian culture and Islamic creed. I

propose to show this in the works of two great poet/thinkers of Iran. Hafez, the renowned Iranian poet of the eighth/fourteenth century exalted tolerance to the point of saying: In these two expressions lies peace in this world and the next / With friends, magnanimity; with enemies, tolerance.

Hafez penned these words at a time when a century had passed since the Mongol invasion of Iran and, with the horror and distress of that invasion still etched on their minds, Iranians were struck by the Timurid thunderbolt. The flames of insecurity, injustice and destruction seared the land, and not only were local rulers and politicians incapable of tolerating one another, but religious and sectarian leaders too were engaged in unending feuds, each one of them considering the others to have been duped by Satan and destined for hell. In Hafez's words, 'the orb was in a grim temper' and society in need of 'a sage proposition'. The sage proposition, which could provide felicity and peace both in this world and the next, was, to Hafez's mind, nothing other than the two noble and lofty notions of magnanimity and tolerance; the first, towards friends and, the second, toward enemies. Of course, if I were in Hafez's place, I would add a concluding phrase to his verse as follows: with friends, magnanimity; with enemies, tolerance, but not with the enemies of tolerance!

Hafez knew well that, in a religious society, inviting people to exercise tolerance would fail to have any impact or captivate hearts unless it was accompanied by an insightful theory of human nature and religion. This is why he astutely tried throughout his works to use the language of poetry and allusion to elucidate a theory of this kind and to persuade his audience that his recommendation was not just a case of well-intentioned sermonizing but that magnanimity and tolerance were sound philosophical notions that rested on solid foundations.

Human fallibility, both in the realm of theory and in the realm of practice, was something that was never far from Hafez's mind and he tried to utilize religious mythology to highlight it and lay it bare. According to Islamic accounts, the presence of human beings on earth was the result of two original sins; one, committed by Satan and, the other, committed by Adam. God commanded all the angels to bow down before Adam. Only Satan disobeyed and his punishment was that he was banished by God. Then, he had the opportunity until the end of time to deceive and lead astray Adam's offspring and to try to lure them away from God. (This myth does not appear in the same form in the Jewish and Christian scriptures.)

The second sin was that, tempted by Satan, Adam ate the forbidden fruit. No sooner had he tasted the fruit than he became aware of his own nakedness and sexuality. The punishment for this sin was that Adam and Eve were banished from heaven and descended to earth, where they married and became the founders of humankind and human history.

On Hafez's reading, then, individual human beings, who are the products of sin and are never immune from Satan's temptations, can neither stake a claim to infallibility themselves nor treat harshly others who err and expect them to behave like angels. None of these things are compatible with human nature and the genesis of human existence. Hafez expresses this idea in the most gracious terms: Who are we to profess innocence? / When saintly Adam was stung by sin.

As far as Hafez is concerned, sin is a defining, ineluctable feature of human nature and conduct. And intelligent people must take it into account in their conception of the world and human life. They must not disregard its vital role for the sake of its moral reprehensibility. Perhaps when Mandeville, the Dutch-born English physician,

wrote his *The Fable of the Bees* and equated individual vice with collective virtue, he had something along these same lines in mind.

Be that as it may, Hafez goes even further than this and, in one of his works, qualifies human beings with the two adjectives 'somnolent' and 'wine-tainted'. The former attribute regards theoretical fallibility and, the latter, practical transgressions. (Bear in mind that, in Islamic law, drinking wine is considered a sin.) It is as if to say, we human beings see truths with half-open eyes or in a dream-like state; hence, we do not have a totally clear conception of them. No one possesses the truth, because everyone is somnolent. And no one has absolute vision; hence, no one can call others blind and treat them with violence. We are all half-blind, half-aware creatures and we have to lend one another a hand. The practical outcome that emerges from this image is not discourteousness and intolerance, but tolerance and patience; and not just with friends but also with enemies, because we are all human beings; we are all somnolent and wine-tainted.

Even more explicit and precise conclusions can be drawn from this mythology-based reading: Truth and religiosity must never be used as weapons. For they are of the nature of language, not claws. Rather than encouraging arrogance and imperiousness, they should foster humility and forbearance. Someone who is closer to the truth is more humble and more tolerant towards others than someone who is self-righteous in the delusion of possessing the truth and imagines that everyone else is deprived and out of luck. This is a kind of mild and moderate Erasmian form of doubt, which underpins modern thinking and logically bears within it a call to tolerance.

Here, I would like to cite Karl Popper's exact words about Erasmus and Socrates and their epistemological moderateness and its link to tolerance and magnanimity, in order to demonstrate the affinity between the ideas of eastern and western philosophers in this respect.

Erasmus of Rotterdam attempted to revive this Socratic doctrine – the important though unobtrusive doctrine 'Know thyself and thus admit to thyself how little thou knowest!' Yet this doctrine was swept away by the belief that truth is manifest and by the new self-assurance exemplified and taught in different ways by Luther and Calvin, by Bacon and Descartes.

It is important to realize, in this connection, the difference between Cartesian doubt and the doubt of Socrates or Erasmus or Montaigne. While Socrates doubts human knowledge or wisdom and remains firm in his rejection of any pretension to knowledge or wisdom, Descartes doubts everything – but only to end up with the possession of absolutely certain knowledge; for he finds that his universal doubt would lead him to doubt the truthfulness of God, which is absurd. Having proved that universal doubt is absurd, he concludes that we can know securely, that we can be wise – by distinguishing, in the natural light of reason, between clear and distinct ideas whose source is God and all other ideas whose source is our own impure imagination. Cartesian doubt, we see, is merely a maieutic instrument for establishing a criterion of truth and, with it, a way to secure knowledge and wisdom. Yet for the Socrates of the *Apology*, wisdom consisted in the awareness of our limitations; in knowing how little we know, every one of us.

It was this doctrine of an essential human fallibility which Nicolas of Cusa and Erasmus of Rotterdam (who refers to Socrates) revived; and it was this 'humanist' doctrine (in contradistinction to the optimistic doctrine on which Milton relied, the doctrine that truth will prevail) which Nicolas and Erasmus, Montaigne and Locke

and Voltaire, followed by John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell, made the basis of the doctrine of tolerance. 'What is tolerance?' asks Voltaire in his Philosophical Dictionary; and he answers: 'It is a necessary consequence of our humanity. We are all fallible and prone to error; let us then pardon each other's folly. This is the first principle of natural right.'¹

Hafez even drew on the troubling notion of determinism (predestination, fatalism) to reinforce his tolerance-inclined thinking. He says, we are all prisoners of destiny; a Muslim person is Muslim by virtue of geography and history, just as a Christian is a Christian on the same grounds. If Iranians were born in the Netherlands and the Dutch in Iran, then the latter would be Muslims and the former, Christians. How, then, can we prisoners of history and geography put on airs and graces and claim to be superior to others, or, even worse, resort to weapons and wage war on one another and shed other people's blood? Prisons always make people humble and prisoners are kinder to one another in the light of their shared fate. We are the prisoners of our history, geography, learning and beliefs and, once the veils have fallen away, we will see with what fallacies and superstitions we were afflicted.

In the correspondence between Luther and Erasmus, as well as in Erasmus' book Discourse on Free Will, we repeatedly encounter the tale of human will versus God's will. This is a conundrum that all scholars and thinkers, especially religious ones, grappled with in the past. They sought to explain what role is left to human beings if God's will determines all affairs; or, if human beings do have some independence, where the boundaries of God's will lie. And, as we know, it was this same delineation and definition of the extent of God's will that ultimately opened the way for philosophical secularism, one of the legitimate offspring of which was political secularism.

Erasmus' final verdict was that people who had been baptized were more likely to benefit from God's grace than people who had not been baptized, and that Gabriel, too, was more likely to receive people who had been chosen by God beforehand. In other words, for Erasmus, too, people who had happened to be born Christians and had happened to have been baptized were more favoured by and closer to God.

Hafez, too, who lived in a religious society filled with Sufi sentiments, whilst being a serious critic of this society, concurred with a determinist position of this kind and wrote unequivocally: Rob me not of hope in eternal grace / How can you know who is truly favoured and who disgraced ? / Not only I happened to lose piety / My Father also opted for losing the eternal heaven. In other words, at one and the same time, he accepted his fallibility as a descendent of Adam and did not accept that transgression and sin removed the possibility of benefiting from God's mercy and grace. He was of the view that good people and bad people had it inscribed in a book from time immemorial that they would lead a life of felicity or villainy.

And even more delicately and profoundly, he wrote: Are the chaste and the unchaste not both from the same tribe? / Which one do I choose to fall for? What choice? In other words, when the saint and the sinner are in the same position in terms of their divinely-decreed destinies, which one do we freely choose? Is it meaningful to speak of choice and will?

We can see what dubious underpinnings Hafez is prepared to call upon to bolster his correct belief in tolerance. And, to borrow an analogy from Mowlana Jalal-al-Din Rumi, we can see how he turns dust into gold with the magic of his words in order to empower and enrich society with the resulting treasures.

From this panoply of views, epistemological doubt or a belief in half-open eyes is the most important and the most acceptable. Let us turn to the great Rumi, who lived a century before Hafez. He came from Balkh (in modern-day Afghanistan) and his travels took him to Iran, Iraq and Hijaz. Finally, he came to reside in Konya (in modern-day Turkey) and was buried there. But his teachings captivated the entire Islamic world – and, in our times, also enraptured the West – and were an inspiration to all ardent hearts and all lovers of God. In order to demonstrate the extent to which human knowledge is incomplete and relative, he recounts an Indian fable to us in verse. The Indians had put an elephant on display. The elephant was in a dark chamber and, in order to see it, the people had to file past it through the darkness. But, since they could not see in the dark, they would try to feel the elephant with their hands. On leaving the chamber, they would tell others about their experience. The ones whose hands had touched the elephant's feet would say, I saw a 'column'. The ones whose hands had touched the elephant's back would say, I saw a 'plank'. The ones whose hands had touched its trunk would say, I saw a 'pipe', and so on.

Rumi tells us that, if these people had had candles in their hands, their differences would have disappeared. But, alas, in the dark chamber of nature, our knowledge of the truth (which is symbolized by the elephant) is fragmented. We each hold a portion of the truth in our hands and no one has all of it (apart from, he believed, mystics, who possess special, kohl-lined eyes). This admission of the deficiency of knowledge is enough to make us more humble, and patience and tolerance are nothing other than one of the fruits of the tree of humility.

Rumi said even more exquisite things and I have no doubt that, if Erasmus had known about them, he would have drawn on them and made excellent use of them in his writings. Rumi held that prophets played two major roles: teacher and healer. And he even attached more importance to their role as healers than as teachers. Prophets and religions have come to human beings mainly to cultivate their spirits and to heal their souls; not to fill their minds with learning, but to fill their hearts with the love of God and love for one another, and to cleanse them of sickness and hatred. The mind, too, when liberated from vice, can find its way more nimbly into the hidden chamber of the world's secrets; a mind that is in chains is heavy-footed and a prisoner of nature.

Rumi counselled theologians that God had given them reason purely so that they could use it to recognize the truth and He had sent religion purely so that they could worship the Creator; woe betide them if they used it to other ends and for other purposes! The mind is like a cane in the hands of the blind, not a weapon in the hands of antagonists with which they can beat each other: When the cane becomes an instrument for clamour and war / smash it into a thousand pieces, O blind one! There can be no better argument than this for exercising tolerance. When something is misapplied and used for the opposite purpose from the one for which it was intended, it must be discarded, even if it is the cane of reason and religion. If religions and ideologies turn into instruments of animosity and if, instead of filling hearts with love and magnanimity and inclining them towards the Creator, sow hatred, vindictiveness and arrogance, they must be abandoned.

Were prophets not physicians and healers? Are religions not servants of morality and the virtues? What sort of religiosity is it that increases sickness and sets people against each other and, in a Godly manner, distributes heaven and hell between people? It is here that the words of Muhyi al-Din Ibn-Arabi, the great Islamic mystic and Rumi's contemporary, are so stirring when he says: I'm a disciple of the religion of love / wherever the convoy of love goes, my religion and faith follow.

Mystically, Rumi takes things even further: Religion is neither a sword nor a cane, it is a rope; a rope that the individual must grasp autonomously, with a longing to ascend, in order to climb out of the well of ignorance and conceit and glimpse the light of knowledge, magnanimity and kindness. Many are the people who have been deceived by the Koran and the Bible (and by religion, in general) because it is not enough for a book to be a book of guidance; the reader, too, must want to be guided; otherwise, a totally humane creed can produce totally inhumane results in corrupt and sullied hands. Rumi used the very evocative and expressive term 'an upward yen': Besech God continually that you may not stumble over these deep sayings and that you may arrive at the journey's end.

For many have been led astray by the Quran: by clinging to that rope a multitude have fallen into the well.

There is no fault in the rope, in as much as you had no desire for reaching the top.²

The rope is in your hands but you do not wish to climb out of the well. You take it and descend into the well. You do not have 'an upward passion'. This is why rectifying the direction and the objective takes priority over the means and the instruments. There are people who turn religions into the instruments of animosity and there are people who turn them into the instruments of kindness and coexistence. It depends on their 'passion', which comes before religion and sits outside of it.

When we speak of the intolerance of believers towards one another, we must not forget non-believers. Just as we can have religious Fundamentalism, so, too, can we have secular Fundamentalism. Intolerance is a kind of plague that both the believer and the unbeliever can be afflicted with and if attention is not paid to the biological origin, mental structure and the inherent deficiency of human knowledge and if there is no 'upward yen', we can all sink into pride and narrow, rigid prejudices, which produce no fruit other than hatred, violence, elimination, folly and decline. Before anything else, we must rectify our passion.

Anyone who thinks that he has special qualities or especially seeing eyes and that he can view humanity and history from a greater height and has discovered the hidden and ultimate secret of humanity's existence and history's destination, or imagines that politics and statesmanship are the realization of a divine or historical (religious or secular) promise, or believes that he has a superior and different standing from everyone else, or treats others in a way that he would not want to be treated himself, can easily succumb to destructive violence and intolerance and consider this violence sacrosanct. The intolerance of people of this kind is the worst kind of intolerance, because, if others see violence as their right, these people see it as their divine or historical 'duty'. Is it not interesting to note that mystics and prophets were of the opinion that, despite possessing special forces and qualities, they had a mission to behave towards the masses as if they were one of them and that they even believed that the unkindness of the masses towards them was an intrinsic hardship of the spiritual path which they had to endure.

Islamic Sufism, despite its shortcomings, was the bearer and teacher of values that we are in great need of today if we are to bolster the element of tolerance. In denigrating power and wealth, Sufis used to teach people to view these two things with the utmost suspicion and to be extremely wary of the afflictions they could give rise to, and to know what mortifications their emergence, growth and unchecked existence could bring. We can even use the denigration of power and wealth to

strengthen – from a moral perspective – the fair distribution of power and wealth which is among the pillars of liberal democracy or social democracy.

By teaching humility and rejecting avarice and even an excessive avarice for knowledge (!), and by restraining ‘the pleasure principle’ and bolstering the ‘quest for virtue’, they guided people in a direction that reduced tension and conflict amongst them, thereby encouraging coexistence and moderation. They always asked God to grant them the ability to do two things: ‘battling against the self and being benevolent towards others’, and they believed that the latter was a product of the former. They maintained that a person has to be hard on himself in order to be magnanimous towards others; a person has to refuse to forgive himself in order to be forgiving towards others.

It is sad to say that, in our world, the internal moral elements of seeking virtue and trying to perfect oneself have become so weak that external measures cannot easily instil patience, magnanimity and humility in people. One of the reasons why humility has been considered the greatest virtue and arrogance the greatest vice, is that arrogance breeds violence and humility tolerance. Our Sufis held love in high esteem precisely because love makes the lover humble! They, therefore, considered conceit to be the slayer of love. The people who turn religiosity into a factor that feeds selfishness and a sense of superiority – and are arrogant and self-righteous because they claim to be pious and obedient to religious law – truly commit the greatest injustice against celestial creeds. Erasmus was a committed Christian and, at the same time, a humble and tolerant humanist. His ‘desire for the top’ prevented him from falling into the trap of ostentatious, degenerate piety. In the words of Sa’di, the illustrious Iranian poet of the seventh/ thirteenth century: The fruit-laden branch bends to the ground; in other words, the more fecund a person is, the more humble he is. It is people who are vacuous and inwardly impoverished who fail to be humble and tolerant towards others.

In my country, Iran, a religious state, tolerance has reached its nadir today; I can go so far as to say that tolerance is seen as a vice rather than a virtue. Before, we used to live under a secular, undemocratic and intolerant state. Today, we have to endure an intolerant religious state. (Hence, religiosity is not a necessary condition of intolerance, nor is secularity a sufficient condition for tolerance.) Today, not just unbelievers but even believers are not tolerated by the state in Iran. And there is no other reason for this other than that the rulers see themselves as the measure of what is true and what is moral. And they are bent on taking people to heaven even if they have to drag them there in chains. The concept of duty has left so little room for rights that, even when the people want to criticize their rulers, they have to ask them for permission.

Newspapers tremble and are easily banned by the dozen with the mere stroke of a pen because their variety and plurality is itself a call to pluralism and tolerance. Conversely, semi-armed groups of hooligans can operate with impunity and insolence, and appear by the dozen at public gatherings to break them up and beat up opponents. They are left free to behave in this way because they are the living embodiment of the absence of magnanimity and tolerance. The country’s officials view these incidents with total indifference because this is what their brand of religiosity, or better put, their ‘downward yen’ decrees.

Our statesmen have taken the rope of religion and are taking the people deep down into the well of obscurantism. And there are only two reasons for this: first, a downward passion and second: vacuity. If they were rich in learning and spirituality and if they had an upward passion, the fate of religion and religiosity would

undoubtedly have turned out better than this, and they would have adopted 'magnanimity towards friends and tolerance towards enemies' as their slogan.

The conclusion I wish to draw and emphasize is that tolerance is an extra-religious (and certainly not an anti-religious) virtue; exactly like love, which, in the words of the great Rumi, 'lies beyond all religions'. Religions have asked human beings to obey God and to refrain from sin. But love (and love of God, at that) is not a religious duty; it is an extra-religious, moral virtue, which, of course, also enriches and lends meaning to religion. Tolerance, too, must be viewed in this same light. It is a virtue that we are all in great need of, whether we are believers or unbelievers. And it is only by teaching tolerance that we can, in Hafez's words, ensure peace in this world and the next. The enemies of tolerance – in whatever guise, religious or secular – are enemies of both humanity and religion. We must guide them.

Translated from the Persian by Nilou Mobasser

Notes

- 1
Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, p.16 rkp 19
- 2
Rumi, *Mathnawi*, Book iii, 4207-4209

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