ARTICLE TITLE	TOLERANCE: ITS CONCEPT AND FOUNDATIONS IN ISLAM

TOLERANCE: ITS CONCEPT AND FOUNDATIONS IN ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

Undeniably, Islam has promoted a message of tolerance and openness from the very beginning of its mission—within structured frameworks that ensure peaceful coexistence and harmony. Its timeless teachings—from the Qur'an and the Prophet's (s) sayings to its rich intellectual heritage—are replete with examples of this ethos. The profound and continued influence of this faith from its inception to the present day underscores that Islam at its core is a call to peace, tolerance, universalism, and communal living (global citizenship), based on mutual respect, genuine engagement, and the rejection of all forms of violence and extremism.

This scholarly summary provides an epistemological foundation, clearly demonstrating that Islam has long embraced the concept of tolerance and actively encourages acceptance of the other. It illuminates the true meaning of tolerance in Islam.

Introduction.

Since the end of the 20th century and continuing into the present, the global landscape has been marked by a serious ideological and value-based conflict, driven by political, economic, cultural, and even geographical factors. This has triggered waves of violence, extremism, and the rejection of "the other," fueled by repeated calls that elevate intolerance and encourage aggression, hatred, and terrorism.

From many perspectives—especially in the West—this situation today is attributed to Islam, its culture, and its followers. Islam has long been associated in Western imagination with extremism, oppression, and intolerance.

This prevailing Western stereotype now poses a major obstacle to initiatives promoting coexistence and transnational citizenship. Simultaneously, it deepens Western (orientalist) research and discourse about Islam and its values—particularly regarding tolerance. A fundamental question arises: **What is the true concept of tolerance within Islam? Is there an authentic basis in Islamic sources for accepting "the other"?**

To address this question and to clarify the meaning of tolerance and related values in Islam, we propose the following premise: **Tolerance in Islam means embracing the other and transcending all forms of exclusion.**

1. On Tolerance: The Term, the Concept... Some Definitions and Contexts

In Arabic, the word *tolerance* (التسامح) derives from the root (س.م.ح), which implies gentleness and ease. It is synonymous with flexibility and leniency.[1]

According to Ibn Faris' *Mu'jam Maqayis Al-Lughah*, the verb *samaha* signifies fluidity and softness.[2]

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[1] (*Collective Author, Arabic Language Dictionary, Al-Mu'jam Al-Wasit, Al-Shorouk International Library, 4th edition, n.d., Egypt, p. 447*).

[2] (*Abu Al-Hasan Ibn Faris, Mu'jam Maqayis Al-Lughah, Dar Al-Jabal, vol. 3, Beirut, 2nd ed., 1979, p. 99*).

In Lisan Al-Arab by Ibn Manzur, the root (س.م.ح) appears in expressions like asmaha, samaha, and samaaha, indicating generosity and giving, stemming from nobility and openhandedness. Asmaha also means "he agreed with me," and the Arabs say, "stick to the truth, for in it there is samah"—meaning abundance or room. They also say asmahaka nafsuhu when the soul yields or submits, suggesting compliance and acceptance.1

Therefore, the term *tolerance* or *forgiveness* in Arabic encompasses a variety of meanings: generosity, ease, agreement, gentleness, submission, openness, leniency, and flexibility. All of these signify a noble human attitude rooted in altruism, self-transcendence, and acceptance of the other. Tolerance, then, carries positive connotations in the Arabic language and culture.

In contrast, the European concept of tolerance originates from the Latin root *tolerare*, which means to endure, to be patient, to persist in hardship. It implies enduring or coexisting with imposed or freely chosen circumstances. In English, *toleration* denotes endurance and patience.[2]

It also means acceptance, accommodation, and respect for others' beliefs and opinions. In French, as found in the *Larousse* dictionary, *tolérance* signifies the freedom of others and respect for their way of thinking and their political and religious beliefs. The *Dictionary of Social Sciences* defines tolerance in the French context as the acceptance of others' views, ideas, and actions based on the principle of difference—directly opposing authoritarianism and violence.[3]

In this light, in European languages, *tolerance* refers to a psychological, existential, social, and religious stance marked by a conviction to accept difference and uphold freedoms and diverse beliefs, regardless of their nature. Tolerance thus becomes an openness, a rejection of dogmatism, and an acceptance of others' ways of thinking, living, and being.

From this linguistic comparison, we observe a divergence between the Arabic and Western meanings. In Arabic, tolerance implies generosity, altruism, and magnanimity. In Western contexts, it emphasizes endurance and adaptability in the face of discomfort, as well as respect for others despite differences or contradictions.

Regardless of linguistic origins, the term *tolerance* emerged in the post-medieval era, specifically in the 16th century, within the religious upheaval of Europe. The Catholic Church wielded both spiritual and temporal authority during the Middle Ages and exerted various forms of symbolic and psychological violence over the public. This dominance spurred religious reform movements and doctrinal conflicts aiming to undermine the Church's religious foundations, particularly between Catholics and Protestants. These sectarian struggles gave rise to a form of doctrinal intolerance (*sectarian intolerance*).

This climate pushed many theologians, thinkers, philosophers, and even clergy to seek relief from the destructive consequences of Christian sectarian strife. Hence, ideas advocating openness and religious tolerance began circulating. The reinterpretation and deeper understanding of biblical texts were central to this movement. Tolerance, in this context, was rooted in the rejection of fanaticism and an embrace of patience and love—values inherently aligned with Christianity, as articulated by Christian theologians and philosophers: *"Religion is the one domain chosen freely. It is most dependent on the will, and no one can be coerced into worshiping what they do not want."[4]*

The English philosopher John Locke further elaborated the concept of religious tolerance, asserting that:
"No man, regardless of his religious office, has the right to deprive another of his liberty or worldly possessions due to religious differences. Such authority is not granted to the Church nor any of its members."[5]

As the call for religious tolerance succeeded in curbing sectarian conflict, the idea evolved further. Humanists began to promote tolerance not only in religion but also in politics, culture, society, and metaphysics. The humanist movement emphasized human dignity, freedom, and individual beliefs, no matter how divergent or contradictory. Voltaire's famous work *Treatise on Tolerance* exemplified this new spirit. He famously wrote *"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."* And also:
"Is it not cruel to persecute in this brief life those who do not think as we do? Is it boldness or insolence to eternally condemn them?"

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[1] (*Ibn Manzur, Lisan Al-Arab, vol. 3, Dar Al-Ma'arif, Cairo, n.d., 1981, p. 2088*).

[2] (*P. Foulquie, Dictionnaire de la langue philosophique, Paris, P.U.F., 6th ed., 1992, p. 729*).

[3] (*Alaa Asaad Wutfa, Education on the Values of Tolerance, Al-Tasamuh Journal of Intellectual and Islamic Studies, Issue 11, Amman, Jordan, 1426 AH, p. 214*).

[4] (*Joseph Lecler, A History of Tolerance in the Age of Reform, trans. Georges Suleiman, Arab Center for Translation – Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 1st ed., 2009, p. 66*).

[5] (*Feryal Hassan Khalifa, Philosophy, Tolerance, and the Environment, Madbouli Library, Cairo, 1st ed., 2006, p. 61*).

These statements reflect Voltaire's deep commitment to tolerance not merely in religion but in its ultimate metaphysical and philosophical form, advocating for the acceptance of difference and plurality.

In this context, Spinoza stressed the importance of tolerance and the elevation of individual liberty as a natural right. Any attempt to interfere with or restrict this liberty would only fuel social, political, religious, and cultural conflicts, thereby destabilizing society. Tolerance thus becomes the only guarantee for strengthening and liberating the human self.

The views of the Humanists, Voltaire, Spinoza, and others helped shape a secular vision of tolerance, moving beyond its narrow theological definition toward a broader modern understanding. Following the Enlightenment and the 18th-century revolutions of reason and science, tolerance expanded to include civil, political, religious, and human rights. These Enlightenment values laid the foundation for what is now referred to as *civil tolerance*—a form of tolerance that supports difference and pluralism and defends them without bias, irrespective of religious or secular sacredness.

Examining the linguistic root and historical development of the term *tolerance* provides a clearer understanding of its current usage. Originating in the 16th century as a response to Christian sectarian intolerance, it has since evolved into a civil principle based on human dignity, liberty, and rights. However, its semantic and epistemological meaning varies according to the contexts in which it is employed, making it difficult to define precisely. Nonetheless, *tolerance* often signifies a value and human behavior grounded in moral, religious, metaphysical, political, and legal foundations—essential principles of human rights.[1]

Tolerance is commonly defined as a term that refers to collective or individual practices aimed at rejecting extremism or avoiding the persecution of those who believe or act differently, even when those beliefs or actions are disapproved of.[2]

In this sense, tolerance expresses the conviction in accepting difference and respecting opposing or differing views—rejecting all forms of extremism and intolerance. It entails a certain acceptance and respect for the opinions of others, even when they contradict one's own.

This definition highlights tolerance as a positive concept that fosters a horizontal relationship among human beings, encouraging openness and acceptance of the right to express differing opinions, even when they are not widely accepted or agreed upon. This applies across life's domains: political, social, cultural, religious, and epistemological. Religious tolerance, specifically, refers to respecting and honoring the beliefs of others.[3]

André Lalande defines the word as:

"A mental disposition or behavioral principle based on allowing freedom of expression for everyone, even if we disagree with them." He emphasizes that tolerance includes the protection of free thought.[4]

Thus, tolerance reflects an epistemological stance characterized by respect and non-dogmatism toward others who hold differing beliefs and worldviews. Tolerance presupposes the belief that others have a legitimate right to think, believe, and act differently—whether on civil or religious grounds. This reflects the very essence of freedom.

Tolerance, then, is liberation from ideologies that reject religious and intellectual plurality. It is an ethical idea with political, intellectual, and religious dimensions. Its antithesis is intolerance—fanaticism, violence, and the coercive imposition of views. Tolerance, by contrast, is a sublime human value that lays the groundwork for the ethics of coexistence with the other, through justice, freedom, and equality.

Ultimately, this relatively settled meaning of tolerance—without exaggeration—captures its essence in Islam. The values of accepting the other, non-discrimination, and fostering a shared life are deeply rooted in Islamic history and its enduring texts. From this perspective, the Islamic view of tolerance is based on equality, dialogue, moderation, and rejecting isolationism—principles that will be further explored in the following research components.

2. Rooting the Concept of Tolerance in Islam

Following the conceptual clarification of tolerance, which revealed that it entails openness, dialogue, equality, and the rejection of all forms of extremism and rigidity in any form, and in defense of this logic within a religious framework, this section seeks to link the idea of tolerance with the Islamic worldview—specifically

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[1] (*Hussein Al-Hassan, Promoting a Culture of Tolerance Among University Youth, Educational Journal, vol. 24, Egypt, 2015, p. 136*).

[2] (*Mohamed Al-Saleh Al-Siqilli, The Degree to Which Islamic Education Textbooks Reflect the Values of Tolerance, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Faculty of Education, Al-Azhar University, Palestine, 2012, p. 16*).

[3] (*Ibrahim Madkour, Philosophical Dictionary, General Authority for Printing Affairs, Egypt, n.d., 1973, p. 44*).

[4] (*André Lalande, Philosophical Encyclopedia, trans. Khalil Ahmad Khalil, Oueidat Publications, Beirut–Paris, 2nd ed., 2001, p. 1460*).

in terms of grounding and rooting the concept within it. From an Islamic religious perspective, Islam and its foundational culture advocated for tolerance and promoted it through various forms and positions. Referring to its primary sources (the Qur'an and the noble Hadiths) is essential to illustrate this and present the genuine foundations upon which the principle of tolerance is built.

The actual grounding of tolerance begins with a linguistic inquiry into the concept and a hermeneutic excavation within the sacred Islamic texts. It is noteworthy that while the exact word "tolerance" (*tasāmuḥ*) and its derivatives do not explicitly appear in the Qur'anic text, synonymous terms that convey its meaning are present, particularly *forgiveness* (*ṣafḥ*) and *benevolence* (*iḥsān*), both of which imply a rejection of all forms of fanaticism, extremism, rigidity, and radicalism. The Qur'an states in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 109:"Many of the People of the Book wish they could turn you back to disbelief after you have believed—out of envy from themselves, even after the truth has become clear to them. But pardon and overlook until Allah brings about His command. Indeed, Allah is Most Capable of everything." And in Surah Az-Zukhruf, verse 89: "So turn away from them and say, 'Peace.' But they will come to know."

These verses practically illustrate the depth of the concept of forgiveness and pardon. Regarding *iḥsān*, Allah says in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 83:"And [recall] when We took the covenant from the Children of Israel, [enjoining], 'Do not worship except Allah; and to parents do good and to relatives, orphans, and the needy. And speak to people good words and establish prayer and give zakah.' Then you turned away, except a few of you, and you were refusing." And in Surah Al-'Ankabūt, verse 46: "And do not argue with the People of the Book except in a way that is best, except for those who commit injustice among them. And say, 'We believe in what has been revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God is one; and we are Muslims [in submission] to Him.'" Also, in Surah Al Mu'minūn, verse 96: "Repel evil with that which is best. We are most knowing of what they describe."

These and other verses deepen the Islamic view of tolerance as manifested in *ṣafḥ* (forgiveness) and *iḥsān* (benevolence), which are two practical dimensions that open the door to rejecting violence, hatred, and extremism. They reflect a belief in pardoning and accepting the other and engaging in dialogue. Thus, the concept of tolerance in the Western tradition, which emerged in modern times, shares much with the Islamic conception. The idea of *ṣafḥ*—as presented in the aforementioned verses—is essentially an ontological, intellectual, social, and psychological position that goes beyond differences and accepts the mistakes of others. Surah Az-Zukhruf, verse 89, explicitly calls for forgiveness, the promotion of peace, and the rejection of violence and fanaticism.

In the Islamic worldview, tolerance takes on a renewed form when expressed through *iḥsān*, which signifies an objective and ethical relationship between the self and the other, reflecting mercy, kindness, gentleness, and dignified treatment between people. This constitutes the core of the concept of tolerance embedded in the daily life of the Muslim. It was narrated that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:

"Indeed, Allah has prescribed *iḥsān* in all things." This indicates that the Muslim's entire life is shaped by *iḥsān* and tolerance, in his behavior, thoughts, and various affairs. When it comes to dealing with others or confronting extremism, rigidity, and ideological radicalism, *iḥsān* provides a path that blocks such tendencies. It is a genuine call to guide Muslims toward proper conduct in their interactions with others.

The Qur'anic text affirms this, as the term *iḥsān*, which as noted reflects the idea of tolerance, appears in its various forms approximately 195 times—12 of which are in the exact formulation used in this paper. This frequent recurrence indicates its profound significance. Notable examples include: Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 82; Surah An-Naḥl, verse 125; Surah Al-Mu'minūn, verse 96; and Surah Al-'Ankabūt, verse 46, among others.

These verses, among others, are only a partial representation of the broader Qur'anic framework, which from the outset sought to structure human relationships in a sound manner that guarantees social stability by eliminating all forms of rigidity, extremism, and aggression. At this point in elaborating and rooting the idea of tolerance in Islam, it is worthwhile to examine it in light of the religious-epistemological content that Islam itself has promoted. Islam initially encouraged tolerance in interpersonal dealings, as shown in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 280, which presents a lenient and flexible approach, at least in financial and commercial transactions. There is no room for coercion or pressure on individuals who are unable to meet their financial obligations due to extenuating circumstances. This leniency implicitly opens the door to a form of temporal tolerance in transactions, which serves as a foundation for balanced and healthy social relations.

A new perspective on the roots of tolerance emerges from the reality that the spread of Islam more than fourteen centuries ago was actually due to its tolerant nature—not, as some Orientalists have claimed, through

the sword or violence. Qur'anic verses affirm that the essence of Islamic preaching was rooted in dialogue, benevolence, and non-violence. For example, in Surah An-Naḥl, verse 125:

"Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best. Indeed, your Lord is most knowing of who has strayed from His way, and He is most knowing of who is [rightly] guided."

This verse indicates that the call to Islam was based on kind and wise speech, using language that does not offend others—this is the essence of tolerance. Moreover, God repeatedly instructed the Prophet (PBUH) to be patient with the ignorance, aggression, and insults of the disbelievers, and not to retaliate. Islam believed that patience and kind preaching could transform animosity into love and understanding. This contrasts with Christianity, which from its inception rejected other faiths. Historical records show that Catholic Christianity even rejected alternative interpretations within Christianity itself, let alone other religions—often with claims of absolute truth and through acts of suppression.

Historically, the Islamic world did not defend its creed, values, or religious life through coercion or violence. Instead, it allowed room for individual freedom, granting wide space for tolerance. The Islamic worldview acknowledged the right of the "other"—the different—to coexist in Islamic society, promoting cultural pluralism and dialogue as the path to coexistence. Numerous verses support this approach, such as in Surah Hūd, verse 118:

"And if your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ." In support of this inclusive and respectful religious tolerance, we find in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 256: "There is no compulsion in religion. The right path has become distinct from error. So whoever disbelieves in false gods and believes in Allah has certainly grasped the firmest handhold—one that will never break. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing."

This stands in stark contrast to what is found in Christian scriptures, where Christ is said to have told his disciples: "Compel them to enter your religion."[1]

Within this framework, some individuals—or more precisely, those harboring animosity toward Islam— may resort to citing certain Qur'anic verses that could be misinterpreted or intentionally manipulated to suggest an attitude of intolerance or rejection of those who differ from Muslims. However, such verses have undoubtedly been misread—more specifically, they have not been placed within their proper historical and contextual setting. Islam was not founded on the persecution of those who disagreed with it, nor on the confiscation of their rights, coercion in matters of faith, or the unjust violation of their property, honor, or lives.[2]

Beyond the Qur'anic text that lays the foundation for the significance of tolerance in Islam, history offers a compelling example that illustrates the remarkable ability of this value to spread through peaceful and non-violent means. This occurred primarily through the genuine embodiment of Islamic principles—such as ethics, civility, and acceptance of the other—by its adherents. It is well known that the expansion of the Islamic state was largely facilitated by Muslim merchants traveling to non-Muslim lands. Their conduct played a significant role in attracting non-Muslims to Islam. The spread of Islamic values was not achieved by the sword or coercive force, for these were only legitimized in Islam in cases of self-defense, or in protection of life, honor, and property.

As the orientalist Thomas W. Arnold notes: *"These Christian tribes who embraced Islam did so of their own free will and choice; and the Christian Arabs who live today among Muslim communities are a testimony to this tolerance."[3]*

The driving force behind this expansion was the practice of *da'wah* (inviting to Islam), dialogue, coexistence, and human conduct—unlike Christianity, which often reacted with hostility toward dissenting sects and critical ideas, particularly under Catholicism. One must also recall that the Islamic world suffered long and harsh campaigns against it—namely the Crusades—which never reflected the spirit of tolerance Christianity claimed to uphold. These campaigns were violent, extreme, and driven solely by Christian sectarian motives. A true historical testament to the Islamic world's acceptance of religious and doctrinal difference lies in the continued existence of Christianity's sacred site in its original birthplace—the Church of the Nativity near Jerusalem. This fact alone speaks volumes about the Muslim world's indifference to, or rather active protection of, the rights of *dhimmis* (non-Muslim citizens under Islamic rule).

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[1] (Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Fanaticism and Tolerance Between Christianity and Islam*, Nahdat Misr, 6th Edition, 2005, p. 56.)
[2] Shawqi Abu Khalil, *Tolerance in Islam: Principle and Practice*, Dar Al-Fikr Al-Mu'asir, Damascus, 1st ed., 1993, p. 50.
[3] Thomas W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, Maktabat Al-Nahda Al-Misriyya, Egypt, 2nd ed., 1975, p. 70.

The foundation of tolerance in Islam is not confined solely to the Qur'anic text or the aforementioned historical instances. Rather, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) deepened this ethos in remarkable and captivating ways. If tolerance is understood as leniency and flexibility in all aspects of life, then the Prophet's saying—*"May Allah have mercy on a person who is easygoing when he sells, when he buys, and when he demands his due"*—is a clear indication and a strong encouragement toward practicing tolerance in material and social transactions. However, its true implications are spiritual and metaphysical in nature.

This direction is further reinforced through numerous examples of tolerance found in the Prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*). The Prophet not only recommended but also practiced tolerance with those who wronged or offended him, responding with kindness and compassion. A well-known incident illustrates this: when a Bedouin urinated in the mosque, the Prophet did not scold him harshly but forgave him and treated him with gentleness. This approach had a profound impact on the man's heart.

A testimony to the Prophet's nonviolent and compassionate character comes from his wife ʿĀ'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her), who said: *"The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) never struck anything with his hand—not a woman, nor a servant—except in the cause of Allah. He never took revenge for anything done to him personally, unless the laws of Allah were violated, in which case he sought justice for Allah's sake."*

These historical testimonies clearly demonstrate the extent to which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) distanced himself from violence and fanaticism. He truly embodied the spirit of forgiveness and tolerance. A prime example can be found in his conduct during the Conquest of Mecca: upon entering the Kaʿbah, he prayed between its two pillars, then placed his hands on the doorposts and said, *"There is no god but Allah alone."* He then addressed the Quraysh, asking: *"What do you think I will do to you?"* They replied, *"We expect good; you are a noble brother, son of a noble brother."* He responded with the words of his brother Prophet Joseph (peace be upon him): *"No blame will there be upon you today. May Allah forgive you, for He is the Most Merciful of the merciful."* He famously declared: *"Go, for you are free."*

These are but a few of the Prophet's statements, actions, and the Qur'anic texts that establish the principle of tolerance within the Islamic world. Undoubtedly, they confirm that tolerance is deeply rooted in Islam, both in word and deed. It is not a modern or foreign concept, for Islam's eternal texts and cultural heritage inherently embody this principle. Supporting this claim with further historical evidence will be the focus of what follows.

3- Aspects of Tolerance in Islam:

The path toward identifying the features of tolerance in the Islamic world and its cultural and historical manifestations first urges us to investigate the epistemological and religious foundations from which this religion began to believe in and defend the idea of tolerance. As we have previously established through Islam's eternal texts, it is entirely logical to assume that these principles rest on well-defined foundations that represent the main basis for it. Islam laid the groundwork for tolerance with firm foundations and solid covenants, explaining in detail the logic of horizontal relationships among Muslims themselves and with those who differ from them.

It is evident that Islam is the religion brought by all the prophets, as expressed in the Qur'anic verse:

"Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam. And those who were given the Scripture did not differ except after knowledge had come to them—out of jealousy and rebellion among themselves. And whoever disbelieves in the verses of Allah, then indeed, Allah is swift in [taking] account."

Surah Āl ʿImrān (3:19) This verse indicates that the message of Islam was sent to all people, even if it came in various and successive forms—from the scriptures of Abraham to Judaism and Christianity. This means that, with the advent of Islam, all people entered into a unified belief system, and there is no longer room to claim exclusive possession of the ultimate truth to the exclusion of other religions, as some priests and popes have done by rejecting other sects.

Islam, historically, did not completely abrogate the previous revealed religions. Instead, it corrected and refined them within the necessary frameworks and limits, while still preserving their original spiritual essence. In this sense, religion—regardless of its historical form—is, at its core, Islam. This is the first foundational aspect of tolerance in Islam.

The second foundational aspect of tolerance is the prohibition of coercing non-Muslims to convert to Islam, as expressed in the verse:

"There is no compulsion in religion. The right path has become clear from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in false gods and believes in Allah has certainly grasped the firmest handhold—one that will never break. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing." Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 256 (2:256)

This verse can be considered a fundamental principle of Islam and a basis for its tolerance. Islam does not permit forcing anyone to embrace the faith, as also reflected in the verse:

"And say, 'The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills—let him believe; and whoever wills—let him disbelieve.' Indeed, We have prepared for the wrongdoers a Fire whose walls will surround them. And if they call for relief, they will be relieved with water like molten brass, which scalds their faces. Wretched is the drink, and evil is the resting place."

The third foundation is justice and benevolence (iḥsān). A Muslim is religiously commanded to deal justly with all people, and he is not allowed to let his hatred drive him away from fairness, in accordance with the verse:

"Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes—from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly." (Surah Al-Mumtahanah, 60:8)

This verse and others like it encourage justice and kindness toward non-Muslims, as evidenced by the affirmation at the end that "Allah loves those who act justly." Treating the People of the Book with fairness and kindness is one of the most prominent signs of Islam's tolerance.

The fourth foundation is refraining from harming non-Muslims in word or deed. Islam prohibits insulting their beliefs or mocking their religions and ensures their right to practice their faith freely and without restriction.[1]

These, then, are the religious and epistemological foundations that define and frame tolerance in the Islamic world. They are principles with a deep historical resonance dating back to the emergence of Islam itself. Islam acknowledges—on both metaphysical and ontological levels—the existence of the "other," their freedom, their rights, and their thoughts. Perhaps the most significant entry point to coexistence that Islam proposed from its inception was this religious tolerance, which affirmed the right of non-Muslims to practice their religious rituals. This represents a clear rejection of doctrinal and sectarian fanaticism, as is evident in many noble verses of the Qur'an that permit peaceful and religious coexistence among various sects and denominations within the Islamic context.

This religious tolerance is manifest in the protection of the lives, rights, and freedoms of non-Muslims in the land of Islam. It took the form of safeguarding the dhimmis—non-Muslims residing in Islamic lands and belonging to divinely revealed religions, whether they were Christian communities, Jewish sects, or Sabeans.[2]

Given that Islam encompasses both a religious and worldly system intended to be implemented in society, it was necessary for it to engage with those groups who remained adherent to their own religions and customs through a framework grounded in the ethical and human values it upholds. Islam guaranteed these groups the preservation of their full personal identity in all its aspects: freedom of religion, the right to culture, and respect for their languages, customs, and personal laws. The places of worship, cemeteries, schools, and courts of the *dhimmis* (non-Muslims under Muslim rule) enjoyed the same sanctity as the mosques, cemeteries, and courts of Muslims.[3]

Such freedom and respect can only be understood within the framework of tolerance and recognition of the other, despite the profound difference in belief systems and individual consciousness. The fact that Islam granted this group a noble form of care, and that it is repeatedly mentioned in its texts, is nothing but a sign of its concern for ensuring they are treated in a manner worthy of their human dignity.

Historically, it would have been possible for Islam—at the moment of its emergence, formation, and eventual completion—to abandon the idea of respecting those outside its faith and to impose its choices upon them. However, this never occurred within its religious framework. Islam was founded on one of the core principles of human relations, namely openness, tolerance, and recognition of the other. It even worked to protect them within the broader Islamic community. Islam committed itself to safeguarding other religions, particularly Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and others, so long as these religions did not pose a threat to its existence. This is why the orientalist Claude Cahen considers this approach to be a form of both religious

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[1] Mohammed Blih Hamad Al-Ajmi, "The Nature and Domains of Tolerance in Islam," Journal of Sharia and Law, Issue 37, Cairo, April 2021, p. 460.

[2] *Jacques Risler, Arab Civilization, translated by Khalil Ahmed Khalil, Oueidat Publications, Beirut–Paris, 1st edition, 1993, p. 85.*

[3] *Mohammed Aziz Lahbabi, Al-Shakhsaniyya al-Islamiyya [Islamic Personalism], Dar Al-Maaref, Egypt, undated edition, 1969, p. 111.*

and human progress in the history of humanity—since, by contrast, Christianity in its original form was not able to treat different creeds with the same tolerance that Islam demonstrated.[1]

When Islam established the religious foundation that allowed *dhimmis* (non-Muslims living under Islamic rule) to continue living within the Islamic society, it simultaneously laid down a worldly foundation that ensured the sanctity of their lives, as well as the protection of their religious, cultural, and material possessions. It also guaranteed them the rights of citizenship and exempted them from the military duties required to defend the lands of Islam. This foundation was the payment of *jizya*—a specific amount of money—considered a tax through which the *dhimmis* contributed to the funding of public interests on the one hand, and received protection on the other.[2]

The Islamic perspective toward *dhimmis* encompassed both religious and worldly respect and recognition for those who did not follow the religion of Islam. In fact, this perspective represents an ideological challenge to anyone who believes that Islam drew the contours of a sectarian or doctrinal society in which people were treated according to their religion or creed—an assumption that reveals underlying racist tendencies opposed to all forms of humanism. Such a view is, in reality, nothing more than a distortion of Islamic culture and a misrepresentation of its foundational approach to dealing with religious difference. On the contrary, Islam not only enabled *dhimmis* to practice their rights and preserve their sanctities, but also allowed them to occupy major positions within Muslim lands, such as in Al-Andalus. Indeed, Jews never reached such elevated status in any society as they did under Islamic rule.[3]

Another significant manifestation of tolerance in the Islamic world can be found in one of the historical documents of Islamic heritage, known widely as the "*Sahīfa*" (Constitution of Medina). This document outlined the framework of relations between the different groups in Medina: the *Muhājirūn*, the *Anṣār*, the Jews, and others. According to its stipulations, Muslims, Jews, and all other factions were to unite in defense against any external aggression toward Medina. Thus, the *Sahīfa* established a general framework of governance in the city, where Muslims and non-Muslims lived, defended, and cooperated collectively. This represents an explicit acknowledgment and full agreement on the part of Muslims to uphold and protect the rights of the Jewish community and recognize their legal and social standing.

In this way, Islam, across its various eras, granted freedoms and rights to the minorities under its authority—minorities belonging to different religions and cultures. This serves as further proof of its ability to coexist with divergent ideas and cultures. Notably, when the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) migrated to Medina and established the first Islamic state, the city was already a pluralistic society with diverse cultural and religious elements: *Anṣār, Muhājirūn*, polytheists, and Jews.

The Prophet's first official act was to draft a treaty, charter, or constitution between these different factions of society, guaranteeing equal rights before the law for all groups. Among the texts of this treaty are:

"Whoever follows us from the Jews shall have help and equality; they shall not be wronged nor shall others be supported against them. The Jews of Banū 'Awf are one community with the believers. The Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs, and so do their clients and themselves, unless one does wrong or commits a sin, for he harms only himself. The Jews of Banū al-Najjār shall have the same rights as the Jews of Banū 'Awf."

This text, among others in the *Sahīfa*, has led many non-Muslim scholars to consider it the first constitutional document in the world, as it remarkably outlined the real foundations of a multi-identity, multicultural society. Within this framework, it has been historically documented that Jews during the Prophetic era used their own language, conducted their prayers in their synagogues, taught their children their religion in their schools, and were not restricted in these freedoms. They were even granted the right to maintain their own independent judicial system.[4]

The Italian orientalist L. V. Vaglieri states:

"Upon Muhammad's (peace be upon him) arrival in Medina, the first thing he did was extend a hand of friendship to the Jews, who at the time constituted a wealthy community dominating the economic sphere in the city. He invited them to sincerely cooperate in a political and social union. However, when it became

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[1] *Claude Cahen, History of the Arabs and Islamic Peoples, trans. Badr Al-Din Qasim, Dar Al-Haqiqa, Beirut, 2nd ed., 1977, p. 115.*

[2] *Hussein Mo'nis, The World of Islam, Al-Zahraa Press for Arab Media, Cairo, n.d., 1988, p. 249. See also: Muhammad Aziz Al-Habbabi, Islamic Personalism, previously cited, p. 111.*

[3] Ibid., pp. 251–252.

4 Ṣāliḥ ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥusaynī, Al-Tasāmuḥ wa al-'Udwāniyya bayna al-Islām wa al-Gharb, Riyadh, 1424 AH, pp. 109–112.

4L. V. Vaglieri, Interpretation of Islam, USA, 1958, pp. 23–26

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evident that they harbored deep hostility toward him and had gone far down the path of betrayal and deceit, he had no choice but to fight them."

The same orientalist adds that the history of Islam, especially during its early conquests, offers numerous examples of religious tolerance initiated by the first caliphs, particularly toward Abrahamic religions. Just as the Prophet (peace be upon him) guaranteed protection for the Christian institutions of Najrān and instructed his envoys not to harm Jews because of their Judaism, so too did the caliphs instruct the leaders of the Islamic conquests to uphold these principles. After their victories, these leaders established treaties with the inhabitants of the newly conquered lands, guaranteeing them religious freedom and the right to maintain their traditions, provided they paid the jizya. It is by no means an exaggeration to affirm that Islam not only advocated for religious tolerance but also institutionalized it as part of Islamic law.[1]

Will Durant agrees with what the Italian orientalist stated, namely that tolerance in the Islamic world represented the true culture and both the spiritual and worldly depth of Islam. This Western historian mentions that:

"The Jews in the Near East welcomed the Arabs, who liberated them from the oppression of their former rulers. They came to enjoy full freedom in their lives and religious practices, and they prospered greatly under Islam in Asia, Egypt, and Spain—more than they had ever done under Christian rule. As for the Christians in Western Asia outside the Arabian Peninsula, they practiced their religion freely... Christian pilgrims flocked safely to visit the Christian shrines in Palestine... Moreover, Christians who dissented from the Byzantine state church and who had suffered various forms of persecution at the hands of the patriarchs of Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch—these individuals became free and secure under Muslim rule after the Islamic conquests."[2]

These, then, were some of the Orientalist testimonies that documented the practice of tolerance in the Islamic world, in addition to the foundational scriptural and traditional texts that established it from within Islam itself. It is simply not accurate to claim that Islam and Islamic culture and civilization reject the idea of tolerance, leniency, or openness. Such assertions reflect a hateful, racist discourse that reveals an inability to comprehend the epistemological, legal, and behavioral foundations of Islam.

Indeed, the type of tolerance introduced by Islam was primarily religious in nature—entailing acceptance of the religiously different and guaranteeing their rights, freedoms, and beliefs. However, what can be said is that this religious tolerance is, in fact, the root and the starting point for all other forms of tolerance: political, social, cultural, and intellectual—naturally within the limits and frameworks that govern it.

Therefore, we do not believe—as acknowledged by a wide range of Western scholars themselves, particularly Orientalists—that Islam came as anything other than tolerant, and in many cases, it was more tolerant than others.

In summary, and by way of clarification of the features and manifestations of tolerance in Islam—whether through its stance toward non-Muslims within its realm or its deep engagement with foundational and traditional texts—it can be said that the Islamic world granted the concept of tolerance a significant status. This stems from the belief that the foundations of social, political, economic, religious, and cultural relations must be built upon a spirit of kindness, leniency, and tolerance. Anything else would deprive a person—whether Muslim or otherwise—of the ability to live in peace and stability.

Thus, the Islamic world, through its texts and historical experience, has embraced a sufficient level of values such as tolerance, benevolence, forgiveness, and the transcendence of hatred, rigidity, and violence. It has left room for the individual to determine their relationships with others—but always within the value-based framework that ensures religious loyalty and deepens the human inclination toward earthly tolerance.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be said that Islam was founded on a basis of tolerance and has disseminated its culture accordingly. Both its spiritual and temporal dimensions are rich in the concept of tolerance—an idea deeply rooted within it, and one that it has consistently defended across various occasions and contexts. Indeed, this has been the true and hidden secret behind its rapid and enduring spread across the world since its inception and into the future.

According to recent global statistics and studies, it will not be long before the number of adherents to Islam surpasses that of Christianity. This is not due to coercion or material appeal, but rather because Islam is a deeply humanistic religion that acknowledges the principle of tolerance, rejects all forms of extremism and

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[2] Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, trans. Zaki Naguib Mahmoud, Dar Al-Jeel, undated edition, 1990, pp. 131–132

fanaticism, and opens its arms fully to anyone who wishes to live within its realm—even if they differ in culture, belief, or opinion.

This reality closes the door on those who attack Islam on the pretext of intolerance. In truth, such individuals possess a distorted imagination and a blurred image of Islam that fails to reflect its authentic essence. There is a vast difference between the image of something and its true nature.

Tolerance has always been—and continues to be—the foremost moral foundation upon which Islam was established. It holds a position that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries within the Islamic world.

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