

## **TOLERATION AND MODERATION IN ISLAM**

AL-AZHAR UNIVERSITY, CAIRO, EGYPT, 10 MAY 1998

### "TOLERATION AND MODERATION IN ISLAM"

I am deeply conscious of the honour of being invited to speak at this august and ancient seat of Islamic learning. I am aware that despite my efforts to learn about the teachings and practices of Islam, I am in the presence of those who are truly learned in the subject. I accepted this invitation because I hold very strongly to my religion and I regret the perceptions about it both by non-Muslims and Muslims which have led to Islam and Muslims being vilified, being associated with unsavoury activities and even made fun of. All these perceptions and vilification are due not to Islam itself but to the interpretations given to it by Muslims and non-Muslims with vested interest, wanting to justify the wrongs that they have done or intend to do. Our religion is perfect but we are not perfect. It is our imperfections and refusal to adhere to the true teachings of Islam that has led to the decline and to the unfortunate circumstance that Muslims worldwide are in today.

2. I would like to thank the University of Al-Azhar for inviting me to speak on the topic of "TOLERATION AND MODERATION IN ISLAM". This is a very pertinent topic given the fact that Islam as a religion and Muslims as a community are currently being equated with intolerance and extremism not just by non-Muslims but even by some Muslims of professedly liberal views.

3. Islam as preached and propagated by the Prophet, Muhammad s.a.w. is a tolerant and moderate religion. This is evident from many of the Prophet's sunnah, by his attitude towards those members of his family who did not embrace Islam, by his attitude and treatment of the peoples of Mekah, his former enemies when Mekah surrendered to him, by his injunctions against the ill-treatment of prisoners, of Muslims who had erred and even of apostates. In none of these was he extreme and rigid. In all he showed understanding, moderation and tolerance.

4. At no time did his tolerance and forbearance manifest themselves more than during the drawing up of the Treaty of Hudaibiyah. We know how the jahiliyah citizens of Mekah ill-treated him and his followers, how they prevented the pilgrims from Medinah from performing the haj. We know too how arrogant were the Mekans when the treaty was drawn up, rejecting the inclusion of the Unity of Allah and the Prophethood of Muhammad in the text. His followers resented the behaviour of the jahiliyah. They wanted to reject negotiation, to reject the words and the terms of the treaty. But the Prophet, Muhammad s.a.w. prevailed and accepted the text of the Treaty of Hudaibiyah and sealed it. He was not just being diplomatic and wise but he was showing the greatest degree of toleration and moderation even in his dealing with his bitter detractors and enemies. And we know what happened in the following year. He and his followers entered Mekah without much resistance by the citizens and they all eventually accepted Islam. He was magnanimous to them, even to Hendon who had eaten the liver of Saidina Hamzah at Uhud. And the behaviour of the Prophet at Mekah won over

all the Arabs of the whole Peninsular so that they all embraced Islam and united into one ummah. From then on the spread of Islam as a faith and as the motivating spirit to build an empire could no longer be resisted. Such was the significance and the miracle wrought by moderation and tolerance for Islam and the ummah.

5. In case we still doubt that Islam enjoins us to be moderate and tolerant, doubt that the Prophet followed the injunctions of Islam when he was magnanimously tolerant and moderate to his followers and to his enemies, let us look at what the Quran says about moderation and tolerance in Islam.

Surah Al-Mumtahinah, Verse 8 says,

" Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just. "

Surah Ali-'Imran, Verse 159 says,

" It is part of the Mercy of Allah that thou dost deal gently with them. Wert thou severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee: so pass over (Their faults), and ask for ((Allah)'s) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs (of moment). Then, when thou has Taken a decision put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him). "

6. The Constitution of Medina encouraged cooperation and solidarity among Muslims, Christians, Jews and others. The Constitution which was put in writing ensured freedom, including the freedom of worship, equality and justice for all. Thus in Surah Al-Kafirun, the non-believers were told, " To you your religion, and to me my religion. "

7. It was the same teachings of Islam which united the Ansar and Muhajirin into "an ummah distinct from all other peoples of the world", but he also referred to the Jewish clans who allied themselves with him, as "an ummah along with the Believers", even though each continued to practise its own faith.

8. One of the most significant teachings brought by the Prophet to the Arab tribes was the futility and the wrongness of the eternal feuds. We know that before Islam these tribes fought against each other continuously over some slight or quarrel that they had had in the distant past. They had even forgotten the reasons for their quarrels but for generations they would remain enemies and would attack each other whenever they met. They were wholly consumed by tribal loyalties and hatred of each other.

9. This fanatical unquestioning espousal of tribalism and a tribal cause through generations can only result in wasteful fighting, disunity and weakness. Islam condemns fanaticism which invariably leads to and is associated with extremism, lack of moderation and tolerance. Certainly one of the greatest achievements of the Prophet and of Islam was to bring the tribes together, to give them a new common and sensible loyalty and to enable Islam to spread eventually

worldwide. In Surah Ali-' Imran Verse 103, inter alia Allah says, "And remember with gratitude Allah' s favour on you, For ye were enemies And He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace, Ye became brethren".

10. The loyalty to Islam was not fanatical. It was based on reason, on the knowledge that unity brought strength and enabled success to be achieved. It was a loyalty that tolerated differences even in the practice of Islam. It was not rigid. Only if the articles of faith, the acceptance of the one Allah Subhanahu wa Ta' ala and that Muhammad is his Prophet are rejected is a person no longer Muslim. Today there are literally millions of non-practising Muslims but they are still people of the faith because they have not rejected the Oneness of Allah Subhanahu wa Ta' ala and that Muhammad is his Prophet. We accept them as our brothers praying that one day their hearts will open and they will be practising Muslims once more. And indeed today we see millions who were forced to give up Islam or had lived in an anti-Islamic environment returning to Islam with such great ardour, fighting against terrible odds in order to protect their belief.

11. But do Muslims follow the teachings of Islam regarding tolerance and moderation? The answer is "Yes". The vast majority of Muslims throughout the world are faithful to the injunctions of Islam to be tolerant and moderate. But in any society, in any grouping and in any religion there will be the ' black sheep' , the exceptions to the rule.

12. There are Christian extremists more cruel and intolerant than Muslim extremists. We see them in Bosnia-Herzegovina, raping, torturing and killing fellow Slavs simply because these Slavs are Muslim. Historically of course, the Spanish Inquisition which lasted 300 years exhibited an extreme degree of intolerance on the part of Catholic Christians. In Ireland religious intolerance among Christians resulted in a long-drawn out war. And the Christian militia in Lebanon wrecked that jewel of a country.

13. We see intolerance in the Jewish state of Netanyahu and some of the Jewish religious parties of Israel. Forgetting their own oppression by the Christians of Europe, they oppress the Arabs of Muslim and Christian faiths and confine them to ghettos in the same way that they were themselves treated by Hitler' s Germany.

14. The Hindus and the Buddhists are also given to extremism leading to intolerance and oppression of others not of their own faith.

15. No one has a monopoly of tolerance and moderation. In any society, in any religion there will be aberrations. We are tempted to label everyone in a society with an aberrant minority with the same label. And having labelled we then proceed to act in a manner that reflects our prejudices towards the whole of that society.

16. Within the Islamic community, the ummah, we must admit that we have a fair share of aberrations, of extremist intolerance and immoderation despite the fact that these are against the teachings of Islam. And as is usual we, the Muslims,

are all tarred with the same brush by our detractors. The unfortunate thing is that quite often the extremist and the intolerant have gained such power over their own communities that they are able to influence almost everyone with their perception of things. And so among non-Muslims, in particular the ethnic Europeans, there is almost total belief that Muslims and terrorists are one and the same thing. They perceive Islam as a religion which preaches intolerance and immoderation no matter how we try to explain that it is not, that it is due to misinterpretations, that it is as much an aberration as the Inquisition was to Christianity, as much as the cruelties and intolerance of the Serbs are not typical of the Eastern Orthodox Church. This unfortunate perception of Islam persists.

17. Do we need to worry about how others, in particular our detractors perceive Islam and the Muslims? I think we should worry. When the Prophet received his wahyu, the first followers came from among those who see in Islam a means of salvation. The Jahilliah community was intolerant and cruel and given to infanticide, to taking innumerable wives of dubious legality, to ill-treatment of slaves and servants and prisoners, to oppression of the rich on the poor, the strong on the weak. Islam preached salvation of the oppressed, just laws, abolition of infanticide, limitation of wives to four, equality between the wives and a host of other teachings which would create a better society. And so the oppressed turned to Islam and Bilal the oppressed slave was among the first to accept Islam.

18. Whether we want to spread Islam or not, we have a duty to explain Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. We have to explain it in such a way as to reduce the wrong perception of our religion that is now common worldwide. But the best explanation, the most convincing argument is through demonstrating visibly the true teachings of Islam with regard to tolerance and moderation, and the rejection of fanaticism and extremism.

19. Islamic justice is based on equitability between crime and punishment; roughly exemplified by the aphorism, ' an eye for an eye' . But what is less known but nevertheless equally strong a principle is the stress on moderation and the quality of mercy in the dispensation of justice.

20. The Quran repeatedly enjoins us to be considerate and merciful. It gives the person wronged the right to demand equity, to demand an eye for an eye, a life for a life but it also provides for compensation in lieu of , for forgiveness and mercy. An eye for an eye is not mandatory. It merely evaluates the crime and the appropriate punishment.

In Surah Al-Maaidah, Verse 45, Allah says, " We ordained therein for them: Life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth, and wounds equal for equal. But if any one remits the retaliation by way of charity, it is an act of atonement for himself. And if any fail to judge by (the light of) what Allah hath revealed, they are (No better than) wrong-doers. "

21. Allah is Merciful and Compassionate. Can we really believe that He does not want us to be merciful and compassionate? To be merciful and compassionate

requires tolerance and moderation. Certainly the single- minded quest for revenge, the consuming desire to inflict upon our enemies what they have inflicted upon us is not in keeping with being Merciful and Compassionate.

22. If we are to correct this image of Islam, if we want to banish the perception that Muslims are implacable enemies, intolerant, immoderate and extreme then we must demonstrate a willingness to forego the desire for revenge, for unmitigated violence. Killing each other and killing others in order to emphasise the depth and strength of our commitment to our struggle may succeed in drawing attention to our grievances, but they will not lead to the success of our struggle. We know that the more the injustice and the oppression that are heaped upon us, the greater will be our determination to fight on. Similarly the more we inflict the same on our enemies, the more determined they will be. And the greater will be their resistance. We will not win that way unless of course it is not winning or success that we are after but the desire to seek revenge for the sake of revenge, to satisfy our animal desires.

23. It is therefore imperative that we cultivate the values of tolerance and moderation that are enjoined upon us by our faith. We know that the Quran says that failures and wrongs are due to us and that success comes from our Creator, Allah Subhanahu wa Ta' ala. So far we have failed. We have failed to regain our past glory. We have failed to protect ourselves. We have failed even to keep up our strength and our knowledge. All these are due to our own faults, faults which emanate from our failure to adhere to the teachings of Islam as contained in the Quran and the verified Hadith. It is not due to Allah Subhanahu wa Ta' ala, to what He has ordained for us.

24. But there will be those who believe that they are truly following the teachings of Islam because they perform all the rituals and more, because of their superficial appearances being compatible with what they think is the image of Islam. I do not question the strength of their faith. But Islam is not just about rituals and appearances. Islam is a way of life, Ad- din. And the way of life is reflected not just in religious piety but also in those characteristics of tolerance and moderation in all that we do.

25. How can we pray and then go forth to seek revenge against fellow Muslims by slaughtering them? They may not pray as much as we pray, but can we really know whether they have gained less merit than we have? Surely only Allah Subhanahu wa Ta' ala will know who adheres more to the teachings of Islam, we or they. Can we then take it upon ourselves to pass judgement on the Islam of others, to punish these people and in the process weaken Muslims and allow those who are against Islam and the Muslims to triumph over us? How many times have Allah Subhanahu wa Ta' ala repeated in the Quran that we may not assume that those whom we condemn are less pious than us, that they may be even more Muslim than us. Our condemnation of others is in fact a reflection of our intolerance and that certainly is against the teachings of Islam.

Verse 11 of Surah Al-Hujuraat, makes this quite clear and I quote:

" O ye who believe! Let not some men among you laugh at others: It may be that the (latter) are better than the (former): Nor let some women laugh at others: It may be that the (latter) are better than the (former): Nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames: Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness, (to be used of one) after he has believed: And those who do not desist are (indeed) doing wrong. "

26. Islam is a pragmatic religion. It is not meant as an imposition on the followers. It is not meant to bring hardship on them.

Thus In Surah Al-Baqarah, Verse 256, Allah says, " Let there be no compulsion in religion. " and in Surah Al-Maaidah, Verse 6, Allah says, " O ye who believe! When ye prepare for prayer, wash your faces, and your hands (and arms) to the elbows; Rub your heads (with water); and (wash) your feet to the ankles. If ye are in a state of ceremonial impurity, bathe your whole body. But if ye are ill, or on a journey, or one of you cometh from offices of nature, or ye find no water, then take for yourselves clean sand or earth, and rub therewith your faces and hands, Allah doth not wish to place you in a difficulty, but to make you clean, and to complete his favour to you, that ye may be grateful. "

27. We know that not all Muslim communities live in countries with a population one hundred percent Muslim. Today more and more Muslims are living in non-Muslim countries, in non-Muslim communities. There are things that a hundred percent Muslim community can do which cannot be done in a community in which the Muslim majority is small, or indeed in which they are a minority. Those Muslims living in a purely Muslim country must remember that in this shrinking world anything that is done in one Muslim community or country will affect the lives of other Muslim communities.

28. We may, in a largely Muslim country be intolerant and oppressive towards the few non-Muslims in our midst. But we must always remember that this may affect the lives of those Muslims who make up the minority in another country. We would not like these Muslim minorities in so many countries to suffer because of our actions against the non-Muslims in our midst.

29. True sometimes even when we are fair and just, tolerant towards the non-Muslims in our midst, Muslim minorities in other countries are still oppressed. What did we do to deserve the atrocities against Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina and elsewhere? But the ways of Allah are beyond us to reason. What we do know is that we are far from living up to the way of life as enjoined by our religion. We pick and choose those teachings which can justify our desires and disregard those which would show that we are wrong.

30. In Malaysia, Muslims are in the majority, but only just. More than 40 percent of our population is made up of non-Muslims. Under British rule, the races were separated from each other physically and by occupation. The separation was augmented by religious differences, the Malays being entirely Muslims, the Chinese Buddhist or Taoist and the Indians Hindus. Clearly all the elements for conflict were there when independence forced the races to come into contact

with each other.

31. But the tolerance and moderation of Malaysia' s first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman brought the ethnic-based political parties under one coalition, the Alliance. The racist extremists left the Alliance to form alternative parties. But the majority stayed with Tunku Abdul Rahman and the resulting coalition won the first election held under British rule and subsequent post-independence elections. In 1969 race riots broke out because political unity was not enough to overcome extreme economic disparities. The violence and the killings did not last long. Within a year the leaders, especially the Muslim leaders calmed their people by drawing up a policy to correct economic imbalances. Since then there has been no race riots of any kind in Malaysia. Attempts by extremists, both Muslims and non- Muslims to stir up feelings of intolerance and hatred failed. The Government curbed any tendency towards religious extremism through judicial and psychological persuasion.

32. Today Malaysia is stable and peaceful. Not even attempts by foreign elements to stir up racial and religious extremism, to destabilise the economy and recreate economic disparities between the races have succeeded in bringing the forces of intolerance and immoderation back.

33. As a result Malaysia has been able to develop fast. The economic wealth, the technological knowhow, the administrative skills have grown among all, including the Muslims. Today the Muslims are as capable in administration, politics, science and technology, in business and in industry as are the non-Muslims.

34. Malaysia' s Muslims believe in moderation and tolerance because that is what our religion tells us. That is reciprocated by the majority of the non-Muslims. Indeed they actively support the Muslims in order to enable them to achieve the same degree of development and success. Tolerance and moderation have therefore paid off handsomely for the Muslims in Malaysia. We see not just a religious dogma in the teachings of Islam but truly a good way of life.

35. Tolerance and moderation is clearly a part of the teachings of Islam. If we ignore these teachings then we will not only be sinning but we will be depriving ourselves of the benefits of Islam. If because of this we fail, if we become weak and oppressed, we have only ourselves to blame.