



The virtue of Tolerance. Notes on the root s-m-ḥ in the Islamic tradition

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Abstract:	Starting from the semantic difference between the Arabic terms samāḥa or tasāmuḥ, and the Latin tolerantia, this essay proposes some observations on the Islamic notion of tolerance according to some contemporary Arabic language texts of Islamic inspiration. This literature invariably emphasises the importance of tolerance in the context of the Islamic religion and thought; and, notwithstanding some evident differences among the authors, relating to schools and to varying degrees of openness to Western thought, the discourse remains anchored in the foundational literature, especially the Sunnah of the Prophet.

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8 *Abstract*
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11 Starting from the semantic difference between the Arabic terms *samāḥa* or *tasāmuh*, and the Latin
12 *tolerantia*, this essay proposes some observations on the Islamic notion of tolerance according to
13 some contemporary Arabic language texts of Islamic inspiration.
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15 This literature invariably emphasises the importance of tolerance in the context of the Islamic religion
16 and thought; and, notwithstanding some evident differences among the authors, relating to schools
17 and to varying degrees of openness to Western thought, the discourse remains anchored in the
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21 keywords: Tolerance, Contemporary Islamic thought, Sunnah, Ethics of Virtue.
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28 *Premise*
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31 For some years I have been dealing with Islamic ethics – not juridical ethics, the duties of the Muslim
32 regarding diet or clothing, interpersonal relationships and so on, but the qualities and the values that
33 form the background to these, namely what is required to be considered a good – as regards personal
34 qualities – Muslim. What, in fact, since Aristotle, we are accustomed to calling the ‘ethics of virtue’.
35 The ethics of virtue according to Islam display some peculiarities that make them different from
36 juridical ethics. For the latter, the model to be imitated is above all the Prophet Muhammad himself,
37 and then the first converts, the so called *salaf* – hence the term “Salafism”. For the ethics of virtue,
38 the model to be imitated is instead God, the ‘supreme example’.
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40 In this sense, precisely because ‘being good’ means approaching God more directly, the ethics of
41 virtue possess a very high status in the Islamic religion. It is also true, however, that today’s Muslims,
42 including Muslims outside the Islamic countries, seem little interested in the ethics of virtue and
43 prefer to focus on legal ethics.
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45 Another important feature of the ethics of virtue is that they rest on a shared ground and show a
46 substantial agreement with the various general philosophical and religious convictions: the good
47 qualities of mercy, gratitude, indulgence, kindness, peace, repentance – to name but a few – are typical
48 of the good Muslim, but also of every good man regardless of his religious affiliation. For this reason,
49 it is important in our day to stress the qualities of the good Muslim and to remind all of us that there’s
50 a commonality here of widespread human values.
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5 *Toleration and samāḥa or tasāmuḥ*
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8 We all know what toleration is. We have been talking about it for many years, since the world we
9 live in has confronted us with ways of life and philosophical and religious convictions which are not
10 our own. These ways of life and beliefs claim their own validity, every bit as much as ours. In the
11 public space, toleration corresponds to religious freedom. However, there is also a private space, in
12 which toleration could be more widely described as respect, coexistence, acceptance and absence of
13 prejudice.
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18 In the last decades, and even before September 11th, many intellectuals of Islamic affiliation and
19 approach have questioned the existence and the modalities of an Islamic tolerance. Let us give this
20 current of thought a hearing, taking the example of some Arabic writers.
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23 The terms chosen by these intellectuals to express toleration or tolerance are two: *samāḥa*, and, from
24 the same verbal root, with the additional meaning of reciprocity, *tasāmuḥ*.¹
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27 To begin, however, we should make some linguistic and semantic observations. In the dictionaries of
28 the classical Arabic language² we notice the complete absence of *tasāmuḥ*; conversely, we find
29 *samāḥa*, considered a synonym of *jūd* or ‘generosity’, and also of *karam* or ‘bounty’ and ‘liberality’.
30 As for modern Arabic dictionaries,³ they translate *samāḥa* as ‘simplicity’ (*suhūla*), and explain the
31 expression *samāḥat al-Islām*, literally ‘the tolerance of Islam’, as ‘easiness in religion’. As a synonym
32 of *samāḥa*, modern dictionaries also give the term *yusr*, which means not only ‘easiness’ and ‘facility’
33 but also ‘prosperity’ and ‘wealth’. In modern dictionaries, unlike the ancient ones, we also find the
34 term *tasāmuḥ*, which is explained as forbearance, kindness, and toleration.
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41 Now, if we consider the terms chosen by contemporary Muslim authors to express tolerance or
42 toleration – i.e. *samāḥa* and *tasāmuḥ* – we realize that they do not at all match the Latin *tolerantia*,
43 since they do not contain the idea of endurance, or any relationship with suffering, which are instead
44 present in the Latin word. The two Arabic terms mentioned, with their content of generosity, nobility,
45 kindness and also ease or facility in human relationships, remind us rather of the great Islamic value
46 of mercy – *raḥma* in Arabic, – that ‘will for good’ which, it should be noted, necessarily proceeds
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54 ¹ *Samāḥa* and *tasāmuḥ* are of course Arabic words, but since Arabic is the liturgical language of Islam, it is also the
55 technical language of religious literature even among non-Arab Muslims.

56 ² I consulted in particular Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311-1312), *Lisān al-‘Arab*, Dār al-ma‘ārif, Beirut 2010 (6 vols.); and al-
57 Fayrūz‘ābādī (d. 817/1415), *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*, Mu‘assasat al-risāla, 6a ed. al-Qāhira 1419/1998, s.v. *s-m-h*. Both
58 works are available at <http://www.baheth.info>. I also consulted E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Librairie du
59 Liban 1968, 1a ed. London-Edimburgh 1872, s.v. *S-m-h* (5 September 2018).

60 ³ See for example almaany.com, <https://www.almaany.com/en/dict/ar-en/سماحة/?c=Islamic> and
<https://www.almaany.com/en/dict/ar-en/تسامح/?c=Islamic> (5 September 2018).

from the greater to the lesser; they also remind us of ‘judiciousness’ or *hilm*, which is repaying evil with good, the strength of mind that allows us not to take revenge while having the opportunity to do so. Finally, this ‘Islamic tolerance’ also feeds on what Muslims of all epochs have called *ihsān*, being good and acting accordingly, by doing good to others.

Some Arabic Islamic authors and texts on toleration

As I have said, many Muslim intellectuals have questioned Islamic tolerance. This is evident from the number of works on the web, as well as the frequency of hits on the sites in which they appear. Some authors have favoured the term *samāḥa*, while others prefer *tasāmuḥ*, with its additional sense of reciprocity.

Among those who prefer *samāḥa*, is the Egyptian theologian ‘Abd al-‘Azīm Ibrāhīm Maṭa‘nī (d. 2008), who trained at the Islamic University of al-Azhar. In 1993, he published in Cairo “Tolerance in Islam in its call for conversion and [in] human relations” (*Samāḥat al-islām fī al-da‘wa ilā Allāh wa-l-‘alāqāt al-insāniyya*).⁴ The Saudi ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ibrāhīm al-Laḥīdān, a scholar from the Imām Muḥammad ibn Sa‘ūd University of Riyadh, should also be mentioned with his “The tolerance of Islam in relations with non-Muslims” (*Samāḥat al-islām fī mu‘āmalat ghayr al-muslimīn*), of 2014.⁵ And Muḥsin al-‘Azzāzī, with “Tolerance in Islam and its rejection of violence” (*Samāḥat al-islām wa-nabdhi-hi li-l-‘unf*), a pamphlet published in 2015 for the Cairo Islamic website *Ṭarīq al-Islām*.⁶ In addition, I should cite two other texts, both by Saudi authors, which share the same title: “Facilitation and tolerance in Islam” (*Al-yusr wa-al-samāḥa fī al-islām*). One is by Fāliḥ ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr, published in 2016, in Riyadh, for the Ministry of Culture;⁷ the other, for which I have not yet been able to identify a publisher or a publication date, is by Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar Bāzmūl, professor at Umm al-Qurā University of Mecca.⁸

Other contemporary authors prefer to employ the term *tasāmuḥ*. We should quote in this regard ‘Abd al-Wāsi‘ al-Ghashīmī and Amīr Fāḍil Sa‘d, both professors at the University of Judayda in Yemen, who authored a long and very interesting article entitled “Islamic tolerance: a reading of its speculative aspects and its practical effects in the light of the Qur’an and the Sunnah” (*Al-tasāmuḥ*

⁴ ‘Abd al-‘Azīm Ibrāhīm Maṭa‘nī, *Samāḥat al-islām* [...], Maktabat Wahba, al-Qāhira, 1993. I will come back to this work.

⁵ <https://islamhouse.com/ar/books/886784/>; International Islamic Publishing House (IIPH), Riyadh, 2014.

⁶ <https://ar.islamway.net/search?query=سماحة+الاسلام+ونبذة+للعنف>.

See

https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/موقع_طريق_الإسلام, site working since 1998 ca. (5 September 2018).

⁷ *Al-yusr wa-al-samāḥa fī al-islām*, Wizārat al-awqāf al-sa‘ūdiyya, al-Riyād, 2016 <http://shamela.ws/browse.php/book-1138/page-8>. Also in <https://www.assakina.com/book/5972.html> (5 September 2018).

⁸ http://www.radiosunna.com/uploads/6/6/1/7/6617650/الإسلام_في_اليسر_والسماحة_في_الإسلام.pdf (5 September 2018).

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3 *Samāḥat al-Islām*, published in 1993.

4 In the *Premise*,¹² the author declares his intention of responding to those in Europe who accuse Islam
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10 a bloody terrorist and violent religion, which disregards liberties, and which accepts only conversion
11 or death, [...] a creed that has pointed its followers towards aggression. In this way [according to the
12 Europeans] Islam has become the enemy of humanity and of human civilization; and must therefore
13 be defeated or destroyed.
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16 The strange thing – continues the author in a combative tone – is that Europe, while portraying Islam
17 in such a malicious light, neglects or pretends to forget its own history, and the blood that the
18 Europeans have shed everywhere, even in recent times: Maṭaʿnī recalls, among other things, the
19 Crusades, Zionism, Communism, and the Balkan war with its violence against the Bosnian Muslims.
20 “Shamelessly forgetful” (cfr. *kull hadhā tansā-hu Urūbbā bi-lā ḥayāʾ*) – he continues – Europe
21 accuses Islam of being “the religion of terrorism and violence” (*dīn al-irhāb wa-l-ʿanf*), of the
22 “confiscation of liberties” (*muṣādirat al-ḥurriyyāt*), and of “complete inhumanity” (*ʿadam al-*
23 *insāniyya jam ʿā*^{an}).¹³ He then observes that some of his compatriots, Arabs and Muslims of Egypt,
24 agree with these European perceptions and spread them in the media.
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27 Precisely in response to these accusations, the author commits himself to illustrating, throughout his
28 book, that Islam is instead characterised by non-violent methods¹⁴ and that it is a religion which
29 severely limits killing and coercion.¹⁵ He also demonstrates the importance of “patience and
30 forgiveness” (*al-ṣabr wa-l-ʿafw*),¹⁶ as well as the “fundamental conformity of Islam to tolerance”
31 (*mabdāʾ islāmī ʿāmm fī al-tasāmuḥ*)¹⁷ and to “mercy for every human being” (*raḥma ʿamma li-kulli*
32 *al-nās*) and not only within the Muslim community.¹⁸ He concludes by explaining that the
33 relationship between Muslims and others is a relationship of peace and not of war (*salām* vs. *ḥarb*),
34 and that
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38 every killing between Muslims and non-Muslims at the time of prophecy – a phase to which we have
39 limited this study – was caused by the non-Muslims waging war against Muslims, and not by their
40 unbelief [...]. This latter perspective is shared by those who believe that the relationship between
41 Muslims and others is a relationship of war and not of peace.¹⁹
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54 12 Maṭaʿnī, *Samāḥat al-islām, Taqdīm*, pp. 2-13.

55 13 Maṭaʿnī, *Samāḥat al-islām, Taqdīm*, pp. 3-4.

56 14 Maṭaʿnī, *Samāḥat al-islām*, pp. 10-138.

57 15 Maṭaʿnī, *Samāḥat al-islām*, pp. 139-178.

58 16 Maṭaʿnī, *Samāḥat al-islām*, pp. 76-85.

59 17 Maṭaʿnī, *Samāḥat al-islām*, pp. 86-103.

60 18 Maṭaʿnī, *Samāḥat al-islām*, p. 104.

19 Maṭaʿnī, *Samāḥat al-islām*, p. 167.

We note that here too, as we have noted for this literature generally, the work is centered on the Prophet's life and so, as the author himself points out, the duration examined is explicitly limited to the epoch of prophecy (*'aṣr al-nubuwwa*).

Tolerance as supraconfessional value: 'Abd al-Wāsi' al-Ghashīmī and Amīr Fāḍil Sa'd

The second example that I propose **here** is more recent and offers a completely different perspective. It was published in Kuwait by the Yemenis 'Abd al-Wāsi' al-Ghashīmī and Amīr Fāḍil Sa'd, with the title *Tasāmuḥ al-Islām*. This work's intent is no longer defensive, but a much more proactive and dynamic one, that is, to promote Islamic tolerance and to highlight its intellectual principles in order to consolidate an already shared sense of humanity, the heritage of us all, beyond or despite the confessional perspectives of each one of us.

The entire discourse is less traditional and much more speculative. Of course, the authors often return to the Qur'an and the Sunna as a starting point or as evidence, but they mostly proceed on their own, occasionally quoting medieval and contemporary thinkers, Muslims and not. It is quite a short paper, of about 72 pages divided into six parts: 1. Etymology and definitions (*al-ta'ṣīl al-lughawī wa al-istilāḥī*) of 'tolerance' (*tasāmuḥ*); 2. Religious foundation of tolerance (*al-aṣl al-shar'ī*); 3. Legal regulation (*al-ḍawābiḥ al-shar'iyya*) of tolerance; 4. Tolerance between Islamic thought and that of others through greater understanding (*al-naẓar al-islam wa-fahm al-ākhar*); 5. Aspects of tolerance (*mazāhir al-tasāmuḥ*) and its representations (*ṣuwar*); 6. Practical effects (*al-āthār al-wāqi'iyya*) of tolerance.

The most interesting part, in the present context, is perhaps the fourth one,²⁰ devoted to intercultural tolerance. This section also contains an important statement: that the fundamental ingredients of Islamic tolerance are 'humanity' (*insāniyya*) – understood as the fact of being human, with the features that predispose to humanitarianism – and 'the effective realization of man' (*taḥqīq al-wujūd al-fā'il li-al-insān*).²¹

The authors quote a number of Qur'anic verses. First of all, the well-known "there is no compulsion in religion" (*lā ikrāh^a fī al-dīn*, Qur'an 2,286), that has become the starting point for every discussion on religious tolerance in Islam, so important as to be included in the Islamic declaration of human rights. They also quote the verse which reads:

²⁰Al-Ghashīmī, Sa'd, *Tasāmuḥ al-Islām*, pp. 31-36.

²¹Al-Ghashīmī, Sa'd, *Tasāmuḥ al-Islām*, pp. 31-32.

O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you [...] (Qur'an 49,13).²²

They note that the verse addresses not only Muslims, but men in general (cf. "O mankind", *ayyuhā al-nās*). Then, within the field of contemporary religious pluralism, and within the particular context of interreligious dialogue, they mention the famous verse that calls all monotheists to a "common word" (cf. "*ta'ālū ilā kalima sawā'an*", Qur'an 3,64).²³ Furthermore, they point out that the tolerance of Islam has inspired Western thinkers and writers, and cite, among others, the example of the German philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (d. 1781) in *Nathan the Wise*. Lessing, they write, was amazed by the rationality (*'aqlāniyya*) of Islam and by its tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*), and subsequently dedicated himself to its promotion.²⁴

Thanks to its attention to speculative elements and to its openness to non-Islamic sources, al-Ghashīmī and Sa'd's work marks an emancipation from Islamic tolerance in its classical sense, that is, mercy and simplification, towards an understanding, more widespread in the European and Western thought generally, of tolerance as promoting a common sense of humanity, recognizing the dignity and the rights of others. And in this sense, it is worth investigating further. But, even today, among Muslims, the most widespread conception of tolerance goes back to the foundational texts.

The root s-m-ḥ in the Sunnah of the Prophet

It is worth noting that the linguistic terms used in contemporary religious literature invariably trace back, at least in etymological terms, to the foundational literature, i.e. the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Now, neither of the two nouns we have been talking about, *samāḥa* and *tasāmuḥ* (or even *sumḥ*), appears in the Qur'an. In the Book, in fact, we do not find their verbal root at all, even if the notion of tolerance is not extraneous to it. However, *samāḥa* – but not *tasāmuḥ* – is often found in the Sunnah.

Let's recall some examples taken from the latter, in order to better understand the weight and

²²Entirely devoted to contemporary Islamic readings of this Qur'anic verse is a remarkable essay by Leah Kinberg, *Contemporary Ethical Issues*, in A. Rippling (ed.), "The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an", Blackwell Publishing, Malden (MA), 2006, chapter 30, pp. 350-466.

²³Al-Ghashīmī, Sa'd, *Tasāmuḥ al-Islām*, pp. 33-34. This verse also gives the title to the open letter sent at the end of Ramadan by 138 Muslim scholars to Pope Benedict XVI and other Christian leaders. See for instance <http://humanevents.com/2007/10/22/the-muslim-letter-to-the-pope/#continueA> (5 September 2018).

²⁴Al-Ghashīmī, Sa'd, *Tasāmuḥ al-Islām*, pp. 34-35. I recall here an article appeared in al-Quds, 26 *dhu al-hijja* 1426/2006 - https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/B5/B5242C9384024246D5E1C98C53C0FDD1_qds17.pdf (5 September 2018) – focusing on the role of the Islamic tradition in the public debate (*mudāwala*) on tolerance, started by S. Horsch, *Rationalität und Toleranz. Lessings Auseinandersetzung mit dem Islam*, Würzburg 2004.

meaning of toleration in its Islamic formulation. Here is an oft-repeated story:

A man went to the Prophet and asked him: - God's Messenger, who is the best believer in his faith? He replied: - The one who is better in his character traits (*akhlāq*). The man still asked: - And what is the best faith? He replied: - Patience and tolerance (*al-ṣabr wa-l-samāḥa*) [...].²⁵

Another well-known example belongs to the category of sayings called 'sainted' or 'sacred' (*aḥādīth qudsiyya*), because they contain the literal words of God that are not reported in the Qur'an itself. According to one of them, God, being "the most merciful of the merciful" (*arḥam al-rāḥimīn*), lets the Prophet know that he will welcome all the monotheists to heaven. After that, he will turn his attention to hell and bring out of there also those men who, although disobedient to the Lord, have none the less shown tolerance towards others. God will command the angels: "Be tolerant with this servant of Mine as he was tolerant with My servants" (*asmiḥū li- 'abd-ī ka-ismāḥi-hi li- 'ibād-ī*).²⁶

According to another story, the early Muslim scholar Ibn Jurayj (2nd century A.D.), after seeing a naked man in the baths washing his genitals and anus said to him: "Go ahead making your ablutions because religion is tolerance. The Prophet used to say: 'Be tolerant so that others may be tolerant with you (*asmiḥū yusmaḥ la-kum*)'"²⁷

According to another ancient scholar, Anas ibn Mālik, the Prophet himself was among the best and most tolerant of people (*min asmaḥ al-nās*), as well as among the most courageous.²⁸

A quite similar tradition, worth recalling because it brings in the love of God – which is a typical way of expressing a moral imperative – is "God loves toleration in selling, in buying and in judging".²⁹

Finally, a negative example: the Prophet told his men that one of the greatest enemies of Islam, a rebel and apostate named al-Aswad, lacked tolerance as well as courage (*samāḥa wa-naйда*).³⁰

The stories about the life of the Prophet which have to do with tolerance are numerous, although some clearly allude to a generic tolerance, which, ultimately, is nothing more than the ability to relate to another without difficulty and complications. For instance, a well-known traditionist of Baghdad states that anyone who is "easy, soft, simple and tolerant" (*'alā kull hayyⁱⁿ layyⁱⁿ sahlⁱⁿ samḥⁱⁿ*) will be spared the Infernal Fire. As can be seen from these traditions, tolerant behaviour is a cornerstone

²⁵Quoted in 'Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827), *Muṣnad, kitāb al-ṣalāt*, no. 4699; and in *Muṣnad Ibn Ḥanbal, muṣnad al-ashara* [...], no. 19002. See also al-Bayḥāqī's *Shu'ab al-īmān*, no. 9079. Here and hereafter, all citation from the Sunnah are taken from <http://library.islamweb.net>.

²⁶Reported by Abū 'Awāna al-Isfārā'īnī (d. 316/928-9), *Mustakhrāj*, no. 329.

http://library.islamweb.net/hadith/display_hbook.php?bk_no=365&hid=329&pid=183925.

²⁷'Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827), *Muṣnad, kitāb al-ṭahāra*, no. 233.

http://library.islamweb.net/hadith/display_hbook.php?bk_no=60&hid=233&pid=26553.

²⁸Cf. among others, al-Ṭabarī, *Taḥdhīb al-āthār*, no. 125.

²⁹Al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī (d. 406/1015-16), *Al-Mustadrak 'alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, no. 2275.

³⁰Al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971), *Al-mu'jam al-awsaṭ*, no. 4193.

of Islamic ethics, and, it is worth noting, by no means always a simply intra-Islamic tolerance, even if it has had predominantly the latter intent.

In conclusion: investigating Islamic pluralism

Given that Ghashīmī and Sa‘d’s work also touches on the theme of religious pluralism, I will take the opportunity of adding, in conclusion, a brief linguistic reflection on this.

Today, when Arab Muslims speak of religious pluralism, they employ the expression “*ta‘addudīya dīniyya*”. However, *ta‘addudīya* does not really mean ‘pluralism’ – the conviction that reality is formed of equal if conflicting basic principles – but rather: plurality, multiplicity, the *fact* of being many and different; to the point that *ta‘addudīya* can mean even ‘increase’ or ‘growth’, without any value judgement. This is an aspect that would merit further investigation, focusing on the main contemporary Islamic literature on the subject.

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