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.

keywords: Tolerance, Contemporary Islamic thought, Sunnah, Ethics of Virtue.

Premise

For some years I have been dealing with Islamic ethics – not juridical ethics, the duties of the Muslim regarding diet or clothing, interpersonal relationships and so on, but the qualities and the values that form the background to these, namely what is required to be considered a good – as regards personal qualities – Muslim. What, in fact, since Aristotle, we are accustomed to calling the ‘ethics of virtue’. The ethics of virtue according to Islam display some peculiarities that make them different from juridical ethics. For the latter, the model to be imitated is above all the Prophet Muhammad himself, and then the first converts, the so called salaf – hence the term “Salafism”. For the ethics of virtue, the model to be imitated is instead God, the ‘supreme example’.

In this sense, precisely because ‘being good’ means approaching God more directly, the ethics of virtue possess a very high status in the Islamic religion. It is also true, however, that today’s Muslims, including Muslims outside the Islamic countries, seem little interested in the ethics of virtue and prefer to focus on legal ethics.

Another important feature of the ethics of virtue is that they rest on a shared ground and show a substantial agreement with the various general philosophical and religious convictions: the good qualities of mercy, gratitude, indulgence, kindness, peace, repentance – to name but a few – are typical of the good Muslim, but also of every good man regardless of his religious affiliation. For this reason, it is important in our day to stress the qualities of the good Muslim and to remind all of us that there’s a commonality here of widespread human values.
Toleration and samāḥa or tasāmuḥ

We all know what toleration is. We have been talking about it for many years, since the world we live in has confronted us with ways of life and philosophical and religious convictions which are not our own. These ways of life and beliefs claim their own validity, every bit as much as ours. In the public space, toleration corresponds to religious freedom. However, there is also a private space, in which toleration could be more widely described as respect, coexistence, acceptance and absence of prejudice.

In the last decades, and even before September 11th, many intellectuals of Islamic affiliation and approach have questioned the existence and the modalities of an Islamic tolerance. Let us give this current of thought a hearing, taking the example of some Arabic writers.

The terms chosen by these intellectuals to express toleration or tolerance are two: samāḥa, and, from the same verbal root, with the additional meaning of reciprocity, tasāmuḥ.¹

To begin, however, we should make some linguistic and semantic observations. In the dictionaries of the classical Arabic language² we notice the complete absence of tasāmuḥ; conversely, we find samāḥa, considered a synonym of jūd or ‘generosity’, and also of karam or ‘bounty’ and ‘liberality’.

As for modern Arabic dictionaries,³ they translate samāḥa as ‘simplicity’ (suhūla), and explain the expression samāḥat al-Islām, literally ‘the tolerance of Islam’, as ‘easiness in religion’. As a synonym of samāḥa, modern dictionaries also give the term yusr, which means not only ‘easiness’ and ‘facility’ but also ‘prosperity’ and ‘wealth’. In modern dictionaries, unlike the ancient ones, we also find the term tasāmuḥ, which is explained as forbearance, kindness, and toleration.

Now, if we consider the terms chosen by contemporary Muslim authors to express tolerance or toleration – i.e. samāḥa and tasāmuḥ – we realize that they do not at all match the Latin tolerantia, since they do not contain the idea of endurance, or any relationship with suffering, which are instead present in the Latin word. The two Arabic terms mentioned, with their content of generosity, nobility, kindness and also ease or facility in human relationships, remind us rather of the great Islamic value of mercy – raḥma in Arabic, – that ‘will for good’ which, it should be noted, necessarily proceeds

¹ Samāḥa and tasāmuḥ are of course Arabic words, but since Arabic is the liturgical language of Islam, it is also the technical language of religious literature even among non-Arab Muslims.
from the greater to the lesser; they also remind us of ‘judiciousness’ or ḥilm, 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 iḥsān, 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-ʿAẓīm 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-daʿ wa ilā Allāh wa-l-ʿalāqāt al-insāniyya).4 The Saudi ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ibrāhīm al-Lahīdān, a scholar from the Imām Muḥammad ibn Saʿūd University of Riyadh, should also be mentioned with his “The tolerance of Islam in relations with non-Muslims” (Samāḥat al-islām fī muʿāmalat ghayr al-muslimīn), of 2014.5 And Muḥsin al-ʿAzzāzī, with “Tolerance in Islam and its rejection of violence” (Samāḥat al-islām wa-nabdhi-hi li-l-ʿunf), 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 ʿUmar 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 ʿAbd al-Wāsiʿ al-Ghashīmī and Amīr Fāḍil Saʿd, 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

4ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Ibrāhīm Maṭa’nī, Samāḥat al-islām […] Maktatab Wahba, al-Qāhirah, 1993. I will come back to this work.
al-islāmī: qirāʾ fī muʿayyit-hi al-fikriyya wa-āthāri-hi al-wāqiʿ fī ẓāw al-Kitāb wa-al-Sunna), published in 2013.9

Another recent title worth noting is “The tolerance of Islam towards non-Muslims” (Tasāmuḥ al-Islām maʿ ghayr al-muslimīn) of ʿAbd al-Bāsīt ibn Yūsuf al-Gharīb [or al-Ghurayyib]; of this, however, neither the publisher nor the date of issue are available on the web.10

Whatever the title and whatever the author’s doctrinal approach, whether published in paper format, or on the Islamic information websites, all the works mentioned share a number of common features. First, they share the same methodology, consisting of a constant referral back to the foundational texts of religion, that is the Qurʾan, the word of God, and the Sunnah, the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad.11

In this way, the authors end up confining their work to Islam’s earliest history, that of the first community; and completely ignoring later epochs. This flattening of history is a remarkable feature from a comparative point of view, but it is entirely predictable for those familiar with the Islamic mentality. The idea that ‘true Islam’ is that of the origins, cannot be reduced to the doctrinal option so-called ‘salafiyya’, the one that identifies the ‘ancient Pious’, i.e. the salaf, as the highest incarnation of Islam. On the contrary, it has always characterized Islamic thought on Islam and, in general, on man and the world.

Hence the absence of historical perspective in Islamic theological thinking: history is considered very important of course, but of concern only to historians, and not to theologians and preachers. From the theological perspective, in fact, history appears as a sequence of cases that either conform to the first Islam, or differ from it; theologians are little interested in examining dynasties, governments or individuals, even from the point of view of their obedience or disobedience to Islam.

Islamic tolerance and European intolerance: ‘Abd al-ʿAẓīm Ibrāhīm Maṭaʿnī

If the majority of contemporary works on Islamic tolerance share a temporal limitation caused by the exclusive use of canonical sources, they also share a common apologetic and defensive attitude, sometimes accompanied by accusations against European countries or the United States. A good example of this latter attitude is offered by the Egyptian ‘Abd al-ʿAẓīm Ibrāhīm Maṭaʿnī in his

11This procedure is however typical of the entire contemporary Islamic production, to the point that it can appear in the end to be no more than yet another form of explication of the foundational texts.

In the Premise, the author declares his intention of responding to those in Europe who accuse Islam of being a bloody terrorist and violent religion, which disregards liberties, and which accepts only conversion or death, […] a creed that has pointed its followers towards aggression. In this way [according to the Europeans] Islam has become the enemy of humanity and of human civilization; and must therefore be defeated or destroyed.

The strange thing – continues the author in a combative tone – is that Europe, while portraying Islam in such a malicious light, neglects or pretends to forget its own history, and the blood that the Europeans have shed everywhere, even in recent times: Maṭaʿnī recalls, among other things, the Crusades, Zionism, Communism, and the Balkan war with its violence against the Bosnian Muslims. “Shamelessly forgetful” (cfr. kull hadhā tansā-hu Urūbbā bi-lā ḥayā’) – he continues – Europe accuses Islam of being “the religion of terrorism and violence” (din al-irhāb wa-l-ʿunf), of the “confiscation of liberties” (muṣādirat al-ḥurriyyāt), and of “complete inhumanity” (ʿadam al-ḥinsiyya jam āʾam). He then observes that some of his compatriots, Arabs and Muslims of Egypt, agree with these European perceptions and spread them in the media.

Precisely in response to these accusations, the author commits himself to illustrating, throughout his book, that Islam is instead characterised by non-violent methods and that it is a religion which severely limits killing and coercion. He also demonstrates the importance of “patience and forgiveness” (al-ṣabr wa-l-ʿafw), as well as the “fundamental conformity of Islam to tolerance” (mabdāʾ islāmī āmmī fī al-tasāmuḥ) and to “mercy for every human being” (raḥma āmma li-kullī al-nās) and not only within the Muslim community. He concludes by explaining that the relationship between Muslims and others is a relationship of peace and not of war (salām vs. ḥarb), and that every killing between Muslims and non-Muslims at the time of prophecy – a phase to which we have limited this study – was caused by the non-Muslims waging war against Muslims, and not by their unbelief […]. This latter perspective is shared by those who believe that the relationship between Muslims and others is a relationship of war and not of peace.

13Maṭaʿnī, Samāḥat al-Islām, Taqḍīm, pp. 3-4.
15Maṭaʿnī, Samāḥat al-Islām, pp. 139-178.
16Maṭaʿnī, Samāḥat al-Islām, pp. 76-85.
17Maṭaʿnī, Samāḥat al-Islām, pp. 86-103.
18Maṭaʿnī, Samāḥat al-Islām, p. 104.
19Maṭaʿnī, 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 (ʿaṣr al-nubuwwa).

Tolerance as supraconfessional value: ‘Abd al-Wāsiʿ al-Ghashīmī and Amīr Fāḍil Saʿd

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-Wāsiʿ al-Ghashīmī and Amīr Fāḍil Saʿd, with the title Tusāmuḥ 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-ṭaʿīl al-lughawī wa al-istilāḥī) of ‘tolerance’ (tasāmuḥ); 2. Religious foundation of tolerance (al-āṣl al-sharʿī); 3. Legal regulation (al-ḍawābiṭ al-sharʿīyya) 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 (maẓāhir al-tasāmuḥ) and its representations (ṣuwar); 6. Practical effects (al-āthār al-wāqiʿīyya) of tolerance.

The most interesting part, in the present context, is perhaps the fourth one, 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’ (tahqīq al-wujūd al-fāʾ 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 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:

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20 Al-Ghashīmī, Saʿd, Tusāmuḥ al-Islām, pp. 31-36.
21 Al-Ghashīmī, Saʿd, Tusāmuḥ 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. “taʿālū 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 Saʿd’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-h 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

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” (asmīḥū li-‘abd-ī ka-ismāḥī-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 (asmīḥū 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 asmah 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-najda).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” (ʿalā kull hayyīn layyīn saḥīn samḥīn) will be spared the Infernal Fire. As can be seen from these traditions, tolerant behaviour is a cornerstone

25Quoted in ʿAbd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827), Muṣnad, kitāb al-Salāt, no. 4699; and in Muṣnad Ibn Ḥanbal, muṣnad al-ʿashara [...], no. 19002. See also al-Bayḥāqī’s Shuʿab al-īmān, no. 9079. Here and hereafter, all citation from the Sunnah are taken from http://library.islamweb.net.

26Reported by Abū ʿAwāna al-Isfārāʾīnī (d. 316/928-9), Mustakhraj, no. 329.

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

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

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

30Al-Tabarānī (d. 360/971), Al-muʿjam 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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