

TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE: METAPHYSICAL ROOTS—ISLAMIC INTERPRETATIONS

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Before discussing Islamic attitudes towards intolerance and tolerance, it is necessary to deal with the metaphysical roots of these attitudes, manifested everywhere in human life, and search for their meaning in the context of the existential reality of both ourselves and the whole of creation. It can be asserted categorically that, from the metaphysical point of view, only the Supreme Principle, the Ultimately Real or what, in the climate of monotheism, is usually referred to as the Godhead, the Divine-Essence, or the Divine Ground has no opposite, for it transcends all duality. The very act of creation or the cosmogonic process implies, of necessity, duality and opposition. Even in the Divine Order which embraces not only the Supreme Essence or the One but also Its Energies, Hypostases-or what in Islam is called the Divine Names and Qualities, where already the domain of relativity commences-one can observe duality, multiplicity, and also the roots of opposition. The manifestation of all things in this world issuing from the Divine Nature is furthermore through their opposite, a principle which has been immortalized in a Persian Poem by the 8th century Sufi poet Shaykh Mahmud Shabistari who wrote,

The manifestation of all things is through their opposites Only the Divine Truth has neither opposite nor like.

To Live in the world of manifestation is, therefore, to live in a world of opposites which can be transcended only in that reality which is the coincidentia oppositorum and which on their own level are often in opposition and usually intolerant of each other. That is why tolerance, and intolerance are not only moral issues but have a cosmic dimension. This is a point which is emphasised by traditional doctrines in the Orient where human and moral laws have not become divorced from each other and was also true in the traditional West and, until modern times, when the link between human morality and cosmic laws became severed. Examples of the

emphasis upon this nexus can be found in classical thought, Thomistic and other forms of Christian theology and philosophy, as well as classical Jewish thought.

To live in this world is to live in a world of duality and also opposition, although there are also elements of harmony and complementarity that must be considered. Therefore, the question of tolerance or intolerance must be understood not simply as only a moral choice or choice of values but also as an ontological reality. According to all traditional metaphysics, which is the perspective of this essay, duality, opposition, and intolerance of opposites for each other are present in all realms of existence below the Divine Order. Moreover, this duality within manifestation, although possessing many facets such as harmony and complementarity as seen in the yin and yang in the Chinese tradition, is also seen in its aspect of irreducible opposition in many traditions, as can be seen in such realities as truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness, or goodness and evil. It is this second type of duality from which derive intolerance and tolerance. Yin and Yang or other similar dualities in other traditions result in complementarity and harmony whereas truth and error, or goodness and evil can never live in harmony with each other without violating the very principles of microcosmic as well as macrocosmic existence. An architect can never harmonise truth and error or falsehood on the level of his art without the building, which he is constructing, collapsing no more than can the individual “tolerate” evil simply as a complementary of the good without losing his or her moral vision. Such dualities can be transcended in a unity which stands above them in the ontological hierarchy but cannot be harmonised on their own level of existence. Truth remains always intolerant of falsehood and good of evil.

In every religion, intolerance is expressed toward evil and falsehood and as the Quran asserts: “If the truth comes, falsehood perishes.” When the light manifests itself, the darkness disappears because here one has oppositions which are not of the same nature as Yin and Yang, which stands on the same ontological level. Goodness and evil do not simply have the same degree of ontological reality, no matter how they appear outwardly. The good is always intolerant of evil because the good corresponds to being and evil is nothingness, parading in the garb of existence. It is in the nature of reality to be intolerant of the unreal. If this thesis be denied, one would have

to surrender the very notion of the truth, which in fact much of the modern world has done in the name of relativity and sacrifice at the altar of tolerance without this step diminishing intolerance in any appreciable manner. Those who deny the truth are even more intolerant concerning those who believe that there is such a thing as the truth than most followers of one form of the Truth are of the followers of other manifestations of It. However, as long as one accepts truth and goodness, one must also accept the intolerance of truth vis-a-vis error and goodness in the face of evil. Moreover, those intolerant towards evil have in fact been praised in all societies as champions of the good.

In this context the term intolerance, which has become so negative and pejorative in this century of maximum hatred of human collectivities toward each other, gains a new meaning. The whole question of intolerance and tolerance becomes reflected in a new dimension when seen in the light of the true and the good, or for that matter, the beautiful and the ugly, and what lies in the nature of existence. The problem becomes, however, even more complicated when one distinguishes between absolute and relative truth and also absolute or relative moral values which determine what is good and what is not in a particular context. Furthermore, as already mentioned, a new type of intolerance sets in among the relativizers against those who still cling to the notion of absolute truth and goodness, a phenomenon which is so prevalent in the modern West as not to need any further elaboration. In fact, the basic problem of intolerance, not seen metaphysically, but observed and experienced in the present-day world, is related precisely to this fact in addition to what concerns the very fibre of separative existence in which irreducible dualities appear. Lest we forget, most human beings do not live at that exalted centre of existence which, according to the great metaphysician Nicholas Cusa, is the coincidence of opposites and which the founder of the Naqshbandiyyah Sufi order called “universal peace” (sulh-i Kull) transcending all opposition and strife. Most of us live simply in the world of opposition and of strife unable to transcend dualities and oppositions in which one side negates the other of the two sides of opposition. Therefore; the question of intolerance and tolerance presents itself to most people as being related not to the reality that transcends all dichotomies, but as part of a world in which both seem to be real and concern man’s daily life in an ever

more threatening manner, thanks to the tools of destruction now available to him.

Today many people hold tolerance to be a positive virtue which is also politically correct whereas now the term implies even endurance of something false, painful, or even opposed to the good. One tolerates something despite its negative connotations such as tolerating pain or this or that person whose ideas or even presence one dislikes but nevertheless tolerates. Therefore, tolerance cannot be the highest virtue but a necessary virtue which one must possess when one cannot transcend the dichotomies of opposition where such a transcendence is a possibility as between two interpretations of a truth and not of course when truth is simply opposed to error. This necessary virtue on a social level is nevertheless considered as the highest virtue by those who are secularists because it also implies relativity, the denial of absoluteness and if carried to extremes, ultimately the very notion of truth. To assert absoluteness in the modern world-view seems to them to imply intolerance at least beyond the realms of the mathematical and natural sciences where society gives every right to scientists to be intolerant of someone who asserts that $2+2=5$ or merely goes beyond the boundaries of the generally accepted paradigm of knowledge now dominating over the modern mentality. Rarely have people called official biologists intolerant when they lack tolerance toward a non-evolutionary theory of biological development even if this be presented by a respected scientist.

The question of tolerance and its opposite poses in fact different sets of problems in the modern West from what one finds in traditional civilizations in which the dominating idea or paradigm always held and continues to hold a most exalted place for the truth and the good beyond the realm of a particular form of knowledge such as modern science in the West since the 17th century. In the Western context, the discussion of tolerance and intolerance is most often between those who have followed the path of relativism and secularist humanism and those who still cling to the Christian and Jewish understanding of the truth. It also involves non-Western civilizations which have not for the most part as yet accepted the secularist relativization of their traditions and agents which most Western relativists and secularists are even more intolerant than followers of religion in the West were intolerant toward other religions in yesteryears or as various

religious communities which have confronted each other over the centuries. The question for the Western intelligentsia must therefore also include the question of tolerance or intolerance toward other religions, cultures, and ethnic groups for whom truth and goodness in an absolute sense still possess a defining role in the lives of their followers.

It must be remembered that all traditional civilizations, which means the whole of the world before the appearance of the modernist separation from the norm, held on to a truth which for them was absolute and this includes Hinduism and Buddhism considered by so many scholars as being opposed to Abrahamic absolutism. The great struggles between Buddhism and Brahmanism in India itself concerned essentially the question of the truth, and not simply social factors. Among all religions, there was one form or another of intolerance as far as views which negated their perspective upon reality were concerned and many wars were fought over the question of truth as they are now fought over markets and economic gains or a short while ago over man-made ideologies seeking to replace religions. It is true that the crusades were carried out in the name of religions as were many other acts of a similar nature elsewhere, if not with the same persistence and ferocity. But more often than not, this kind of doctrinal intolerance was combined with practical tolerance.

A case in point is that of Islam, identified by many with intolerance today, because it seeks to cling to an immutable vision of the truth before the relativizing forces of the modern world. Muslims did fight against Christians, Shamans, and Hindus on the various borders of the Islamic world. But also Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived in remarkable peace and tolerance in Islamic Spain and Hindus and Muslims under Muslim rule during much of the domination of India by Muslim powers. Moreover, even today millions of Christians and still small numbers of Jews, as well as Zoroastrians, Buddhists, and Hindus live under Muslim rule from Morocco to Malaysia. Not only are they tolerated on the human level, but many comprise the wealthiest groups in their countries, such as the Copts in Egypt, or the Chinese Buddhists in Malaysia, and they have never been “ethnically cleansed,” as Muslims and Jews were in Spain after 1492 or the Tax-tars under Czarist Russia and present day Muslims in Bosnia, not to speak of the horrendous crimes of Nazi Germany.

In such situations in the Islamic world, the common people for the most part exercised tolerance which often included personal friendship with members of a religious community while shunning discussions of other visions of the truth which on the surface would negate their own vision of it. Most, however, also remembered that others were 'People of the Book' (ahl al-Kitab) and had received a revealed truth from God, the Truth (al-Haqq) and the source of all truth. Then there were philosophers and theologians who debated with Jews, Christians, and others often in a more tolerant fashion than is to be seen among the so-called tolerant modern secularists against anyone denying the premises of their world-view. This fact is of course due to the common truths of a transcendental nature which exist between various traditional religions and the lack of such a basic common ground between the agnostic-secularist perspective and the religious one.

In any case besides the theologians and philosophers, there were the Sufis who spoke so often of the Truth which embraces all religions and who sought beyond the world of forms the Formless Reality wherein is to be found that "Universal Peace" (Sulh-i-kull) transcending all confrontations, delimitations, and oppositional dualities. In contrast, in the modern world in which it is impossible to harmonise truth and error and in which no common ground exists between those who cling to an absolute truth and the relativists, in the view of the latter a new element has entered the whole question of intolerance and tolerance and that is doubt and relativism. Seeing themselves of course as being tolerant, and forgetting their intolerance of the religious perspective, the relativizers glorify their own scepticism and relativism while always blaming those who cling to an absolute truth as being intolerant or fanatical, always insisting that the foundation of tolerance is doubt and relativization.

It is well known that since the Age of Enlightenment, and putting aside certain philosophers such as Lessing who sought to discover the underlying common truth of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the more irreligious and agnostic philosophers sought to refute any claim of absoluteness, except of reason itself. They took human nature as the basis for the creation of tolerance among human beings. Such figures as Voltaire and Rousseau became paragons of this new understanding of tolerance which would sacrifice the right of the truth, especially the Truth as such, to that of the

individual. It was considered that human beings be tolerated because they are human beings and not whether or not they assert the truth and live according to the good.

This century has proven how wrong was this appraisal of human nature for in this most secularist period of human history when, in the West at least, religion has been to a large extent sacrificed at the altar of the secular and forced to accept relativization in order to be part of the modern discourse, not only has tolerance not increased in a profound sense, but intolerance is raising its head in an unprecedented manner, now armed with means of destroying not a few but thousands and millions of human beings. We live in a world in which in the West the relativization of nearly everything, including what has remained since the Renaissance of Christian ethics, is being carried out with great rapidity in the name of individual rights and freedoms and any opposition to this trend is immediately branded as intolerant, fanatical, and extremist. Moreover, any part of the world which refuses to participate in this process is called out of step with the' march of history, so-called progress, and all of the other idols of 18th and 19th century European thought which some refuse to give up despite the observation of the unprecedented chaos of this age which it would take more than religious faith to confirm as progress.

Being in the very nature of cosmic and human reality, intolerance has continued to survive in the West itself, which claims to determine the very direction and tempo of what is called "the march of history." Needless to say, the metaphysical principles mentioned earlier in this essay continue to be operative whether one accepts or rejects them. Yet, these new forms of intolerance are usually blamed upon what still remains of religion in the West and its recent partial revival in some circles and hardly ever upon the secularists and relativists themselves who keep insisting that if only everyone were to stop believing in absolute values and accept the process of relativization, then tolerance would flower all over the world and intolerance would disappear.

It is, therefore, important to examine the issue from the other side and turn especially to Islamic civilization accused today by the West to be more intolerant and fanatical than any other religion and civilization no matter how many centuries old mosques are destroyed in India or Muslims massacred in

Bosnia or Chechnya. It is especially necessary to turn to the Islamic world now because of the deliberated and orchestrated program to identify the negative attitude of intolerance with Muslims especially, to the extent of neglecting the rather remarkable record of Islamic civilization concerning minorities during most of its history, there being of course tragic exceptions. There are even those who do not want to be reminded of the facts of Islamic history even if mentioned by respectable scholars because such historical truths either challenge their own world-view. or their political and economic interests.

To turn to the other side of this debate, it is first of all necessary to remember once again that to be tolerant on the basis of the relativization of the truth implies also to be intolerant toward those who claim the reality of absolute truth and their attachment to it Like the thesis and antithesis of Hegelian dialectic, which Hegel probably took from Jacob Bohme and the long Hermetic tradition in the West, the very assertion of tolerance on the basis of relativism brings about the negation and intolerance toward those who refuse to participate in the prevalent process of relativization. That is why, while many people in the West talk of tolerance, they are usually very intolerant of members of other civilizations which do not accept their views even if these other civilizations pose no danger to the West. Many people speak of the Islamic world as if it had its navy in the Gulf of Mexico endangering America itself, rather than the American navy dominating the Persian Gulf and the main economic resource of all the Muslim countries in that region. A picture is drawn by the very secularist champions of tolerance that if another civilization wants to go its own way, experiment within the context of its own religion and history and with the dynamic of its own society, not accepting the prevalent secularist and relativizing models dominating over the West, then it is intolerant and must be opposed. In such situations, suddenly all the decorum of tolerance falls apart and the hitherto unannounced sentiments become formulated as the motto "whoever does not follow- our way of doing things we are intolerant against him, but since this is not a laudable trait, we keep emphasising that he is intolerant against us. We possess all the virtues and the other, all the vices." This is where one needs to pause and think for a moment again about the metaphysical and philosophical roots of tolerance and intolerance, truth and falsehood, good and evil, alluded to briefly at the beginning of this essay.

Turning now to the Islamic world specifically, it must be asserted at the outset that Islam sees the value of human life in holding firmly to the doctrine of the absoluteness of the Divine Principle and in leading a life in accordance with the norms revealed by that Principle, norms which therefore participate in some way in the quality of absoluteness. For centuries, and despite the bigotry of a number of its scholars, the Islamic world has respected the life and property of Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and others living in its midst and in doing so, it has followed the advice of the Prophet. Moreover, the Qur'an states explicitly that the "People of the Book" (ahl al-kitab), who include not only the followers of the Abrahamic religions but also those of other major religions such as Zoroastrianism and Hinduism with which Islam came into contact, have also received a divine message and that ultimately all authentic religions contain elements of the Truth within themselves. That is why Muslims are obliged according to their Sacred Law (al-Shari'ah) to protect the followers of other religions living in their midst even if Muslims do not agree with all their teachings. In answer to some contemporary Muslims who claim other religions to be false, one could ask why would God command Muslims to protect the rights of groups who live in error and would be condemned to hell. Traditional Muslims always saw other people in terms of their attachment not to an ethnic group or nation in the modern sense of the word, but to a religious community. That is why even today most Muslims, not transformed by modernism and Westernization, see Westerners as Christians and cannot even understand the category of secularism and the fact that many Westerners are only post-Christian and no longer attached to the Christian world-view. The faranji for the Arabs and farangi for Persians (from Frankish and meaning European) is inseparable in the mind of the people of the bazaars of Isfahan, Damascus, and Cairo from Christianity. Even the term kafir usually translated as infidel used for European Christians did not bear the strictly theological significance of a people cut off completely from the truth and grace as does the term pagan in Christianity. Because of this basic outlook, the whole question of intolerance and tolerance is seen in a different light by traditional Muslims. Tolerance is seen as involving a person who does not accept the truth of Islam but accepts some other call from Heaven as the Muslims displaying of tolerance toward Christians in such lands as Syria for fourteen hundred years bears witness. The traditional Muslim's attitude has not involved a person or society which denies any divine truth and relativizes all that is absolute and

desacralizes all that is sacred because for Muslims the purpose of human life is to confirm the Absolute and the Sacred without which the human being is only accidentally human. This radical difference in perspective is the cause of so many in the West having such difficulty in understanding the reaction of Muslims to the Salman Rushdie affair, judging all things from the prism of its own understanding of the Absolute and the relative, the Sacred and the profane, God's rights and human rights. And it has displayed the utmost degree of intolerance toward those who have not been willing to accept the fruits of the European philosophical and political developments of the last few centuries.

At the heart of this affair lies the basic question: What is more important, God's rights or man's rights? However, even if one speaks of tolerance and freedom of choice in the current Western sense, then every society should have the right to respond to this question by itself without either imposing its answer upon others or accepting others to impose their answers on it. Any society which claims that its answer to this question is global and that anyone who does not accept its answer is "backward" or "medieval" or some other such pejorative term based upon the myopia of progress and evolutionism, is exercising the worst kind of intolerance on a global scale. Putting aside sloganeering and emotional condemnation by taking recourse to such terms as "medieval", which paradoxically refers to the most religious chapter of Western history and is therefore also called the "Age of Faith", one must turn to the basic question about divine and human rights with logic and objectivity.

If viewed in this manner, we come to the conclusion that Western societies after centuries of internal wars and social revolutions have come to the conclusion that human rights are more important than divine rights. The latter are respected only under the condition that they do not interfere with law, economics, political, and other aspects of daily human affairs. Real tolerance would mean that other societies which have not undergone the modern Western experience and have not made such a decision, societies for whom God's rights come before man's would be respectfully tolerated as those societies must tolerate the West's decision on such a crucial matter which defines human life and what it means to be human. That of course has not happened especially as far as the West, which speaks so much of human

rights and tolerance, is concerned while non-Western societies have little choice but to tolerate the situation because of the complete imbalance of power. It is the hiding of these basic truths which make the situation so difficult and the discourse so tortuous today, especially in the case of the Islamic world which is perhaps more vocal than others in announcing its abiding attachment to the Absolute and the Sacred and its choice to accept the rights of God before the rights of man, a truth which is also very much present in traditional Christianity as seen in the saying of Christ: "It is the attempted by the modern West to globalise the substitution of the "kingdom of man" for the "kingdom of God" and then label anyone who does not agree with this program me as being intolerant that has taken away any claim to seriousness of much of the discourse that is now going on concerning intolerance and tolerance or human rights on a global scale.

Today we are not in a situation like the medieval period when the military and economic power of civilizations were close to each other if not evenly matched. These days there is no comparison in worldly power between the defenders of the priority of the rights of God and those of man not only globally but even within Western societies. The Islamic world, like what remains of other traditional civilizations, has little choice before this onslaught of alien ideas supported by overwhelming economic and military might. Those in the non-Western world who choose the favourite slogans of this century such as democracy and human rights, whatever they might mean in a non-Western context, are endeared to those powers, while those who try to bring out their deeper implications as far as the Absolute and the Sacred are concerned are anathematized and not at all tolerated. We only have to wait now to see what the slogans of the 21st century will be. The intolerance of the relativists against those who still hold on to the sense of the Absolute and the Sacred is a marked character of this period of human history. Intolerance continues with the same ferocity as in the ages gone by except that it is now camouflaged by the veil of hypocrisy according to which those who display such intolerance, evident in so many circles during the Rushdie affair, pose as champions of tolerance and identify their opponents as the only people who have a monopoly on intolerance.

These are factors which contribute to the difficulty of serious dialogue in today's world. One civilization, namely the Western, having broken from its

Christian past, and possessing tremendous economic and military power, combined with unprecedented social disorder, defines itself as being open-minded, the champion of human rights and tolerance but defines such terms in a particularly relativistic and secularistic manner, despite the presence of Christian, Jewish, and now to some extent Muslim voices within it. Moreover, although it is the only civilization of its kind in the world, it acts as if its understanding of man, his rights and freedoms and relationships with God or lack thereof are global. It is, therefore, decidedly intolerant toward those opposed to its world-view, while other civilizations now faced with the possibility of the very destruction of their particular identity are also intolerant toward the dominating power of the modern West.

The West traversed the path which led it where it is now as a result of its own inner forces and not because of the coercion of an outside force. In contrast, other civilizations, some of which, such as the Islamic, are still very much alive, have not had in the recent past and do not have today the freedom and choice to decide their own futures according to the dynamics of their society and the principles which their people uphold. It is here that the question of tolerance and intolerance reappears. Muslims, like many others, are intolerant toward this situation of external coercion in which others, supported by extensive economic means and political pressures, want to decide for them the meaning of human life. Seeing their identity threatened not only by an external power called the West, but also by Westernized elements within their own society who are supported by the West, they have now become even more intolerant towards the modern world. In fact, however, they are not intolerant of the West itself, but of what the power of Westernization is doing to their society, culture, and even religion. Any society whose identity is threatened becomes intolerant of the forces which constitute that threat and the intolerance increases with the increase of the threat, for in this situation, there is not the question of complementary dualities such as the yin and yang but dualities which confront and annul each other. One cannot defend the kingdom of God and His absolute rights and at the same time, the kingdom of man and his claims to the absoluteness of his rights. One can tolerate individuals with the other view as many Muslims do not only tolerate but have close Western friends, but one cannot be tolerant toward a world-view which is simply seeking to negate and obliterate one's own view of things. The West in fact displays the same

intolerance, although it is not under economic or political pressure to conform to an alien perspective.

Where there is the least sense of threat to a country's identity or even economic welfare in the West, even the decorum of tolerance and human rights is cast aside as we see in Europe during the last five years where a small decline in the economic situation has caused an exponential rise of intolerance in such countries as France toward the very non-Europeans whose hard work for cheap wages helped the economic revival of the country. Who could have imagined that the country which from the 18th century became the vanguard of human freedom, anti-Christian rationalism, humanism, and free-thinking and which also influenced the founders of America should demonstrate such intolerance towards those living for fifty years amidst its people, going to the extreme of banning Muslim girls from wearing scarfs to school. Far from condoning intolerance on the individual and social levels by certain Muslims, we wonder what the manifestation of tolerance and intolerance would be in the West, if the situation were reversed and the Islamic world were exercising as much pressure upon the West to conform to its point of view as the West is exercising upon the Islamic world.

The threat to the existence of any entity which is still alive brings with it resistance and intolerance toward whatever is threatening its existence, this being true for both the individual and any human collectivity united as a society or civilization. Much of what is happening in the Islamic world is due to this fact and increase, with the impending threat. Many Muslim societies feel threatened from both the outside and the inside by forces lowly allied to the outside without regard for the fact whether this situation is their fault, the fault of their leaders, the forces outside their boundaries, or all of them together. They are reacting in the manner of a living organism which becomes immediately intolerant toward the threatening element. Our body, for example, shows acute intolerance toward a foreign virus threatening its harmony and functioning. If it were to show tolerance, the body would become ill and possibly (lie. How tragic for a body which has lost its immune system and becomes overtolerant toward every foreign invasion!

Traditional Muslims always showed much greater tolerance toward others than the so-called "fundamentalist" Muslims do today, precisely

because the former felt much less threatened as far as their identity and very existence was concerned than do the latter. But what I am most concerned about is traditional Islam still followed by the majority of Muslims who of all the different groups shows the least degree of fanatical opposition to the West. It is an Islam which is very much alive and still remains very tolerant towards Christians and followers of other religions in its midst. But traditional Islam is also now being threatened. What it does not tolerate, therefore, is a world-view which would deny ultimate truth altogether and which is moreover trying to impose this view upon Muslims. In such a situation the wise and the saintly cannot appeal to a transcendent truth of which Islam and this or that religion are different formal manifestations. There is in fact no common ultimate truth to be discovered in the present situation between the Islamic and the modern secularist view. The best that one can do is to have recourse to tolerance on the human level, provided each side respects the rights of the other and does not seek to impose itself by economic or cultural pressure, not to speak of political impositions, upon the other.

In the present context, therefore, where the modern West is trying to impose its view of things, which while being partial and even provincial is paraded as global and even “absolute,” despite its constant change, Islam has no choice but to be intolerant toward what threatens its very existence. For Islam, the truth comes before all earthly considerations and if forced to choose between the truth and tolerance based upon the destruction or marginalisation of the truth, it would certainly choose the former and have tolerance toward the latter only on the condition that it not be imposed upon it by force. I think that many believing Jews and Christians in the West would also agree with this Islamic position, although not all dare speak about it clearly and openly rather than seeking to placate the secularising other by bending their own teachings which as a result, ‘sometimes become hardly recognisable any more.

The problem of the Islamic world is, however, not how to come to terms, tolerate, and even display sympathy for traditional Judaism and Christianity which have so much in common with Islam. The problem is have tolerance towards a world view which is simply the negation of Islam while at the same time seeking to impose itself upon the Islamic world. The

Islamic world must learn to continue to strengthen its identity in the face of a powerful external threat always preaching to it the doctrine of human rights according to its own understanding while applying it selectively and only according to its worldly interests, and yet remain tolerant vis-a-vis this force at least on the human level. The difficult situation is complicated further by the tragedy of the lack of freedom by Muslims to chart their own course and work out a modus vivendi toward the modern West in conformity with their own principles and traditions. It is as if Americans and Europeans were forced from the outside to come to terms with Confucian ideas of filial piety without the freedom to react to such an alien idea creatively and freely.

As for the West and those who believe that tolerance is related to human rights defined according to a purely worldly notion of human existence and individualistic understanding of freedom, irrespective of whether man was created in the image of God or is simply an evolved ape, there is also an immense challenge but in the other direction. It is how to be tolerant toward those who do not accept the Western definition of the human state, nor relativism and secularism, those who belong to other civilizations or even within the West for whom the sense of the Absolute and the Sacred has not withered away and is not likely to wither away no matter how much one extols the glory of secularism. These beliefs will not disappear especially at a time when, under the most secularist and worldly civilization ever known, the modern society is falling apart so rapidly from within.

The future of the world in the next few years and decades will depend obviously on how various world-views and civilizations will be able to live together not simply under the banner of a relativistic and secularist view foisted by the West as global human rights, but after consideration of the different understandings of ultimate truth on the one hand, and its denial on the other. If all civilizations were still traditional, this task would have been much easier since one could not only speak of tolerance of other versions of the truth, but in the manner of a Rumi or Ramakrishna of the Truth which transcends all forms and is yet manifested in different sacred forms lying at the heart of different civilizations. One could also appeal to metaphysics and seek to understand the root of intolerance in certain types of dualities which characterize manifestation as such. But of course this is not now the case and

the challenge remains how to be tolerant of ideas, forms, and philosophies which negate one's world-view at its very foundations.

Needless to say, no matter how difficult, the challenge must nevertheless be successfully answered. Interestingly enough, at this moment of history the challenges to the Islamic world and the secularised West are in many ways reversed and opposed in nature. The Islamic world must learn to be tolerant of a world that threatens its very existence without losing its identity, and the secularized West must learn the very difficult lesson that its modernised understanding of man and the world is not necessarily universal and that it is not sufficient to boast of the virtue of tolerance while being totally intolerant toward all those who challenge the very premise of the secularist and humanist world-view. Paradoxically enough, each side, the non-Western- especially the Islamic- and the Western, have much to learn from each other, whether in a positive or negative manner, at this dangerous juncture of human history.