The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Combating Religious Intolerance: A Perspective from Muslim Contexts
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Abstract

The lecture draws upon both British and Muslim history to explore the consequences of religious
and cultural intolerance in societies and looks at ways in which such intolerance can be
overcome. Through examples from architecture, literature and history, Professor Nanji brings out
the pluralistic nature of the cultural heritage of different groups and challenges the notion of an
essentialised or pure culture. The lecture concludes by discussing the possibilities of mulit-
culturalism in contemporary times and addresses the need to draw upon knowledge and learning,
irrespective of its origin.

Key Words

Pluralism, Tolerance, Constitution of Medina, People of the Book, *Rasa'il Ikhwan al -Safa*',
Andalucia, multiculturalism, Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*

Introduction

It is always a pleasure to come to a city that is a world heritage site. Whenever I come to Bath I
try to stop at the Abbey. For me the attraction is not just its magnificent architecture and the
wonderful stained glass representations inside but also the fact that there is a convergence of
architecture and design across cultures that people probably do not notice or about which they are
unaware. The Romanesque tradition, the French tradition that entered Britain partly through the
Norman Conquest, was heavily influenced by what had happened in Muslim Spain, taking over
and embellishing further some of the features of architecture and design that had evolved
there. Those of you who have visited Andalucia know that one of the wise things done by people
involved in what is known in Medieval Christian history as the Reconquista and the Inquisition
was not to destroy the architectural monuments of Granada. Though there would no longer be the
presence of Muslims in Spain, their buildings were left to remind us of a time which I shall come
back to later.

Tolerance and Intolerance: Lessons from British History

Those of you who are familiar with the history of the Abbey will recall that in the 1530s, as part
of the Dissolution of the Monasteries, Henry VIII ordered the expunging of the Catholic identity
of the building. Much of the monastery was ruined and the building took on a different character.
I wanted to put that historical period before you because the building did survive and preserve its
devotional and spiritual significance. It is interesting to note, however, that traditions can go
through a period of crisis, and in such times of crisis we tend to lose perspective of what

historically nurtures those traditions. In the case of the period that followed Henry VIII, we see how there was a long conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Britain and elsewhere.

I refer to that event because the cumulative understanding of that event and why it happened, and how one can subsequently put behind a period of intolerance, is one of the great lessons we need to draw from the British experience. We need to learn not only what intolerance does to a society but also how the society then manages to move beyond a time of intolerance and create a more enabling climate in which historical differences can be transcended. That is an experience that this country has had over a long period of time and I think it is an experience we need to keep in mind. The particularities of that experience and the cumulative learning that has come from it is a lesson for many other religious traditions as they go through their own transitions.

The second historical reference I want to make is to the fact that almost two hundred years ago William Wilberforce was able to push through a bill in the Parliament for the abolition of the slave trade. This was an era when not just in European and American societies but also in Muslim societies a large section of the human race was treated as a commodity. One of the consequences of intolerance is that we strip human beings of their humanity. We demonise a particular group of people, or we go even further and render them non-human and therefore not subject to respect and dignity as human beings.

Having lived in America, I feel this period of racial hegemony and division has not been easy for many Americans to put behind them, and some of the consequences of it still survive. It is important that such times be remembered because they mark a phase when levels of intolerance created some of the darkest hours in our history.

Tolerance and Intolerance: Examples from Muslim History

After speaking about two developments in what is essentially British history, I want to move on to the Muslim world. I shall quote a story that is common to many religious traditions. This is a story of some wise men who are seated around the square on a pleasant summer evening, doing what wise men do - exchanging presumed wisdom and trying to solve at the same time the problems of the world! While they are seated on this bench they see a young woman walking in front of them, going to and fro and obviously looking for something she has lost. Eventually they enquire what it is that she is looking for and she replies, "It's an earring". They ask "Do you know exactly where you lost it?". "No, I don't know where I lost it", she replies. Perplexed at the response, the wise men ask, "Why are you looking for it just in this space, walking back and forth?" And she says "Because it's the only place where there's a lamppost."

I am concerned and troubled, as are many of my colleagues, that when one looks at the Muslim world today, one tends to focus on what is happening under a single 'lamp'. We tend to see all the issues the Muslim world is facing, all the crises that it is going through, as if they were illuminated by a single 'lamp', rather than seeing them in the broader context of their historical framework.

We are now in the fifteenth century according to the Muslim calendar. As I was in the Abbey I remembered that the present structure was rebuilt from 1499. If one were to judge British history in terms of tolerance and intolerance from the period that dates from 1500 to 1600 it would make pretty sorry reading. It was a period of great conflict, a period of great religious intolerance, and a period of persecution. To look at Muslim history simply under the current perspective or 'lamp'

and to see the events that are taking place now as representative of the entire Muslim tradition would be a mistake – like looking at British history in terms of 1500-1600. Muslims are certainly going through an extremely difficult time right now and there are expressions of intolerance, expressions of warfare and internecine conflict. But that is not the entire picture of Muslims that I want to put before you.

One of the ways of putting all this in a historical perspective is to ask whether in Muslim history and experience there are resources that speak to our current desire for tolerance, to pluralism, to the value of diversity. If there were such resources but have been lost then we must ask how they may be recovered. The question is important, and not just for Muslims, because Muslims do not live in isolation from others. They live in the context of many societies of which they are a part and what they do and what happens in the Muslim world affects all of us. So I want to make a case for looking at the foundational materials, experiences, and historical perspectives within Muslim traditions to ask if there is a vocabulary, an experience, of how to deal with intolerance. I want to start particularly by looking at the experience of Prophet Muhammad.

Prophet Muhammad at Medina

He was born in a relatively closed society that was very tribal on the one hand and on the other hand beginning in some sense to become very cosmopolitan. The town of Mecca where he was born was on a trade route which had considerable cosmopolitan influences. The Prophet's first main job was as a merchant hired by a leading woman merchant in the town to whom he eventually got married. This fact, unfortunately, is not recalled enough in Muslim societies today but when I speak to Muslim audiences I like to remind them that the Prophet's first job was given to him by a woman. Not only by a woman who was a contributor to the society in which she lived and a wealthy merchant, but a woman who admired and respected his work enough to ask him to marry her. In the context of some of the ways in which intolerance in the Muslim world is practised and understood vis-à-vis women, this is an important point to keep in mind.

The Prophet faced major difficulties when he started to preach, having been inspired by revelation like all the great prophets in the biblical tradition. As soon as he began to preach his message, he ran into problems because he was challenging the norms of his society; he was challenging the values of a tradition that the Arabs held to be sacrosanct because it had been handed down to them by their leaders and by their ancestors for hundreds of years. In his challenging of that tradition they saw him as a traitor; he was betraying his tribal roots. This was exactly what the Prophet intended to do. He was not arguing for a revival of Arab tradition or Arab values. He was in fact challenging the structure of those values and the traditions of society that supported them.

Eventually, a small number of people accepted his call. As a result, they faced persecution. To escape it, the early Muslim community had to leave Arabia and, interestingly enough, the place where they sought refuge was in a Christian kingdom, in Abyssinia, which of course today is the country of Ethiopia. The land's Christian king received them and then later he received the delegation from Mecca that wanted him to repatriate the Muslims to Arabia so that they could be punished. The king asked the Muslims to explain themselves, saying, "What reason can you give me that I should not send you back for punishment as traitors to your own people?" They explained what they had been taught by the Prophet. It is said that the Emperor drew a line with his walking stick on the sand and said, "What divides your beliefs and mine is as thin as this line". I think that is the first major experience of tolerance that the young Muslim community had and which was from a Christian Emperor in Abyssinia who recognised the commonalities

between the two traditions.

Subsequently, more favourable circumstances created an environment in which Islam flourished and the Muslims grew in numbers. Eventually, the Prophet established a community but in Medina not in Mecca as he faced a great deal of opposition in Mecca. The creation of the community meant that the Prophet had to take into account the most important problem in Medina, that is, the relationships between different religious groups. In Medina, in addition to the Muslims, there were Christians and Jews. These were long-established communities and the Prophet had to determine what would be the relationship of this new Muslim community with these ancient religious communities. Out of their experience, there developed a vocabulary and a language among the Muslims that speaks a language of tolerance.

One of the reasons I want to bring this up is because when religions are born and grow, the tendency of the new religion is to push away other religions or to overtake them. Here we have an episode in history where the Prophet wrestled with the value and ideals of tolerance. We have a document that has survived from that time. It is often called the Constitution of Medina. It is not a constitution as such but a series of agreements between Jews, Christians and Muslims, and it emphasises three important things.

First, all three communities were considered part of one greater community, Ummah. So, Jews and Christians were not to be seen as apart from the larger community that had been created. Jews and Christians were to be regarded as the People of the Book - those who have received their own revelations preserved in their own scriptures which are sacrosanct to them as part of their history and religious practice. Second, Muslims would not interfere with those traditions but allow those communities to retain their traditions of practice and their religious autonomy. Their sacred places would not be violated and their leaders would be allowed to exercise their authority within this framework. And, third, Christians and Jews in return would never attack Muslims wilfully and not seek to undermine the Muslim authority as it grew.

These conditions were written in the agreement and became the defining way in which Muslim relations with other faiths would be governed across centuries. Muslims have not always lived up to these ideals, nor have they always succeeded in translating these values into practice. On occasion they have warred against other religious groups and other religious groups have been undermined. But generally these were the principles that have governed the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims when Muslims were in the majority or when Muslims ruled over non-Muslims. Indeed as the Muslim world grew and became over time an empire or a series of empires, Jews and Christians continued to play a critical role in the intellectual, social and economic life of these societies.

We see that role across many parts of the Muslim world. Those of you that have travelled widely in the Middle East would know that for a very long time there were vibrant Jewish as well as Christian communities in these parts of the Muslim world. Morocco had a thriving Jewish community –subsequently they have migrated to Israel but for centuries they contributed to Morocco. There has been a strong Christian presence in Syria, and of course in Palestine. This ability of the Christians, Jews and Muslims to live together in a larger civilisational context is what one scholar, with particular reference to Andalucia, has called *convivencia*.

Such principles and practices of tolerance and mutual contributions can become embedded in a society when the scripture and interpretation of that tradition acknowledges and favours the

notion of religious pluralism. The Qur'an itself, though unfortunately it gets misquoted by Muslims as well as non-Muslims in this regard, has much to say about religious pluralism. Probably one of the most important statements in the Qur'an is that humanity was created out of one soul. So the primary assumption is that all humanity comes from a single source, and all people share that commonality and that founding experience together. Secondly, the Qur'an affirms that God has created people to be different. He did not seek to unite all of them into one group. This is spoken about as a deliberate act on the part of God. God wished to create humanity through communities which would live with each other, which would acknowledge and recognise each other. That is an important underlying message in the Qur'an. Clearly, if God had so wished, He could have united human beings into one community, but He wished rather to maintain the diversity and the pluralism of communities.

There is a very specific reference in the Qur'an that there is no community in the world with whom God has not communicated. Since every community in the world can regard itself as having had some communication from God, that makes everyone metaphorically 'Peoples of the Book' since they have all received communication from God. Now, if that is a shared experience then the way in which people crystallise that revelation into their own lives becomes again a shared value across space and time. Part of the difficulty with exploring religious tolerance today is to see if the religious traditions will recognise the boundaries of community formation in their respective historical contexts.

Once at a conference at St. Louis in the United States I unwisely said that perhaps Christians and Muslims should declare an embargo on conversion. After all they both number over a billion. That might be enough for the time being, and they could concentrate on working with those within their community rather than trying to convert some more people. It was a difficult notion, several people applauded and some people booed. Part of the difficulty with religious traditions as they try and accept a notion of pluralism is whether they recognise the need to go beyond tolerance in the sense of "I tolerate you even though you're wrong". The question is whether they are ready to accept a much broader recognition: "I respect and acknowledge that you have a formation that comes out of your own tradition and experience of communication with God." That is a language that has been difficult particularly for Christians and Muslims to develop historically. Both traditions have wrestled with difference while wanting to assert their own superiority. One of the challenges of the future will be to find ways in which each tradition can draw lessons from the past that will help towards greater convergence rather than towards greater division.

Culture of learning: Contributions of different faiths

I want to focus for a moment on the experience of Andalucia. In many ways the Reconquista (as it is known in Medieval Christian history) of 1492 and the launching of the Inquisition marks an end to one of the great experiments of medieval Europe in creating a society of tolerance. That was a time when the majority language of most of the educated people in the region was Arabic. The great Moses Maimonides and other Jewish scholars wrote their theological works not just in Hebrew but also in Arabic. Subsequently this tradition of theology and intellectual reflection was passed on to the great Christian traditionalists and scholars leading up to the Renaissance. Thomas Aquinas is a good example of someone who began to understand Aristotle not by reading him in the original but by studying him through a Latin translation of the Arabic commentary on Aristotle by Ibn Rushd (Averroës).

So we see a period where knowledge is bridged. All of the three traditions acknowledged a debt to the Greek particularly Hellenistic thought. In the Muslim tradition, Aristotle is called the first teacher because his work was felt to be so influential and so all-encompassing, and Muslims made every effort to try to understand the heritage of rational thought among the Greeks. In fact one of the very places that is in the news almost every day, Baghdad, became the first major centre where as much of the Greek corpus as was available to Muslims began to be translated into Arabic. This was one of the great openings towards tolerance. It says that while there are those amongst us who believe that God has revealed Himself to us through the Qur'an, that is only the beginning. There is a possibility of building on that knowledge. Therefore, we should be open to wisdom from wherever it comes. The construction of such a knowledge based society has therefore always been at the heart of building a truly pluralistic society.

The Institute where I work is in the process of translating one of the great encyclopaedias of the medieval period, a work known as the *Rasa'il Ikhwan al -Safa',* the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. They were a group of intellectuals in Basra, in Iraq, who met periodically and contemplated the great issues of their time. Out of those discussions emerged epistles which have been put together on virtually all the subjects which you discuss here in your Society. They are classified and arranged according to knowledge in all disciplines. Their view was that if Muslim society chose to ignore other knowledge systems, it would become impoverished. Therefore Muslims needed to learn from whatever sources of wisdom there were around them. They felt that by creating an encyclopaedia they would create a knowledge base, a database, from which Muslims could draw. This is in the late 9th and early 10th century. Much of that knowledge base came from the time of the Greeks, whether it was the philosophical tradition, the medical tradition, the tradition of studying cosmology, etc. The sciences of the day were inspired by Greek knowledge as well as Persian and Indian knowledge.

One of the exercises that I do whenever I'm giving a talk, especially to students for whom awareness of the interaction between Muslim and Western traditions is not so great, is to write on a blackboard the number 29 in Roman numerals, and then I ask them to multiply it by 19 also written in Roman numeral, using Roman numerals. Then I do the same exercise in Arabic numerals. It's basically to illustrate how one builds on knowledge. Mathematics was a science that the ancients practised for a long time, but when the Muslims came to mathematics they understood that the Greeks and Romans had created a system but that it had limitations. So they looked to India for how to think about the great issues in mathematics, and in particular in numbers. If we didn't have the zero, a number which comes from its name in Arabic, we would have very little in terms of the developments that took place in the medieval science of mathematics but also in the modern world.

If you walk through the Abbey and you look up, you see the wonderful fan design– the idea of creating a nave and structure around this wonderful architecture is based on an ability to understand how geometry works. Muslims wrestled with it as much as Christians did, and out of that shared experience comes the ability to do good architecture, the kind of perpendicular architecture with which we're familiar. How can you build pillars and then put a dome around them? It is difficult to do unless you have a sense of precision about mathematics. Muslims learned this from others but then they passed it on as well, to give us some truly spectacular examples of how we can create buildings.

Plurality and the architectural heritage

One of the things we forget, particularly when we are looking at this time of synthesis, is that buildings are very important. Buildings are probably the greatest examples of the value of tolerance. They speak volumes that works of theology cannot. I am fortunate that we have in London an Ismaili Centre in South Kensington that is next to the Museum of Natural History and the Victoria and Albert Museum. This is in the space where the former National Theatre was going to be built. The question that had to be asked was whether in this little space the Ismaili Muslim community could create something that would sit well with these two major institutions but would also be a statement of the Muslim identity.

When I talk about this building - and I get a chance to do this occasionally when the BBC is doing its rounds on architecture in London - I point out that the notion of tolerance is articulated architecturally by enabling a landscape where cultures sit comfortably nestled to each other; where a building does not appear like a rude interruption in the cultural landscape of that space. It is possible they might have decided to build a replica of the Taj Mahal there to show that it was Islamic architecture, but the Taj Mahal belongs in India not in London. Part of the way in which we learn from each other is the creation of physical spaces that allow permeation and connection between cultural traditions. This past year, some of the significant buildings in the South Kensington area participated in cultural exchange through a programme of music and culture.

The great contribution of the Muslims in Andalucia is probably a good place from which to learn this, that is, the creation of spaces that have survived the passing of those traditions. When the Capitol in Washington was being built as a symbol of a new identity, or Paris was being reconstructed after the French Revolution, the creators looked for architectural inspiration. For this they looked back to the Greeks and Romans because they saw that as the resource from where these new values and new inspirations would come. Fortunately they didn't dismantle the tremendous heritage of Christianity in France, so that cathedrals such as Chartres or Notre Dame remain examples of how architecture gets blended across time, and becomes not simply monumental but also transitional.

One of the examples of both intolerance and tolerance that I remember clearly comes from the Bosnian war. There is a bridge in Mostar, built during the Ottoman period which linked communities that were Christian and Muslim as well as those within the Christian community who were Orthodox and Catholic. That bridge was bombed during the war and was destroyed. In a way this act marked a notion of separating peoples, by saying "You may have a shared history but from now on you're going to have a history within a specific boundary, and you will no longer share things. You will get rid of those places where you used to meet, that bridged your differences." Fortunately, the communities in that part of the world decided that they wanted to restore that bridge and it was restored. It is one of the projects within an architectural programme supported by the Aga Khan Development Network. Once again, that kind of symbolism makes a statement, particularly in a climate where people wish to exacerbate differences and create divide.

Multiculturalism in contemporary British experience

The other area that I particularly want to point to is one where shared notions of knowledge become vehicles for building tolerance. It seems particularly important in the kind of world that is illustrated by what is called multicultural Britain. I know that multiculturalism has come in for a lot of bashing recently, perhaps some of it for justifiable reasons, but we have to admit to

ourselves that the religious and cultural landscape of Britain has changed. It is not that it was ever fixed, it was always changing.

One of the advantages of having a colonial experience, of growing up in what was then the British colony of Kenya, was that I was instructed by a variety of British teachers. The person who taught me English and English literature was Welsh, our headmaster was Irish, and the person who could not inspire me to study biology was a Scot. I had in growing up an experience of Britain that was probably very different from what many others would have had, because I saw in my teachers' mannerisms, in their attitudes, in their expressions and sometimes in their strongly held beliefs a notion of what being Scottish or Welsh or Irish meant to them. These are elements that in Britain have had to be reconciled over time.

I heard strong sentiments from Alex Salmon, the member of the Scottish National Party, about what he would do if his party came to power. Similar things I heard during my education at McGill University in Montreal. From 1968 to 1971 there was a strong separatist movement in Quebec; it still continues, and it's a problem for Canada. What is Canada? Is it English? Is it French? Is it both? Well, it is now very different from what it was in 1970 when I was there; it has become truly pluralistic. So countries have to stop thinking in terms of dichotomies. These dichotomies may have been inherited from the past, but they must now be transcended.

Additional things have begun to change the landscape of Britain and, in this particular context, the question of how does one develop a notion of Britishness has emerged. Influences have come from different parts of the world, particularly from Africa and the Caribbean. These influences are affecting policy even within the Anglican Church. Quite recently, a meeting was held in Tanzania to discuss this very vexing issue that the Anglican Church is facing over recognition of gay bishops. It is a critical issue for the Church, but the responses to it cannot simply come out of England or out of Lambeth Palace any more. They must also come out of Nigeria, Kenya, and so on. The notion of dialogue across cultures is already present in what I would call the British experience. In addition, one must accommodate the presence of Sikhs, Hindus, Zoroastrians and Muslims.

Whenever I see three or four different cultural spaces contending, I think back to the place where I grew up. Most of my education in Kenya was in the port city of Mombasa. Like all ports, it doesn't look back into the hinterland; it looks out across the ocean. I remember growing up in an environment where we had people from virtually every religious tradition, and every tradition within Islam. There were Shias, there were Sunnis, there were Zaydis from Yemen, there were Ibadis from Oman; communities that most people don't even know exist in the Muslim world. We grew up in this environment without thinking that one was right or the other was wrong. Our places of worship were close to each other; I could walk from a Sunni mosque to an Ismaili Jamatkhana in the space of twenty yards and it was an easy transition to make. I wonder sometimes, using the imagery of William Blake, whether we lived in the realm of innocence until we became contaminated by experience and began to recognise difference. We began to articulate difference, and perhaps to exacerbate difference.

So, one of the issues that I want to raise before you is whether the nature of conversations that take place here, that take place in academic institutions, and that take place among the intelligentsia, can begin to grapple with this changing landscape. In Bath, Georgian architecture is a relatively recent phenomenon. You did not have Georgian architecture all the time, you had it only since the Georgian period, and yet it has come to define what Bath is. In a similar way,

perhaps one can begin to look at the pluralism in the British community and say whether out of this a kind of cultural architecture can emerge, where there is a shared language and a vocabulary that comes to define the way people relate to each other. It is an experience and a challenge worth facing because the longer you leave it the more traditions fossilise and notions of alienation and of separate belonging are developed.

Concluding Remarks

For me when I recall the founding period of Muslim history what I find the Prophet challenging the most is the narrow tribalism of his people. He gave them a sense of shared history. They had thought of themselves as Arab tribes imprisoned in their ancestral traditions. He reminded them of two things. One was that they were linked to others because they were human beings who shared a common humanity. The second was that they lived among Christians and Jews with whom they shared common Abrahamic roots. The recovery of that vocabulary and consciousness is what I see as probably one of his greatest contributions.

If Muslims have anything to learn from their Prophet it is this, that the vocabulary of tolerance, of respect, and of mutual acknowledgment exists within the Islamic experience - talk of alienation, of civilisational clashes, is not the majority experience of Muslim history; it is a minoritarian experience, and it is an experience that has always failed. What we need to begin to do is to pluralise our own discourse about what is the new narrative. I started by referring to problems that had occurred during the Dissolution, in Henry VIII's time, and I talked about slavery, because these represent examples of how we move beyond events. We cultivate out of our common experiences a vocabulary that allows us to build bridges rather than to allow walls to arise.

I want to end by reference to a narrative within the Muslim tradition attributed to a great mystic. This is Farid al-Din 'Attar who describes in a way the issues that are before us today. His book is called *The Conference of the Birds*. In this instance he treats birds as a community. Birds from different parts of the world come together to ask of themselves two questions. First of all, what does it mean to think of oneself as a bird? In other words, what is 'birdness'? Secondly, if that 'birdness' makes any sense, what is it that is shared? How can one identify what is shared?

There are many birds who argue that they are content with who they are. They know their single identity that one is a parrot or an ostrich or a peacock. They feel comfortable with and are reluctant to engage in this talk about common shared 'birdness'. Many of those birds leave the debate and the conference, and are happy to go back and preach to their own flock about the special characteristics they have. But some birds remained committed and they embark on a journey to find answers to their dilemma. This journey is described by Farid al-Din 'Attar in *The Conference of the Birds* as a quest through seven valleys and over seven mountains. During each stage of the journey they deconstruct part of their limited experience and leave it behind. As they move on they strengthen their shared bond. But they don't get a straight forward answer to what it is they are seeking. Eventually, when they arrive at what they think is their final destination, they are led in through a door beyond which they think that some being exists who will give them the answer. They wait for a very long time and nobody comes. They don't receive an answer and they realise that nobody's going to come. So they sit in the room in which they are and they reflect on their experiences. As they reflect, they become conscious of now as plurality, they have also discovered their shared humanity and learned to live it and recognise it as a common spiritual bond as well as origin.

Thirty of them had survived. The Persian word for thirty is *sih* and birds are called *murgh*. So, they see themselves as the *simurgh*, the thirty birds. In their original conversations, they had been told that the being who was their origin and would provide them the answer was a mythical bird called the *simurgh*. And so, as they reflect on their experiences and their commonality, they realise that the Being is within them; they are the *simurgh*. Perhaps out of our common quest and common conversation will emerge a vocabulary that will enable us to fight the intolerance of our times.

Thank you.