

ISLAM CONTRIBUTION TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND RIGHTS

Islam provides many verses revealing veracious precepts, relating to the unity and the universality of the message of God, relating to harmony, tolerance and moderation.

Islam preaches the good and condemns the evil.

The human beings constitute a single and same community and everyone is equal.

Within this community, piety is characterized by acts of kindness and utility towards other people.

Islam was born, one thousand five hundred years ago in Arabian deserts' sands.

This religion was revealed to prophet Mohammed.

Islam was revealed among the Bedouins people who were very few compared to the people among whom it was spread.

It spread over a whole part of our planet within very little time, from scraps it built up a civilization, thousands of cities, it inspired many poets, historians, philosophers, scientists and theologians as many thinkers as the Occident produced.

This civilization - Islamism with its historical terminology and not the mystic one was fought, politically, ideologically and militarily by the Christian powers since the Crusades. These same powers shared part of its territory, in Asia and Africa, during the colonial conquests of the XIXe century, finalized in 1920 by the treaty of Sevres which crowned the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire.

This diplomatic dismemberment had in fact begun one century earlier, but when the treaty of Sevres was signed - after thousand years of Turkish domination - the Arabs, who were about to recover their independence, fell into the new chains set on them by the economic and oil interests of British and French, their new Masters.

Arabism, which brooded under ash since the end of the XIXe century emerged during that time. Initially, it was fought with strength by the Westerners, who put in place, some obedient sovereigns and dynasties in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Arabia and Egypt.

Shortly after the Second World war, the arabo-Muslim world exploded.

The fake sovereigns were almost eliminated, and new leaders came to power as opponent to the westerners and they claimed new political ideologies like Bass socialism in Syria and Nasserism in Egypt.

During that time, the Muslim Brothers developed their religious militancy, for the greatest happiness of the Western "democracies" which could justify their neocolonialism (and their oil appetite) by the urgent need to fight these new "devils".

In fact, Islam has never been Occident's enemy.

On the contrary : over centuries Islam has rather been the victim, as soon as sordid economic and feudal interests led the European knights to carry death and desolation to Syria-Palestine, during the Crusades, on the pretence that they would set the holy Places free.

Then please, dear readers, put aside your prejudices and your preconceived ideas.

Please stop despising that nearly two billion human beings community led by the Holy Koran whose fundamental morals is the same one as the Gospels'.

The genuine Christians from the Middle Ages were named François d' Assise, Thomas d'Aquin, Montaigne or Montesquieu and not Pierre l'Ermite, Godefroy de Bouillon or Simon de Montfort, and the same goes for Muslims.

Islam is, today, the faith of more than two billion people of different social, cultural and economics backgrounds in all parts of the world, and their numbers are continuing to grow.

As a religion, and a way of life, Islam, is, and has been for centuries, a major part of human history, and has adapted to new ideas, different ways of life and cultures.

It has contributed greatly to the world's civilization and knowledge, and has demonstrated its ability to leave in peace in a pluralistic world.

It is, therefore, a distortion of history to consider it as monolithic, intransigent, and ill adapted to change, or as hermetically sealed and antagonistic to pluralism.

This is erroneous, and fails to recognize both the history of Islam, and its true role in the contribution of the modern world.

Many liberal historians, scientists, philosophers and politicians have recognized that Islam has been from its inception, and throughout history, a formidable driving force for the promotion of human learning and culture, and has taught the importance of tolerance and respect for the cultures and faiths of others.

This was a new approach when it was first expounded in the Holy Koran, and was insisted upon as a fundamental principle of Islam.

Throughout the period of the remarkable spread of Islam to various parts of the world, and during the years of the great Muslim empire, when it exerted political power, it embraced people of many different races, ethnics, cultures and faiths, and so developed multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural characteristics.

Since, at the height of its political power, the Muslim world had the ability to integrate different cultures and ways of life, it became the place where thinkers, scientists and philosophers could meet and exchange ideas.

It provided a favorable environment for the development of science, philosophy, literature, music and art.

Islam world produce a huge philosophers and thinkers like Al-Khwarizmi (Central Asia 8e century), Al-Fraganus (Ahmad Fergani - 9e century), Alpetragius (Al-Butragi), Al Geber (Ibn Hayan Jabir), Albumasar (Abu-Mashar Balkhi), Avicenna (Ibn Sina), Al-Biruni, Al Hazen (Al-Haytham), Al Gazel(Ghazali), Averroes (Ibn Rushd), Abu Bacer (Abou Bakr Ibn Toufayl)...

Islam was never hostile to those who rediscovered, and propagated, the works of the ancient Greek philosophers, and it never punished astronomers, physicians and mathematicians who ventured to produce completely new theories and ideas relating the world.

According to Muslims, religious tolerance is their gift to humankind.

All prophets and theirs followers are members of one brotherhood.

« This community of yours is a single brotherhood, and I am the Sustainer of you all » (K.21 :92)

The basic message of all prophets was to submit to God.

The Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon Him), therefore, did not restrict the world « Islam », to his own followers.

It was used freely of his Judeo-Christian predecessors, who were regarded as fellow-believers.

One of the most important concepts of Islam, and which incorporated other religions and race, was that of « *umma* » or community.

This disregarded all considerations of race, ethnic origin, class, or wealth, and allowed Islam to create a multi-racial, multi-cultural civilization, and to borrow, adapt and include important elements from them.

This concept enabled Muslims to facilitate the acceptance of « others », and to receive them. This is indispensable for people to live together in peace and harmony, and in a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-religious and pluralistic society.

And those reasons are also the key explaining the Islam's grow.

To judge correctly a religion as important and complex as Islam, it is necessary to distinguish between what are its true teachings, and the misinterpretations of some of its followers, and other commentators.

It is unwise to make a value judgment of a religion based solely on the interpretations of a small minority, who distort or deviate from the truth because of intolerance, ignorance or any others reasons.

Pluralism is defined as « *a condition of society in which numerous ethnic, religious or cultural groups co-exist within a nation. It also means that reality is made of many ultimate substances, and also the belief that no single explanatory system or view of reality can account for all the phenomena of life* ».

The most important requirements for living in peace and harmony in a pluralistic world, therefore, are tolerance, acceptance of differences in culture, and respect for the religious faiths of others.

Islam forbids intolerance towards other religions.

The obligation to respect earlier religions of the Book, and their prophets is one of the basic principles enunciated in the Holy Koran. « *O you who believe ! Believe in God, in his apostle, and his Book has sent down to his apostle. And in the Book he has sent afterwards.* » (K.4 :136)

It states that Islam, although a newly revealed religion, is not antagonistic to earlier monotheistic faiths, and on the contrary insists on their acceptance.

Islam asserts that it is a continuation of them, and opens the gates to the concept of the oneness of all humanity, as explained in the Holy Koran.

« He has sent down to you (Mohamed) the Book of truth, confirming the Scriptures which have preceded it. Hitherto He sent down the Torah and the Gospel for Mankind's guidance. » (K3.3)

The basic doctrine of Islam is that of the unity of God. The Holy Koran repeatedly emphasizes how all the prophets are in agreement on this.

« Say, We believe in God and in what has been sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob and his descendants and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. No distinction do we make between any one of them and to Him we are all resigned. » (K3.84)

These verses not only emphasize that respect for, and acceptance of, an earlier faith is mandatory for Muslims, but also assert the indissoluble link and continuity between

them. They affirm the tolerance of Islam towards other religions beyond any possible doubt.

It is clear that, according to the teaching of Islam, all those who believe in God, constitute a commonwealth of worshippers, with their own prophets, laws and rituals, and who respect each other's faiths and cultures. They form a common society, where each group has the right to develop as it chooses, in a democratic manner and in peaceful and pluralistic society.

The following verse of the Holy Koran underlines the essential principles of Islam, namely : the recognition of the pluralist nature of humanity, respect for its differences, and the importance of unity within diversity.

« To every people We have given a law and a ritual, and if God had so willed he would have made you all but one society. But it was His wish to test you by what He has given to each of you. Be emulous in good deeds. To God you shall all return and He will make you realize the evil of wrangling over what were mere variations in law and rituals »

The Holy Koran also insists on the concept of respectful, inter-faith dialogue : « And tell my servants that they should speak in the most kindly manner unto those who do not share their beliefs. »

The Koranic message does not exclude those who do not have a scripture, or do not believe in a supreme being. Religion is not regarded as an instrument for denigrating those who may be considered to be different or inferior, or for any other purposes.

The Prophet Mohamed (Peace be upon Him) was the first to apply the principles of tolerance and respect enshrined in the Holy Book of Muslims, by proposing that a social and political contract be drawn up with other social and religious communities of medina, in a pact of friendship mutual assistance, solidarity and respect.

It was the famous Constitution of Medina where, for the first time, a pluralistic society, under the guidance of a visionary leader, accepted the terms of a consensual political contract and agreement, based on the principles of unity, justice, peace and mutual support.

The contribution made by Islam to human dignity and a respect for human rights are enormous, when the first Caliph, Omar, took Jerusalem, the Commander of Faithful ordered :

« I grant them security of lives, their possessions, and their children, their churches, their crosses, and all that appertains to them in their integrity ; and to the lands, and to all their religion. Their churches therein shall not be impoverished, nor destroyed, nor injured from among them ; neither their endowments nor their dignity and not a thing (their property) ; neither shall the inhabitants be exposed to violence in following their religion ;nor shall one of them be injured. »

The history of the spread of Islam is less one of authoritative religious expansion than of a meeting of various cultures and civilizations. The Islamic world, which stretched from Spain to Samarqand and Delhi, was never monolithic, but multi-cultural and multi-ethnic, and united in an unshakeable belief in the oneness of God.

This world was characterized by the fervent faith of the majority of its population in Islam. Yet religious tolerance was essential to it. Jews and Christians were protected and respected as much in Moorish Spain as they were in Jerusalem.

In Cordoba, Toledo, Granada, and Istanbul synagogues and churches were treated with

respect, and defended by Muslims, just as Hindu and Sikh temples were by the Moguls rulers. Akbar, the great Mogul emperor, appointed Hindus to high office, and allowed them to continue to follow their religion.

Throughout history Muslims, Christians and Jews have co-existed and worked together in pluralistic societies, practicing tolerance and honoring universal values.

New philosophies were developed which reconciled faith with reason, and innovative studies were undertaken, in medicine, science and agriculture, while daily life was enhanced by the establishment of law and order and by flourishing developments in the fields of art and music. The debt owed to Muslims for the enormous contributions they made to social, political, educational, scientific and legal advances should be readily acknowledged.

The period of Muslim rule in Spain was an extremely tolerant one, and gave an impetus to spiritual, political and social conditions, and to a society, which was very pluralistic for its time. In contrast to the northern countries of Europe the Moors turned Al-Andalus into a magnificent centre of culture, commerce and beauty. Its capital Cordoba was the intellectual centre of Europe. Students from all Europe went there to study. The works of Plato, Aristotle and Euclid were all translated into Arabic. Enormous works in the fields of medicine, philosophy, geography, astronomy, chemistry and history were written.

Some of the greatest thinkers of all time worked there, and one of the finest of them all, **Averroes (Ibn Rushd Cordoba 1126 – Marrakech 1199)**, tried to reconcile the thought of Aristotle with that of Islam.

The greatest achievement of the Muslims in the world and particularly in Spain, and which played a decisive role in the Renaissance, was the restoration of the scientific spirit, and the determination to discover those laws that governed the phenomena of nature.

Moors helped in the development of modern civilization in this important respect. It was largely through the translation of the work of Averroes into Latin that Aristotle was rediscovered in the west. Translation of his work into Hebrew also made a lasting impact on Jewish philosophy.

Maimonides , another important philosopher was also a tremendous influence on the development of the scientific spirit and the philosophy of Judaism.

While Al-Andalus and Baghdad were under Islamic rules and law, it was a melting pot for other civilizations and cultures. Though there were local differences within the entity, they nevertheless remained conscious of belonging to the whole, which was in essence Arab and Muslims, but still retained the ability to innovate and explore...

Human dignity finds its major expression in the right of minorities to exercise both religious and other forms of expression, and when their needs are recognized and ensured.

For this reason there were no conflicts of identity, and why there was so little social tension under the Islamic rule of law.

Perhaps the highest tribute that can be paid to the period of Muslim rule in Spain was that it had the energy and ability to absorb, improve and innovate.

This passion for intellectual exercise and the search for exact knowledge was the unifying factor, and it was more widely diffused than was ever the case in Athens or Rome. Nowhere else were there such splendid libraries, such thriving schools and universities, and so many excellent writers. This fondness for intellectual discussion in a pluralistic setting is something that we can still applaud as a model from the past, and one that we should try to emulate in the future.

My main purpose, however, is not to make comparisons or to celebrate the meeting of different currents of Muslims thought and philosophy, and which had such splendid consequences. It is rather to show that there is much to be gained from the practice of tolerance, which is such a fundamental principle of Islam, and to show the importance that it can have in a pluralistic world.

I have already tried to show how Islam can assist in the creation of a pluralistic society. However it is still necessary to maintain some homogeneity in a faith that is practiced from across the Atlantic, across Europe and Africa, to South East Asia. This unity is not only spiritual, but is also economic and commercial.

Nor should we forget those distinguished scientists from Central Asia, who were Muslims, and who made such an enormous contribution to the development of science, mathematics, medicine and geometry.

The works of the great **Al Biruni (973-1048)**, from Afghanistan, were also taught in the universities in Cordoba and Toledo. He also studied Hindu philosophy and science, and passed on their work to the rest of the world.

Many historians regard **Ibn Sina (Avicenna Bukhara 980- Hamadan 1037)** as the most famous scientist in the Islamic world.

His massive fourteen volumes, « The Canon of Medicine », were the foundation for all modern medicine, and for seven centuries were the standard medical texts for medicine throughout Europe.

He is one of the earliest pioneers of the scientific process, and which is know today as « peer review ».

The heritage of toleration and plurality, that Muslim civilization left to us, should inspire us to face the social and political challenges of the present day with more equanimity. The immense task of modernizing some of our societies will require courage, vision and deep reflection.

And trying to impose or export freedom and democracy from western countries in not the solution.

Islam is fully award about democracy, tolerance and freedom.

The task of modernization is complex and cannot be met by an over simplification of the present situation. It serves no useful purpose to describe the Muslim world as a monolithic entity, in confrontation with the west.

Muslim countries are themselves faced with many challenges related to their historical, cultural, ethnic and social particularities, which affect their democratic and political development.

There are, for example, tremendous differences between the countries of Indonesia, Turkey, Kuwait and Mauritania.

It is essential to approach these problems with a sense of history, and especially that of the west. The Muslim world did not experience the same changes as those brought about by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, which ultimately led to modern western democracy.

While western countries needed more than two hundred years to develop democracy, through secularization, Muslim world has during these period, been invaded by western countries.

Most Muslim countries became colonies of western nations , and in consequence embarked on a long period of political and social stagnation, which hindered progress.

It requires an understanding of the political and social conditions of each nations, and a respect for individuals cultures, to establish a constructive and purposeful dialogue, before solutions can be found.

The world is divided not so much by religions and civilizations as it is by those who are intolerant, and those who are not.

Faith and culture do not always lead to combat.

It is sometimes ideas of progress and those of obscurantism that cause conflict.

Each religion has experienced internal division, (Catholics against protestants - Saint Bartholomew Night massacre) and when intolerance and obscurantism have prevailed then this has led to the oppression of those who disagree.

The real question is not which faith or way of life all will accept, but how to bring about a « single brotherhood » living in peace.

Only when there is mutual respect will a constructive dialogue among nations will this be possible.

As the guardians of the great achievements of faiths and cultures, all Muslims bear a great responsibility towards the generations still to come.

We should help to build bridges between communities and societies, we should work to gain mutual respect and trust, and do everything we can to remove misunderstanding and distrust.

The culture and way of life of each group can work in the interest of global peace, and can help to show that another culture is not a threat to our way of life.

When religion and culture are politicized they are demeaned and debased, and can no longer work in the preservation of peace.

If cultures were equated with the light and rays of the sun, we could witness a variety in their intensity, depending on the angle from which we face the light. However, despite the differences in intensity, it remains a source of illumination.

As one of the greatest Afghan philosophers and poets of the twelfth century, Balkhi-Runni wrote :

« The paths are many, but the goal is one. Do you not see how many roads, there are to the Kaaba ? For some the road starts from Rome, for others from Egypt, from Persia, or China, some come by sea from India and the Yemen.

If you are considering the differences infinite ; if you consider the goal, however, they are all in harmony and are one.

The hearts has one overriding attachment, a passionate love for the light, and there is no room for contradiction.

The attachment to the Kaaba cannot be called either « impiety or faith » ; it is mingled with the various paths we have mentioned.

Once the travelers arrive at the Kaaba, all-quarreling and vicious squabbling about the different paths, this person saying to that « You are wrong »,

« You are a blasphemer ! », and the other shouting back in kind – simply vanish ;

they realize that what they were fighting about was the road only, and that their goal was one. »

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