

“From *Al Tasamoh* to *Al Tafahom*”

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Scholars of *usul al fiqh* (the “roots” of doctrine/ jurisprudence) and Islamic theologians say “*La mushahah fi’l istilah*” (“All terminologies are incontestable”). By this they mean that words and outward forms are meaningless in themselves so there is no point in debating them, and that the actual meaning of a thing lies in its content and substance. Terminologies and styles may vary, but the important thing is the intended meaning.

Variations in terminology are usually found when a new school of thought is still in its infancy. Then later, after it has become an established part of the cultural scene and put down roots, it acquires a recognised set of terms and expressions which become generally accepted, with the result that differences in the form and manner in which it is presented become significantly narrowed and the focus of debate becomes centred on the essential concepts rather than the terminology in which they are couched.



Even so, it may be argued that this view of differences in terminology is not totally correct, since terms and expressions are a “diagnostic manifestation” of a particular concept when it occurs within a particular sphere of knowledge and a specific historical circumstance. Hence they tend to reflect different approaches to understanding, evaluating and judging concepts; this is exemplified *par excellence* in the words “tolerance” (*al tasamoh*) and “mutual understanding” (*al tafahom*).

The term “tolerance” first appeared in Europe in the 17th century during the religious conflict between the Protestants and Catholics which led to several major wars and clashes. And when this religious conflict paralysed that continent’s life in both the public and private spheres, “tolerance” (as understood by John Locke) came to be seen as the only appropriate and effective way of eradicating it from public life, thereby enabling adherents of the different religious sects to continue to follow their own respective creeds while co-existing with those whose beliefs differed from their own. By opting for “tolerance,” people with different ideas and beliefs were able to co-operate with each other in the public sphere while establishing relations with their co-religionists in other lands.

By modern times the “Age of Tolerance” had already become an established reality as far as Muslims were concerned. For them the Middle Ages had been a time in which numerous different theological and doctrinal schools of thought were engaged in extensive disputes, though these had gradually abated as their proponents turned their attention to other religious questions. However, the problems and issues thrown up by the modern age were such that it was difficult for Muslims to agree on a common approach to tackling them. Moreover, as was the case with other nations and cultures, challenges which began outside the nation’s borders showed a strong tendency to become internal conflicts – and escalating internal conflicts at that. Indeed, this was what happened when the Muslim world found itself having to confront the challenges of modernity; hence the need arose for a new kind of “tolerance” based on the well-known maxim: “We co-operate where we agree, while at the same time we grant each other latitude in those areas in which we



differ.” As an expression of this principle, some people preferred to use the word “*al tasahol*” (“indulgence” - or “leniency”) rather than “tolerance”. Consequently, towards the end of the 19th century Muslim intellectuals and thinkers generally adopted the term “*al tasahol*”, whether or not they were familiar with the history of European thought.

When *Al Tasamoh (Tolerance)* magazine first came out at the beginning of the 21st century, the name was chosen for two reasons: firstly, in recognition of the differences which exist between Muslims and the need to go beyond those differences and find an accommodation within the broad world of Islam; and, secondly, in view of the new relationship between Islam and other faiths – particularly the different sects and schools of the Abrahamic Tradition. Demonstrating its commitment to the message of its title, the magazine published articles and studies by Muslim and non-Muslim writers which reflected a broad range of intellectual opinion. In addition to this, after the annual symposium on *fiqh* (doctrine/jurisprudence) – a yearly event staged by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs along with its cultural season – it became *Al Tasamoh*’s practice to publish the texts of all the lectures that had taken place, regardless of the intellectual trends and religious schools they represented. In doing so, its intention was to highlight the need for an open-minded attitude to the different ideas generated by the changes taking place in the Sultanate, the Arab world and beyond, showing that is possible – nay essential – to see them as a source of benefit. At another level – that of Christian-Muslim dialogue – the magazine sought to play a role in establishing a new and more constructive relationship between the two great world faiths after centuries of discord and conflict.

Reflecting the Ministry’s policies, *Al Tasamoh* also co-operated with universities and churches and engaged in positive discussions on religious studies and the philosophy of religion with groups and individuals in the United States and Europe. The response was impressive; as well as providing fertile ground for discussion in Muslim circles, the magazine also helped change the way in which Christians view Islam and interact with Muslims.



As a decade has now passed since we first went into print, we have decided to take a further step forward along the Qur’anic path of “*ta’aruf*” (“getting to know one’s fellow man”) by renaming our magazine *Al Tafahom* (*Mutual Understanding*). This change of name does not mean that there are no longer any disagreements between different religions and schools of thought. What it does mean is that we are seeking to create the proper mindset for dialogue and discussion with the aim of achieving mutual understanding, or at least agreeing on a set of common denominators. When the Holy Qur’an says: “**O mankind! We created you from a single male and female, and made you into nations and tribes in order that ye may know each other,**” (*Qur’an: Al Hujurat 13*), it is telling us that a Muslim’s piety and fear of his Creator should enable him to overcome any inclination he may have towards hostility and discord, so that he can respond in a positive way to the Qur’anic message of mutual understanding and “*ta’aruf*”. This is the approach enjoined by the Holy Qur’an and the Mission of the Prophet (PBUH). The Qur’an carries the message of the One Faith and calls for *Tawhid* (monotheism) - a belief in One God which it shares with the *millah* (way) of Abraham (PBUH), the Father of the Prophets. The Prophet himself (PBUH) called upon the polytheists to turn to the One God, just as he sought to highlight the common denominators of the One Faith which Muslims share with the “People of the Book” (i.e. the Christians and Jews) who believe in *Tawhid*. What was required of them and the followers of the Prophet was that they should comply with the demands implied by that principle: “Say: ‘**O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him; that we adopt not from among ourselves lords and patrons other than Allah.**’ If they then turn back, say: ‘**Bear witness that we [at least] are Muslims [bowing to Allah’s Will]**’” (*Qur’an: Aal ‘Imran, 64*).

There are People of the Book who enjoy the blessings of Guidance and Light just as we do. And there are the “common terms” which form the essential basis of Guidance, Light and the common denominator which calls for mutual understanding on the principle of worship of the One God. And there is the principle of equality before Allah and mankind which allows for no vain triumphalism in matters of faith and relationships



between individuals and communities. If others should insist on disagreeing with us, we will not quarrel with them; rather, we shall point out that we will continue to follow the path of Islam – the One Faith which must inevitably bring us all together sooner or later.

In response to his teacher Habermas’s call for interaction through dialogue, the modern German thinker Axel Honeth said: “That cannot be a goal in itself, because it would become dialogue for the sake of dialogue. We need to go beyond that - to mutual understanding or reciprocal recognition. That is to say, the goal of dialogue should be mutual understanding on a set of common denominators.”

In choosing “Mutual Understanding” as its title, *Al Tafahom* magazine seeks to go beyond its predecessor’s objectives and identify the “goals behind the dialogue”. To achieve this, its aim is to expand and deepen its discussions as it intensifies its efforts to reach the goal (whether it is a distant one or easily attainable) of a broad mutual understanding among ourselves and with the wider world.

And success is from Allah