



FROM *TASAMOH* (TOLERANCE) TO *TAFAHOM* (MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING) A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Evolution, development, progress and growth are facts of life; this is just as true of the mind as it is of the body. Similarly, there is no difference between the evolution of prophethood and Divine Revelation and the evolution of the human intellect. Revelation has progressed from stage to stage, prophethood has evolved from prophet to prophet and human perception has advanced from the physical senses to the intellect and from direct experience to deductive reasoning.

The process of conceptual development from *tasamoh* (tolerance) to *tafahom* (mutual understanding) is a natural one; “tolerance” represents the act of knocking at the door, while “mutual understanding” is the act of entering the house. “Tolerance” is a beginning and “mutual understanding” is an end; “tolerance” is a means, while “mutual understanding” is a goal. “Tolerance” points the way, while “mutual understanding” comprises the inner substance.

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Concepts evolve through trial and error after they have been tested against the reality of the world around us. A concept is not just an abstract idea in a vacuum but a product of the “demands of reality” that evolves and changes just as the demands evolve. Reality is inseparable from the time in which it occurs and a concept is an ideational representation of it. Or, to put it another way, a concept exists “in tandem with” experience even if it may appear to be independent of it, and it follows on from it even if it may appear to precede it.

Despite all this, however, the relationship between concept and experience is not necessarily an “automatic” or “mechanical” one, since intuition is also a determining factor where both these elements are concerned. Experience is a product of the senses, perceptions and vision (initially, at least, though not in the final analysis), while a concept is an idea derived from experience without being an exact replica of it. This enables it to play a creative role in a wide range of disciplines including the natural sciences, humanities and mathematics.

The terms *tasamoh* (tolerance) and *tafahom* (mutual understanding) – both of which refer to reciprocal rather than unilateral actions – do not occur in the Holy Qur’an or the Sunnah of the Prophet, but are modern Western imports which have their roots in specific historical circumstances. “Tolerance” originates from the time of the religious wars between the Protestants and Catholics and the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre of the Protestants by the Catholics in 1572, while “mutual understanding” dates from the rise of Western rationalism.

Even so, if we consider these words from the point of view of their actual meaning rather than as mere lexical items, we will find that they do indeed exist in the Book and the Sunnah, though they are expressed in other terms such as *‘afuw* (forgiveness), *ukhuwwah* (brotherliness), *fadl* (magnanimity), *ihsan* (benevolence), *husna* (kindness), *ta’awun* (co-operation), *ulfah* (affection), *mahabbah* (love), *dhimmah* (protection), *nusrah* (support), *shura* (consultation), *jidat* (discussion), *hiwar* (dialogue), *‘adl* (equity), *qist* (fairness), *hadith* (discourse), *haqq* (right), *hukm* (judgement), *da’wah* (invitation), *hikmah* (judiciousness), *ra’fah*

(compassion), *rahmah* (mercy), *shukr* (gratitude), *safh* (forgiveness), *nasihah* (counsel), *'ahd* (commitment), *qurba* (affinity), *kalimat sawa* (common terms) and *amanah* (trustworthiness). They are also implied through negative qualities such as *ikhtilaf* (disagreement), *shiqaaq* (discord), *'adawah* (enmity), *'udwan* (aggression), *ikhraj* (expulsion), *dhulm* (injustice), *tughyan* (tyranny), *taghut* (false deity), *naqd al 'ahd* (betrayal), *ghurur* (arrogance), *ghaflah* (negligence), *khiyanah* (treachery), *kidhb* (lying), *kayd* (plotting) and *laghuw* (nonsense/error).

Each of these qualities can be related to either tolerance or mutual understanding. Some, like forgiveness, affection and love, have connotations that are closer to tolerance, while dialogue, discussion and consultation are closer in their connotations to mutual understanding. The Holy Qur'an also contains concepts that are the opposite of tolerance and mutual understanding; these are also relevant, since a positive can only exist if there is a negative and negation is a step towards affirmation.

“Tolerance” implies “discovery of that which is different,” “departure from the circle of selfishness, narcissism and self-love,” and “inclusiveness of the ‘other,’ the wider world other people and the broader cosmos.” The “other” is the “twin brother” of the self, and “one” becomes “two” after it has given birth to another “one” (as happened with Adam and Eve). That is why some ancient peoples adopted dualism – or duality – as a philosophy or rational creed in response to the concept of oneness – or unity.

Tolerance is the “opening up of the self to the other,” enabling it to discover its “natural associate,” which does not necessarily have to be the Devil. Indeed, that is the function of faith. A Believer’s relationship with Allah is a representation of the self’s relationship with the “other” – or the “I” with the “not-I”. The self is not essentially a closed entity – closed upon itself; if this were the case, it would be empty, a vacuum. In phenomenological terms, “every feeling is a feeling of *something*”; moreover, that “something” is a “different other,” which is not necessarily a “natural thing”.

It is at this point that dialogue begins, since dialogue requires the participation of two parties – the self and the other. Hence the Greco-Latin



term *dialogos* (or dialogue) means a *dual discourse*, not a discourse with the self, which would be a *monologue*. Dialogue with the self or *hadith al nafs* – a Sufi practice – is called *munajat* (soliloquy), whereas dialogue with the “other” is *tafahom*, or mutual understanding – a process of give and take, “transmitting” and “receiving”.

“Tolerance” includes the implication of “mutual understanding”. If this were not the case, it would be no more than a temporary manoeuvre designed to dilute hostility to the “different other” and conceal a covert conflict between two “closed selves,” each of which refuses to recognize that the other self is a part of itself (and that it is a part of the other self), like two sides of the same coin. Tolerance is the outward expression of mutual understanding and mutual understanding represents the theoretical essence of tolerance.

Before it can bear fruit, tolerance needs to fulfil certain prior conditions. Tolerance towards oneself must necessarily precede tolerance towards others. Tolerance is a “self-oriented” value; thus tolerance with oneself is only possible if one is able to understand oneself, know the limits of the self’s rapacity and congeniality and overlook its shortcomings; this has been the practice of the ascetics, mystics and Sufis as they seek to draw nearer to Allah and restrain the *nafs* (self/lower soul) from *hawa* (vulgar passions).

The idea of impeding the *nafs* is a misinterpretation of the Hadith: “Your worst enemy is your *nafs* which is between your flanks.” Scholars and Sufis have written disparagingly about *hawa* in the strongest terms, but *hawa* is not the same as the *nafs*. *Hawa* is a component of the *nafs*, but it is not the *nafs* in its entirety, since the *nafs* also contains the potential for goodness, tolerance and forgiveness, as well as consideration for others and a readiness to sacrifice oneself on behalf of other people.

The preconditions of tolerance include avoiding suspicion – “for suspicion in some cases is a sin”. Suspicion entails doubt and doubt arouses fears which are an obstacle to tolerance. For how can a person live in a world of doubts, suspicions and fears in which it is impossible to trust anybody? Absolute certainty about oneself and absolute suspicion of the

rest of creation generates inflexibility, intolerance, narrow-mindedness and a refusal to engage in dialogue, interact or co-operate with other people at any level. For how can it be possible for truth to co-operate with falsehood, certainty with suspicion, good with evil and right with wrong. When you have two opposites that are incapable of meeting, tolerance can have no psychological structure; instead, you will have “absolute truth” on the one side and “absolute falsehood” on the other.

Even if tolerance should succeed in recognizing the rights of others to the same extent that it recognizes the rights of the self, the problem of practical implementation will still remain. Calls for tolerance are usually at their loudest when two religious, tribal or ethnic groups become involved in unfortunate incidents which lead to bloodshed – such as occurred after the Christmas bombing of the Saints’ Church in Alexandria, the Nag Hammadi massacre and the attack on the train in Upper Egypt. These were followed by widespread condemnation of extremism and fanaticism and a reaffirmation of Muslim-Christian unity, accompanied by reminders that Muslims and Christians have always lived together in peace and harmony since the early days of Islam. It was noted that Islam had been welcomed by the Copts of Egypt and that both communities had taken part in the national revolutions and worked together side by side for the sake of their country’s progress and development.

However, after the crisis was over, all these warm words failed to produce positive action, nor did the message of tolerance put out by the press, radio and television lead to any change in the social reality that had caused the outbreaks of inter-communal violence. Instead, “tolerance” showed itself to be no more than a media phenomenon aimed at improving the country’s self-image at home and abroad. Meanwhile, the leaders of the two faiths met and exchanged messages of goodwill – either in the churches at Christmas and Easter or at fast-breaking time during the month of Ramadan.

Tolerance succeeds when its conditions are met and when the causes of religious fanaticism or racial prejudice are eradicated and replaced by national harmony – a harmony which ensures that citizenship is recognized as the



common denominator uniting all the people of the nation and that the state treats all its citizens equally, regardless of their race or religious affiliations.

Tolerance is an appeal from the heart, an aspiration of the soul and a goal of society and the state, and it cannot be achieved without a change in the social situation which caused its absence. This explains why there have been so many declarations and conferences, so many new magazines have been founded and books written about tolerance, yet all the time fanaticism and bigotry are still widespread. Religious, sectarian and racial conflicts continue to threaten the unity of nations. School curricula, satellite TV programmes and conservative religious cultures remain the same, as does their impact upon the relationship between the “I” and the “other”. Not surprisingly, therefore, communal incidents continue to occur from time to time, since the wellsprings of ill-feeling have not ceased to flow and the infrastructure has not changed.

Although tolerance is a general concept with no specific religious or philosophical character (neither historically nor today), its connotations have always been religious and associated with sectarian strife. This has reduced its impact upon societies seeking to move on from the stage in which religion plays a dominant role in public and private life to one in which the state and religion are separate entities and all citizens enjoy equal rights and obligations regardless of their religion or race.

The concept of tolerance is still associated terminologically – and in both the religious and philosophical senses – with Western culture. That is why its appeal has been so limited in Islamic countries. The circumstances which led to its emergence in the West – the wars between the Christian sects – are not the same as the ones being experienced by the Arab and Islamic world today. There have been no sectarian massacres between the different Islamic groups like the ones that happened in the West. The current incidents between Sunnis and Shias in Iraq are more political than religious, and the conflicts now taking place in Yemen, Somalia and Sudan are also political in nature.

Political conflict will not be resolved through tolerance, but through political change involving a transformation from sectarianism to

citizenship, from tribe to state and from ethnicity to human rights. There is no use in two sides having a bilateral dialogue if neither side is prepared to make any kind of compromise or change its position in any way. A dialogue of this kind is basically fruitless and does no more than – at best – provide temporary relief from the violence inflicted by each side upon the other. (That is to say, it acts as an anodyne rather than a cure.)

Only when the proper conditions exist for the two sides to live together in a pluralistic relationship at every level – religious, racial and national – will it be possible for them to genuinely accept and recognize (rather than merely tolerate) each other. True coexistence requires that all citizens without exception should enjoy equal political and social rights and obligations. An inter-sectarian coalition government on the Lebanese model is not enough. (There the Head of State is a Maronite, the Prime Minister is a Sunni and the Speaker of Parliament is a Shi'ite.) Such a system, which institutionalises sectarianism through a fair allocation of political posts, can sometimes be successful, though it is liable to lead to an explosive situation that can quickly escalate into civil war.

There is nothing new about appeals for tolerance. They are a familiar phenomenon, particularly when leaders of different groups find themselves talking to the media. Kisses and kind words are exchanged, as if they in themselves are enough to resolve inter-communal conflicts. Tolerance is pointless if it is merely an outward show of goodwill while the basic situation remains unchanged. Tolerance is something that must exist in deeds, not words. There needs to be fundamental social change so that there are no animosities between religious groups.

Mutual understanding is a “deeper” notion than tolerance and demands a greater degree of conceptual awareness. It requires an appreciation of the social conditions in which all the different groups live, as well as an understanding of the underlying causes of religious or racial strife. The first stage is “understanding”; this is the first step towards “mutual understanding,” which in turn is the key to comprehending why social violence takes place – a necessary precondition of any appeal for mutual tolerance.



Thought needs to precede action. Mutual understanding is the key to tackling inter-communal strife and entails an objective analysis of its causes. This is a job for the social scientists, not the speechmakers, preachers, missionaries and clerics with their calls for tolerance. Mutual understanding is derived from the intellect and knowledge, while tolerance comes from the heart and the emotions. Mutual understanding is an existential recognition of the “different other” and leads to an effort to understand the other’s situation before reaching a state of empathy with it. Mutual understanding requires a recognition of difference before arriving at a declaration of unity – a recognition of the right to differ before an attempt is made to reduce that difference. Mutual understanding involves recognizing individual characteristics before trying to establish common ground within a general system shared by all the parties concerned. If social differences create division, intellect-driven mutual understanding produces unity. Mutual understanding does not deny the existence of the other, but affirms it, since two distinct, differing parties have to exist before mutual understanding can take place between them.

While tolerance is an appeal for the “other” to be socially accepted, even if it continues to be psychologically and intellectually rejected, mutual understanding has no “outward” and “inward” aspects – an “outward” one calling for tolerance and an “inward” one in which difference is still deeply ingrained. Mutual understanding is a single, straightforward discourse, not a double one, and it requires no manoeuvring or subterfuge.

The term “mutual understanding” indicates a willingness to understand without rejecting, and a readiness to change one’s position rather than sticking doggedly to it and reinforcing it. First and foremost, mutual understanding takes place with the *nafs* and seeks to rescue the *nafs* from *hawa*, distractions and short-term interests: “The Day whereon neither wealth nor sons will avail, but only he [will prosper] who brings to Allah a sound heart.” It is when the *nafs* is unsullied that the “different other” becomes manifest, and it is then that dialogue takes place with it. This is what Ricoeur calls “*le soi comme un autre*” – “the ‘I’ as an ‘other’” – in which the “I” and the “other” are equal in principle, and when affirmation of the “I” is an affirmation of the “other” and affirmation of the “other” is also an affirmation of the “I”.



Mutual understanding may also be considered as a “historical psychological accumulation” – that is, a legacy from generation after generation of evolution and development – that defines a person’s or a community’s vision and behaviour. Peoples who still maintain strong links with their past find this is an obstacle to mutual understanding, particularly since memory is selective. If the present is happy, the memory is not prompted to recall past times of mutual understanding and coexistence, while if it is sad, it only remembers the days of communal strife in order to justify what is happening in the here and now; in doing so, it conveniently chooses to forget Andalusia’s Golden Age of communal harmony, when different cultures exchanged the best they had to offer and there was a genuine dialogue between the civilizations, or the Madinah Charter when every sect and school lived in a single community that recognized the right to hold different views – an age of diversity in unity and unity in diversity.

Mutual understanding also means recognizing the realities of the present day without engaging in hostile confrontation on ideological grounds. Present-day reality is the result of an accumulation of past events and influences – positive as well as negative – comprising people’s day-to-day lives and experiences, both sad and happy. Mutual understanding within the context of the present day demands a recognition and acceptance of reality so that it can be improved upon. It does not entail ignoring inconvenient truths; on the contrary, it strips the truth bare of its garments.

Recognition of the truth is a virtue. While tolerance may consist solely of alleviating present-day religious, racial and national conflicts, mutual understanding looks ahead to the future and sets out a vision of how communities should live together in the years to come. Its aim is to galvanise reality and guide it along a “historical path” towards a common goal of peaceful coexistence that serves the interests of the whole of mankind.

Mutual understanding is the opposite of religious or political isolationism and inflexibility, whether dogmatic or ideological, and demands a return to that innocence and clarity of intellect referred to by the philosophers.



The Holy Qur'an tells the story of a man who had ninety-nine ewes, while his brother had only one, and it shows that at that brother's request an intuitive intellectual position was taken. Elsewhere in the Qur'an, Allah heard a woman's discussion with the Prophet (PBUH): "Allah has indeed heard [and accepted] the statement of the woman who pleads with thee concerning her husband and carries her complaint [in prayer] to Allah. And Allah always hears the arguments between both sides among you; for Allah hears and sees [all things]." Discussion (or dialogue or argument) requires a combination of intuition and a sound intellect: "He said to his companion in the course of a mutual argument: 'More wealth have I than you, and more honour and power in [my following of] men.'"

Faith is an intuitive quality, while unbelief is a form of blindness. Mutual understanding endorses differences, while seeking to achieve unity. Moreover, in accepting mankind as it is, it seeks to guide it towards a single common goal.

Where either tolerance and mutual understanding are concerned, one might ask the following three questions: "Tolerance or mutual understanding with whom? And about what? And in what way?" In neither case is it sufficient merely to repeat well-known arguments and facts from the Islamic heritage about the dialogues that took place between the different Islamic schools or between the theologians and Caliphs in their *diwans*, because those times belong to the past, whether we look back on them with pride or nostalgia, or quote them to show how intellectuals and Sufis were persecuted in those days; there are numerous instances of the latter, from al Ja'd bin Dirham, al Hallaj and Ibn Rushd in the more distant past to Sayyid Qutb and Shahdi Atiyah in recent times. The past can offer numerous examples of tolerance as well as bigotry, not to mention both mutual understanding and a complete lack of any such thing.

Nor is it sufficient to cite – or pick and choose – from Western or Eastern sources (usually Western sources, since the West is geographically closer to the Arab world; moreover, we have had political and cultural links with it for over two hundred years). If we have pro-Western views we will cite examples of dialogue, mutual understanding, freedom of expression

and a willingness to countenance other opinions – either as established Western practices or as concepts promoted by Western thinkers such as Martin Buber (in *Dialogisches Leben*), Emmanuel Levinas and Gabriel Marcel. On the other hand, if we are anti-Western we will point to the many religious conflicts in the West beginning from the time of Christianity’s founding fathers – such as Arius and the Arians (who the Prophet was probably referring to in his letter to Heraclius; “you bear the sin of [persecuting] the Arians”) – and through the Middle Ages (Abelard, Siger of Brabant etc.) to more recent centuries (Spinoza, the Freethinkers and the Young Hegelians).

In the Arab Islamic context we can consider the question of confrontation or mutual understanding in the light of the relationships between political ideas and ideological trends such as Salafism and secularism, fundamentalism and modernism – or indeed the relationship between individual thinkers regardless of whether they are Islamists or secularists. We can examine their impacts on people’s daily lives and identify precisely the historical period when bigotry gave way to tolerance, confrontation was replaced by mutual understanding, and “*al Firqa al Najiyah*” (the “Group destined for Salvation”) and the imposition of a single view and a single path was transformed into an intellectual and creedal pluralism accepted by all. (“For the one who is wrong there is one reward and for the one who is right there are two rewards.”)

Let us go back to the first question – “Mutual understanding with whom?” There are two types of mutual understanding – “internal” and “external”. By “internal” we mean applying it to all the intellectual, ideological and political trends in the national culture including the Islamic and secularist movements. As an integral part of the popular and cultural heritage with a long history and roots in the Book and the Sunnah, the Islamic movement is a movement with huge numbers of followers throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds which calls for the implementation of Shariah law. Although the people, who are tired of unjust laws and despotic regimes, regard the Shariah of Islam as fair, just and equitable, the Islamic movement does not know quite what it wants to achieve, with the result that its focus is on slogans and the outward and visible signs of



worship rather than on issues of substance and the people's actual needs – i.e. freedom, justice and equality.

The main focus of dialogue with the secularist movement (which is drawn from the elite class of society) is on socialism, liberalism or nationalism. National liberalism was the dominant trend before the latest Arab revolutions, with national socialism coming a close second. Now it is the turn of “comprador” liberalism, which has closer ties with international capitalism than it does with national liberalism. The secularist movement knows what its goals are (i.e. freedom, democracy, political pluralism and social justice), but it does not know how to achieve them. Consequently, it has resorted to the Western ideologies of liberalism, socialism and nationalism.

The function of mutual understanding, therefore, is to establish a third way which knows what it wants (like the secularist movement) and how to get there (like the Islamic movement).

By “external” mutual understanding we mean mutual understanding with both East and West rather than with just the West (unlike previously, when the focus was overwhelmingly on Western culture and models). These days the level of “misunderstanding” between us and the West may best be characterised as confrontation and alienation, or even open hostility. The main reason for this is the stereotypical images each side has of the other as a result of academic Orientalism, evangelisation, imperialism and cultural arrogance. The West has developed a superiority complex towards other cultures, while from our side we suffer from an inferiority complex towards the West, and currently the relationship between us is one of the “centre” with the “fringes, in which the “centre” creates and originates, while the “fringes” copy, interpret, expound and digest what the “centre” says and embrace its culture with open arms.

The West has coined various anthropological terms to express the contrast between what it regards as its own “logical deductive mind” and the “magic, myth-oriented mind” found in other cultures (and in order to compare its own progressiveness with non-Western backwardness). However, despite its assumption of superiority, one manifestation of



Western civilization was Nazism, while the “Roman Empire” mentality is deeply rooted in the West’s psyche and a “psychological affiliation” with Judaism is buried in the Western subconscious.

In reality, civilizations follow a cyclical pattern in which they start from nothing before rising to a pinnacle of achievement, after which they decline and fall. This was the case with the civilizations of the past such as China, India, Babylon, Assyria and Canaan, as well as Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. It is probable that this will be the fate of the modern West which began its rise over five hundred years ago and is now showing signs of break-up and collapse; this thesis has been put forward in numerous works of literature such as Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, Lukacs’s *Destruction of Reason* and Husserl’s *Crisis of the European Sciences*.

In recent decades the “misunderstanding” between us and the West has intensified and the West has begun to link Islam with terrorism. Islamophobia, or fear of Islam, is growing, although it was Islam that built the civilization of Andalusia and produced seminal works on mathematics and the natural sciences that were translated into Latin and contributed significantly to modern Europe’s Renaissance. The spread of Islam in Europe – through Arab and Muslim immigrants and European converts – is a positive phenomenon and today it is Europe’s second religion after Christianity. The West needs new blood to help it overcome its crises and enable its civilization to begin a new cycle, and Islam could well provide that blood. In any case, Islam is not an alien culture where Europe is concerned, but an integral part of it, while Europe has been an integral part of Islamic culture since the early Muslims translated books from the Greek; indeed, this relationship lasted till the “Second Translation Age” some two hundred years ago and it has continued in one form or another up to the present day.

As I mentioned above, the term “external” mutual understanding also applies to the relationship between Islam and the East, particularly since Islam began to spread eastward into Central Asia during the time of the Fourth Caliph. There are strong Persian and Indian elements in early Islamic culture - e.g. Miskawayh’s *Al Hikmah al Khalidah (Eternal*



Wisdom) and al Biruni's *Tahqiq ma lil Hind min Maqulah Maqbulah fi 'Aql aw Mardhulah (Al Biruni's India)*. In his illuminist philosophy and *Mantiq al Mashriqiyyin (Logic of the Orientals)* Ibn Sina tried to combine Eastern and Western wisdom.

Today dialogue with the East is vital in view of the resurgence of the East – particularly China, Japan and Korea – and the eastward shift in civilization's centre of gravity, as Anwar Abdul Malik points out in his book *Rih al Sharq (The East Wind)*; the same theme can be seen in Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilization in China*. Even so, we are still modelling ourselves on the West and turning to them for our defence, our development and our culture, despite the fact that mutual understanding may well be easier to achieve with the East than it is with the West. Confucianism is closer to the ethical teachings of Islam and it is quite possible that Confucius was a prophet sent to carry the Divine Message to China: “And there never was a people without a warner having lived among them.” It is of no importance that he is not referred to in the Holy Qur'an, since the Qur'an only tells us the stories of the prophets of the Children of Israel who were familiar to the people of the Arabian Peninsula: “There are some whose story We have related to thee, and some whose story We have not related to thee.” Buddhism could also be closer to the spirit of Islam in such matters as asceticism and restraining the lower passions. In fact, some scholars regard Islamic Sufism as being Indian in origin.

So we should not limit our dealings with China, India and Korea to the economic – and possibly military – spheres. Our mutual understanding with them ought to encompass the realms of culture, ethics and values, rather than mere reciprocal interests. China has become the main investor in Africa, the East is nearer to the Gulf than the West is, and the eastern end of the Arab world extends further towards the East than it does to the West.

There is also mutual understanding between North and South, just as there is between East and West. Africa is the richest continent on the globe in terms of natural resources and the western end of the Arab world is in North Africa. The Nile – the world's longest river – passes through Egypt and

Sudan. Islam was spread peacefully in Africa by the Sufi *tariqas* when it was at its weakest and today it is just as well established there as it is in Asia.

Now let us go back to the second question – “About what?” The mutual understanding or dialogue referred to by the question would not be about purely theoretical issues, despite the importance of theoretical propositions, since if it were we would be left with a kind of mutual understanding devoid of substance. The dialogue should be about the present state of the Arab nation and the Islamic world and the main challenges they face such as the liberation of the Occupied Territories in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan; the liberation of their peoples from every form of social, political and cultural oppression; social justice, in view of the huge gap between rich and poor; the unity of the *Ummah* (Islamic Nation) and the dangers of disintegration along racial and sectarian lines as is currently happening in Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen and – perhaps in future – in the Arab Maghreb; self-sufficiency and nationally generated development to ensure that Arabs and Muslims have no need to import their food and weapons from abroad; protecting the national identity against the dangers of Westernisation in public and private life (language, customs, dress, architecture, education and outlook); and, finally, mobilising the people to promote the *Ummah’s* interests at home and abroad.

Mutual understanding is not just something that occurs between two sides or two cultures. As the world as a whole is a party to it, it can also take place between a culture and its context or between people and their environment. Topics within this category in a global context include the New World Order, globalisation, the unipolar world, the global economic crisis, the information revolution and the knowledge society.

When considering topics for mutual understanding the most important thing is: Who is setting the agenda? The Western agenda includes topics such as women, minorities, human rights, pluralism, democracy, globalisation and the clash of civilizations – that is to say, it expresses the West’s priorities and reflects the other side’s weakness (in view of the fact that the other side is suffering from severe crises in these areas).



We should also be aiming for an agenda that reflects our historical relationship with the West and covers such areas as domination, hegemony, power and control, imperialism, arrogance, the superiority complex, the Eastern sources of European knowledge, the future direction of Europe's knowledge and understanding, cultural interaction, the centre and the fringes, transfer and creativity, historical cycles etc.. What is needed is a common agenda for mutual understanding that is not set solely by the stronger side and acquiesced in by the weaker side without the opportunity to discuss it or propose alternative options.

Going back to the third question – “How (and under what conditions can mutual understanding be achieved)?” – we should note that mutual understanding is not a static state existing between two stagnant parties, but a dynamic process between the past, present and future. Each party to it is a product of its education and upbringing and the stereotypical images it receives of itself and the “different other”. In Egypt, for example, Copts and Muslims are taught religion separately in the schools, where Copts learn the basics of Christianity and Muslims learn the basics of Islam. This encourages a feeling of “difference” at the expense of a common sense of citizenship. It should be possible for Muslims and Copts to be given lessons together about the values shared by the two religions such as love, piety, faith, brotherhood and co-operation, because morality lies at the heart of religion. Despite this, Muslims are brought up with the idea that the other side – the Christians – are idolaters or Unbelievers who believe in a multiplicity of gods and the Crucifixion, neither of which are compatible with Muslim beliefs. Meanwhile, from their side Christians are taught from childhood that Islam is a Judaeo-Christian sect that originated in the Arabian Peninsula, that Muhammad (PBUH) did not receive revelation from Allah and that his ideas were taken from Judaism and Christianity – i.e. from the faiths that were around during that time. When a Christian child grows up, he continues to retain that stereotypical image put out by the media, Orientalists, sociologists and anthropologists about the other side's propensity for violence, its inflexibility and its refusal to engage in dialogue, as well as its obstinate insistence on maintaining an identity that is at odds with general global trends – including such features as the *hijab*, the *niqab*



and minarets, as well as its reactions to the Danish cartoons and offensive novels and newspaper articles about the life of the Messenger.

Therefore there is a need for mutual understanding so that a start can be made in breaking down prejudices.

From our side - as Muslims - children learn lessons at school about how the other side are Unbelievers and idolaters. As they grow up, they learn how Western civilization is materialist, secular, atheistic, nihilistic and depraved and, on the basis of that stereotype, they see it as despicable. They are unaware of its intellectual achievements, its declarations of human rights and its citizens' charters, its respect for the values of freedom, democracy and the concept of equal rights and obligations for all citizens, and its adherence to the rule of law and the constitution. Instead, they put the whole of the West into one basket, making no distinction between the imperialist West and the anti-imperialist West, which supports the peoples' independence movements and their struggles for freedom.

Mutual understanding is not the final goal, but a means of coexistence and co-operation aimed at enabling peoples to realise their aspirations towards freedom and justice (in our case) and new values (in the case of the West). It is a means of establishing common ground between two sides and enabling them to judge truths and falsehoods by applying a common yardstick instead of double standards: **“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 take not, from among ourselves, lords other than Allah.”**

Mutual understanding can only be achieved within a framework of a general national renaissance in which one of the fundamental principles is entente with other parties. Mutual understanding is not merely the fulfilment of an obligation; most appeals for it come from the other side, which also funds it. To be serious, mutual understanding needs to express the “rebirth” of a party that is trying to remove obstacles to its progress that are caused by the other party's failure to understand the nature of its rebirth, so that there can be co-operation between the two sides. If mutual understanding is unable to achieve a genuinely positive result, it can at



least take steps to prevent injustice, arrogance and rejection or contempt of the other side.

This phenomenological analysis of *tasamoh* (tolerance) and *tafahom* (mutual understanding) aims to identify the areas in which they coincide and differ. In doing so it seeks to examine the theories behind the two concepts as well as the way in which they are actually applied in the contemporary Arab and Islamic context. Such an undertaking demands intuition and shared experience, rather than an exclusive focus on pure theory. Although there may be a variety of different analyses, the only truly objective one must reflect the experiences of the greatest possible number of people.