



In Explanation Of Humility and The Need for Tolerance With Reference to Islam

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Prefatory Note

The following text is from a reply sent, in November of 2012, to a personal correspondent living in America who enquired about my peregrinations among various religions; about why - as mentioned in previous correspondence - I still respected the Muslim way of life; and about my response to the particular criticism that 'Islam encourages terrorism'. I have corrected a few typos, clarified the sense in one or two places, and added sub-headings.

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Of Learning Humility and Tolerance

As someone who has lived an unusual and somewhat itinerant (but far from unique) life, I have a certain practical experience, over nearly fifty years, of various living religions and spiritual Ways of Life. An experience from which I

have acquired the habit of respecting all those living religions and spiritual Ways: Christianity (especially Catholicism and monasticism); Buddhism; Islam; Taoism; Hinduism; Judaism; and the paganism manifest in an empathic appreciation of and a regard for Nature.

Due to this respect, there is a sadness within me because of the ignorance, intolerance, prejudice - and often the hatred - of the apparently increasing number of people, in modern Western societies, who disparage Islam, Muslims, and the Muslim way of life, and who thus seem to me to reflect and to display that hubris, that certitude-of-knowing, that lack of appreciation of the numinous, that at least in my fallible opinion and from my experience militates against the learning, the culture, the civility, that make us more than, or can make us more than, talking beings in thrall to their instincts who happen to walk upright.

My personal practical experience of, for example, Christianity, is of being raised a Catholic, and being a Catholic monk. Of Buddhism, of spending several years meditating and striving to follow the Noble Eightfold Path, including in a Buddhist monastery and with groups of Buddhists. Of Islam, of a decade living as a Muslim, performing daily Namaz (including attending Jummah Namaz in a Mosque), fasting in Ramadan, and travelling in Muslim lands. Of Taoism, of experience - in the Far East - a Taoist Martial Art and learning from a Taoist priest. Of Hinduism, of learning - in the Far East - from a Hindu lady and of over a year on my return to England continuing my learning and undertaking daily practice of Hatha Yoga according to the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā*. Of paganism, of developing an empathic reverence and respect for Nature by time spent as a rural 'gentleman of the road', as a gardener, and by years doing outdoor manual labour on farms...

Following a personal tragedy which suffused me with sadness and remorse and which - via *pathei-mathos* - ended my life-long desire for and enjoyment of practical Faustian peregrinations, there arose a years-long period of intense interior reflexion, and which reflexion included not only discovering and knowing the moral error of my immoral extremist pasts but also questions concerning the nature of faith, of God, and our desire, in times of personal grief and tragedy and remorse, and otherwise, to seek and often to need the guidance, the catharsis, of a religion or a spiritual Way.

Importantly, as I wrote in *Pathei-Mathos, Genesis of My Unknowing*,

"...what exposed my hubris - what for me broke down that certitude-of-knowing which extremism breeds and re-presents - was not something I did; not something I achieved; not something related to my character, my nature, at all. Instead, it was a gift offered to me by

two others - the legacy left by their tragic early dying. That it took not one but two personal tragedies - some thirteen years apart - for me to accept and appreciate the gift of their love, their living, most surely reveals my failure, the hubris that for so long suffused me, and the strength and depth of my so lamentable extremism."

Forced by grief - by *pathei-mathos* - to admit my mistakes, the suffering I had because of my extremism and my selfishness caused, I discovered I did not like myself, my character, and felt I needed to reform myself. But how? Through the guidance and acceptance of a living religion or some spiritual Way of Life? By holding fast onto Islam? By returning to my Catholic roots, or to Buddhism or Taoism? Or by, and perhaps unhumly, trying to find some solutions of my own? Suffice to say it took me over five years [2006-2011], and culminated this year in my philosophy of *pathei-mathos*, my fallible answers to certain questions concerning morality, expiation, reformation, the numinous, and the nature of Being and of beings.

In the process, I came to appreciate humility; to admit its importance in trying to live a moral life where there is an appreciation of the numinous, a desire to be gentle, compassionate, to value love, and where there is the feeling that one needs to avoid causing suffering. To admit that we do not have or know all or even many of the answers; that we are fallible and thus that our own answers or conclusions or opinions may be wrong, and that we need therefore to be tolerant and respect the choice, the views, of others and the religions and the spiritual ways that offer and which have offered them answers to questions regarding meaning, morality, and love, and possibly also given them catharsis, purpose, an appreciation of the numinous, and happiness.

For one of my answers was that I felt, in common with many others, that

"...there is, to paraphrase an expression of George Fox used by The Religious Society of Friends, 'that of the numinous' in every person, and that answering to 'that of the numinous' can take and has taken various manifestations over millennia with all such manifestations deserving of respect since there is an underlying unity, a similar spiritual essence - a similar discovery and knowing and appreciation of the numinous, a similar understanding of the error of hubris - beyond those different outer manifestations and the different terms and expressions and allegories used to elucidate that of the numinous." [1]

In addition, I began during those five years to fully appreciate Islam, beyond the rather harsh interpretation of it which I as a Muslim had for many years

accepted and followed. An appreciation which took me on further travels; involved days of discussions; much further study, personal and with others; and enabled me to place my years of living the Muslim way of life in the context of not only my life in general but also in relation to my experience of other religions and spiritual ways of living.

Of Respect For Islam

In respect of this appreciation of Islam:

" I felt really at home with, among, devout Muslims - those trying to follow the guidelines of Quran and Sunnah (or in the case of the Shia, being Taqlid of a Mujtahid). There was, and is, so much to admire about the Muslim way of life, from the modesty of women, the reverence for the Prophet, the cultivation of humility, the necessity of Wudhu, praying five times a day, the reliance on only Allah, fasting in Ramadan, the real feeling of belonging to the Ummah, the avoidance of intoxicating substances...

Of all the religions I have personal experience of, I found Islam to be perhaps the most human. In the Quran and Sunnah our weaknesses are laid bare, and in Shariah there is a guide to living in a balanced, a human, and a numinous, way." [2]

Thus my personal view of Islam, of the Muslim way of life, and which view I have expressed in recent correspondence with others, is a very positive and tolerant one; of respect born from experience, a scholarly study, and a comparative assessment with other religions and spiritual ways also personally experienced.

Perhaps the bad opinion many people in the West have of Islam would be changed if they spent time with Muslim families in places as diverse as Egypt, Somalia, Turkey, Morocco, Pakistan, Senegal, Malaysia, and Birmingham. Until they have, who are they to pass judgement on the Muslim way of life, and on the Quran, the Sunnah, and the Shariah, that inspires and informs that way of life?

Terror and Al-Quran

An ayah [verse] often (mis)quoted by those ignorant of, intolerant toward, or prejudiced against, Islam, Muslims and the Muslim way of life, is Ayah 151 of Surah Al 'Imran, which is usually interpreted as "Soon shall we cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers." Indeed, some self-proclaimed enemies of Islam

have even produced images of the World Trade Center in flames, following the attack in 2001, overlaid with that interpretation of that Ayah as one of their 'proofs' that Islam incites 'terrorism'.

However, a reasoned consideration of the interpretations of the Ayat [verses] such people use in their propaganda reveals their error and their ignorance. For instance, the Arabic of Ayah 151 of Surah Al 'Imran is:

سَنُلْقِي فِي قُلُوبِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا الرُّعْبَ بِمَا أَشْرَكُوا بِاللَّهِ مَا لَمْ يُنَزَّلْ بِهِ سُلْطَانًا وَمَأْوَاهُمُ
النَّارُ وَيَسْ مَثْوَى الظَّالِمِينَ

[Transliteration: sanulqi fee qulubi allazeena kafaroo l-ruba bima ashraaku bil-lahi ma lam yunazzil bihi sultanana wamawhumu l-naru wabisa mathwa l-zalimeena]

Importantly, does الرُّعْبُ imply 'terror' as the aforementioned interpretation suggests, along with all that the modern English word terror implies, as in the difficult to define term terrorism? No, it does not; rather, the Arabic implies *the fear/the dread* and 'the astonishment/awe' - that is, that human feeling inspired by apprehending or experiencing some-thing supernaturally or extraordinarily powerful and numinous; for example, an Ayah (Sign) of Allah, Al-Khaliq, Al-Azim, Al-Jalil. The fear/trembling/awe/astonishment felt, for instance, by the Apostles when, as recounted in Luke 24.37, they witnessed Jesus alive after the crucifixion.

That is, I suggest that what is referred to in Ayah 151 of Surah Al 'Imran - as in the other four Ayat where رُعبًا / الرُّعبُ occur - is similar to the 'suffusion with fear' and the 'being scared' that occurs and has occurred, as recounted in both Christian scripture and the Quran, when a mortal is (a) confronted by God/Allah or some-thing divine/numinous/awe-inspiring, and/or (b) has such fear, and such a being scared, thrust into their hearts by God/Allah, as a Sign, a warning, or as mention of their fate.

In respect of Luke 24.37, for instance, the Greek text is: πτοηθέντες δὲ καὶ ἔμφοβοι γενόμενοι ἐδόκουν πνεῦμα θεωρεῖν. The term ἔμφοβος means 'suffused with/by phobos' - held/gripped by fear; timorous - and occurs in Sirach 19.24 and Luke 24.5, the latter of which is very interesting: ἐμφόβων δὲ γενομένων αὐτῶν καὶ κλινουσῶν τὰ πρόσωπα εἰς τὴν γῆν εἶπαν πρὸς αὐτάς Τί ζητεῖτε τὸν ζῶντα μετὰ τῶν νεκρῶν. That is, suffused with phobos, they assumed a posture of submission/reverence/respect by bowing their heads; in effect prostrating themselves in the presence of some-thing divine/numinous/awe-inspiring. Since πνεῦμα - pneuma - implies apparition or ghost, and πτοηθέντες suggests they

were 'scared' (cf. Odyssey 22.298 - τῶν δὲ φόβος ἐπιείθηεν) then Luke 24.37 could be translated as "But they, suffused with fear and scared, felt that they saw an apparition." [3]

My, admittedly fallible, view now - after some years of reflexion and study - is that, in an English interpretation of the meaning of a work as revered, and misunderstood, as the Quran, English words in common usage must be carefully chosen, with many common words avoided, and that it would sometimes be better to choose an unusual or even archaic word in order to try and convey something of the sense of the Arabic. Thus, with a careful interpretation common misunderstandings of the text - by non-Muslims unversed in Arabic - can possibly be avoided, especially if - as might be the case with unusual words - the reader has to pause to consider the meaning or make the effort to find the meaning, if only in a glossary appended to the interpretation. A pause and/or an effort that is suited to reading a work revered by millions of people around the world.

In the matter of Ayah 151 of Surah Al 'Imran, a possible interpretation of meaning is:

Into the hearts of they who disbelieve We shall hurl redurre because they, without any authority revealed about such things, associate others with Allah; and for their home: The Fire, that harrowing resting place of the unjust.

Here, I have used the unusual English word redurre, with a meaning of 'awe combined with a trembling fear'. A word suggested by its occurrence in religious works by Richard Rolle and John Gower, and also by texts such as *Morte Arthure* [4].

Of Islam and Violence

It is easy to misinterpret texts; easy to form an opinion based on reading such misinterpretations; easy to generalize from a few misinterpreted texts - or from texts taken out of context - and produce propaganda that incites prejudice, intolerance, and even hatred.

For example, it is possible for a reader of translations to find more talk of 'terror', retribution, destruction, killing, and violence, in the Old Testament than in the Quran. Consider, for example, a commonly available translation of Deuteronomy 32. 25:

"The sword without, and terror within, shall destroy both the young man and the virgin, the suckling also with the man of gray hairs."

Do the plethora of such quotations from readily available translations of the Old Testament make Christianity and Judaism barbarous religions of hatred, violence, and terrorism? Are such translations of LXX accurate, to be relied upon in the matter of forming an opinion about what is meant?

Few people today would claim - based on some quotations from a translation of the Greek Old Testament - that Christianity and Judaism are barbarous religions of hatred and terrorism, and if they did so claim, there is over a thousand years of Jewish and Christian scholarship to contradict it, as well as the contribution adherents of both those religions have made, over thousands of years, to culture, science, and to doing works which have benefited humanity. Not to mention the millions of adherents who, following the precepts and guidelines of their faith, live or try to live moral lives and who thus make and have made the world a better place.

Similarly, there is the contribution Muslims have made, over more than a thousand years, to culture, science [5], and to doing works which have benefited humanity. Just as there are millions of Muslims who, following the precepts and guidelines of their faith, live or try to live moral lives and who thus make and have made the world a better place; and just as there is over a thousand years of Muslim scholarship to contradict the claims made by the 'Islam is a savage, evil, religion' brigade, a treasure of scholarship that the members and supporters of the anti-Muslim brigade are, of course, either ignorant about or which they, in their bigotry, scorn.

Similarly, who today - other than the ignorant or the bigoted - commits the logical fallacy of distribution in respect of Christianity by condemning that faith based on the actions of a few individuals or fanatics who claim they are Christians, or who, for instance, in the name of defending 'Western Christian culture' murder seventy-seven, mostly young, innocent people? Who, other than the ignorant or the bigoted, condemns Catholicism because a few priests commit crimes against children? Who draws attention to the professed Christian faith or the Christian baptism of murderers and rapists in order to defame Christianity?

Yet the anti-Muslim brigade repeatedly commit the logical fallacy of distribution, and the fallacy of incomplete evidence, arguing as they do from the particular to the general, and selecting and presenting as they do - in support of their prejudice - material which appears to support their claims about Islam and Muslims, while ignoring or dismissing the much larger body of material which

does not support their claims about Islam and Muslims.

Thus do the ignorant, the bigoted, the intolerant, anti-Muslim brigade draw attention to the beliefs and the acts of the small numbers of Muslims - out of billions - who follow a harsh interpretation of Islam, while ignoring the diversity within Islam, ignoring the scholarship which militates against such a harsh interpretation and such acts, and ignoring the millions upon millions of Muslims, world-wide who, by following the precepts and guidelines of Islam as manifest in Quran, Sunnah, Ijmah and Qiyas, live or try to live moral lives, who appreciate the numinous, strive to avoid the error of hubris, and who thus make and have made the world a better place.

Conclusion

In this matter of division, divide, tolerance, and prejudice, I am rather reminded of George Washington's 1796 Farewell Address. Such eloquent, reasoned, words expressive of a man of good intentions and discernment who not only appreciated the virtue of tolerance but knew the nature of we oft-times dishonourable, sometimes honourable, human beings:

"...designing men may endeavor to excite a belief that there is a real difference of local interests and views. One of the expedients of party to acquire influence within particular districts is to misrepresent the opinions and aims of other districts. You cannot shield yourselves too much against the jealousies and heartburnings which spring from these misrepresentations; they tend to render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection...

It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government... Promote then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge...

Observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and morality enjoin this conduct; and can it be, that good policy does not equally enjoin it...

In the execution of such a plan, nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded; and that, in place of them, just and amicable feelings towards all should be cultivated. The nation which indulges towards another a habitual hatred or a habitual fondness is in some degree a slave.

It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest. Antipathy in one nation against another disposes each more readily to offer insult and injury, to lay hold of slight causes of umbrage, and to be haughty and intractable, when accidental or trifling occasions of dispute occur. Hence, frequent collisions, obstinate, envenomed, and bloody contests. The nation, prompted by ill-will and resentment, sometimes impels to war the government, contrary to the best calculations of policy."

Did his words prevent designing men from causing a civil war between North and South? No. Did his words in support of virtue and the diffusion of knowledge prevent the racism that prevailed in the South from lasting over a hundred years? No. Did his words prevent the disharmony between nations that led to the First and the Second World Wars? No.

But his words did inspire generation after generation of individuals who, each in their own personal way - sometimes small, and local, sometimes larger - did make a moral difference, and who all in their own personal way promoted and diffused knowledge, fostered fraternal affection, who championed good faith and justice towards all nations, and who strove to cultivate peace and harmony.

Who all, in summary and gradually, made America, and the world, a better place.

Notes

[1] *Pathei-Mathos - A Path To Humility*. 2012.

[2] *Just My Fallible Views, Again*. 2012.

[3] On a pedantic note, I understand δοκέω as meaning here not the conventional unemotional 'suppose/thought' nor (worse) 'opinion' but rather as 'felt' in the sense of experiencing (as they do) an intense and personal feeling. Hence my rendering that they "felt that they saw..."

[4] John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*

That thogh thi love more drawe
And peise in the balance more,
Thou miht noght axe ayein therfore
Of duete, bot al of grace.
For love is lord in every place,
Ther mai no lawe him justefie
Be reddour ne be compaignie,
That he ne wole after his wille
Whom that him liketh spede or spille

(Book 5, v. 4558) *The Complete Works of John Gower*.
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899-1902

Morte Arthure

That thow ne schall rowte ne ryste vndyr the heuene ryche,
Dofe thow for reddour of Rome ryne to þe erthe [108-109]

[5] In terms of culture one might mention just a few, such as the preservation of important Greek manuscripts; Bayt Ul-Hikma; the first universities (in Al-Andalus) and pleasures such as coffee. In terms of science, one might mention Arabic numerals and the decimal system, algebra, early research in chemistry and medicine, pharmacology, observational astronomy, navigation, the inventions of Abbas ibn Firnas; and so on.

cc David Myatt 2012

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