

Mehdi Khalaji on the Concept of Tolerance

A warm welcome to viewers of this program. I hope in the next half-hour I'll be able to raise a few points concerning the issue of tolerance - or, as it's said in French, "tolérance" - for your benefit.

The concept of tolerance (in Persian, "tasaamoh") is a new one for us Iranians. You can even see it in how the word gets translated: there's no consensus on a definitive Persian equivalent. In the 20th century, Arab writers first rendered it "tassahol," however, these days "tasaamoh" is used more often in Arabic. "Tassahol" has become more or less obsolete in the language; it's not much used for the concept of tolerance anymore. In Persian, however, there's still a difference of opinion among translators: some use "modaaraageri," some use "ravaadaari," and some prefer the Arabic rendering. These differences are not a matter of mere linguistic taste; they reflect differences in how we apprehend the concept. In the next few minutes I'll explain the various ways tolerance is understood and how this word and concept have evolved in Europe over the course of time.

The issue of tolerance occupies a unique space in Iran, where even human rights are a new theme. In the course of the Iranian Revolution, demands for human rights occupied a marginal place where they existed at all. They were not among the principal political demands of the revolution, nor were they a focus of political literature in the decades before. A certain sociologist conducted a scholarly review of the slogans, declarations, and statements written and distributed at the time of the revolution. One of his conclusions is of interest to us here: he found that in many factories and other industrial spaces, workers conceived of human rights in terms of wages and labor laws. They thought that the demand for human rights meant increased income - a natural perception given that at that time it was difficult to find books and articles dealing with human rights, or institutions and organizations pursuing a human rights agenda in an influential and widespread way.

The Iranian Revolution - a great event, like any revolution in any country's history - had a wealth of consequences, both in the long- and short-term. From the day after the revolution broke out, the revolutionaries resolved to destroy the old regime and its functionaries, imprisoning many of them, expropriating others, and prosecuting still more. This violent course was not halted, nor would it be limited to former regime officials or those who enjoyed some sort of patronage under the Pahlavis: gradually it ensnared various revolutionary groups themselves. The revolutionary clergy gained the upper hand, and little by little were able to eliminate rival political factions. We might say that this situation lasted until Khordad of 1360 (1981 Gregorian); by summer of that year the clerics would have everything in their control. An important point here is that, while the political factions battled among themselves during this period, they contended mostly for their own abstract claims. Rarely did political or activist groups define their struggles, either between themselves or with the government, as a matter of democracy against dictatorship. Rather, leftist groups vied for power and other factions followed suite, and on the occasion that either achieved it they proceeded to negate and exclude one another. This meant that a discourse of

human rights, a discourse of pluralism, a discourse of tolerance was entirely absent among both victims and persecutors.

The 1360s (1980s Gregorian) were an enormously important decade for the fate of human rights in Iran, as political groups both inside and outside the country gradually realized the significance of tolerance and human rights issues. In response to the bloody series of political traumas that took place after the revolution, as well as the political openings of the time, human rights came to be thematized. But because dissidents were still not welcome in the country, their words did not reach a wide audience. These conversations remained limited to small circles without the benefit of media access, or to those outside the country.

In the first decade of the revolution, at the time of Ayatollah Khomeini's life, the leftist Islamists had the upper hand: their wing had the Majles at its disposal, they enjoyed great influence among other political blocs, and they were personally close to Khomeini. In the year 1368 (1989 Gregorian), when Khomeini passed away and Khamenei took his place, the leftist current was isolated and marginalized. Unlike the Islamic Republic's opposition, which was lacking in media and institutions, the leftist current, though driven from power, nonetheless maintained its grip on a great many press organs, institutions, and other organizations. In a retrospection which is itself the product of falling from power, we might say that it was the leftist Islamic current which widely introduced concepts of human rights, tolerance, and pluralism to Iranian society.

This to say that still another generation of victims of the Islamic Republic - unlike previous generations in that they enjoyed a considerable period in power and themselves persecuted other political factions - finally took refuge in the vocabulary of human rights, pluralism, and tolerance at the historical moment the tables turned. They began to regard the development of these concepts in society as their only means of staying alive. Concepts which are foreign to the patrimony of both the Left and Islam, not to be found in either leftist or Islamic ideology. For precisely this reason it was vital for the leftists to revise and reassess the whole of their Islamic ideology.

Among the media organs the leftists possessed, perhaps Kiaan Magazine - whose staff were drawn from the Kayhaan newspaper and later on from the ranks of Kayhaan Farhanggi monthly, which was the mouthpiece of the religious intellectual tendency - had the most significant role in propagating these concepts. Concepts of tolerance, concepts of pluralism, concepts of human rights. Because the magazine had the ear of Iranian society, in particular the young university student strata, these concepts quickly entered the political and social discourse of Iranian society. A few years later, in 1376 (1997 Gregorian), Mohammad Khatami was elected to the Presidency; he too strove to introduce concepts like civil society, pluralism, and tolerance to the public vocabulary, and to a great extent he was successful.

But one problem endured: words can always deceive. Different people can intend different things with them. And many key words - like freedom, justice, human rights, and this very term tolerance - may, if not properly understood, lead us to destinations

we'd rather not go to. Which is to say though we may expect them to achieve a particular objective, they may remain frustrated.

One of the things the religious intellectuals tried to accomplish was to domesticate European terms - domestication meaning here that they strove to find equivalents for these new concepts within their traditions. As in: look, here's this concept; it's not essentially European, in the past we had the same thing. Or with an eye to classical intellectual source they'd try to justify or rationalize these concepts - this was another technique. For example, suppose that Mr. Abdolkarim Soroush tries to justify cultural or religious pluralism on the basis of the mystical tradition. In various articles he's written, including "Saraathaaye mostaghim (The straight paths)," he endeavored to use mystical ideas and concepts, particularly those of a figure like Jalal al-Din Rumi, to make a case for the legitimacy of tolerance. So that Iranian society, traditional as it is, would not feel the concept to be strange and foreign, and would be able to reconcile with it and absorb it intimately, folding it into everyday life and behavior. The truth of the matter is that such a project might be very successful in putting a new concept in people's mouths; however, if that concept's bases are not correctly acknowledged, documented, and specified, it might all come to naught.

In the European context, tolerance is a concept which emerged from the sectarian and religious strife of the 16th century, a period abounding in violence and destruction. A figure like John Locke, one of the most important advocates of tolerance, tried to define, promote, and justify the concept for European society. Two very important rationales existed at the time. The first is that if we display forbearance up against thoughts and opinions different than our own, we achieve an ethical virtue. In fact, it is this ethical aspect of tolerance which Locke makes prominent. Contenance, sufferance, or forbearance against the speech and opinions of another. Such that if someone insults me, even if it's not possible for him to reproach me if I insult him back, or someone does me harm, even if my right to harm him back is secure, and I forbear the insult, I've achieved an ethical virtue; likewise if someone speaks harsh words to me and I respond with silence, or otherwise does me wrong, and I do no wrong in return. This is something that might distinguish a person from others.

Suppose, for example, the case of Islam: they say that if someone kills another person, on the basis of Islamic jurisprudence the family of the slain can punish the murderer in kind. But if they pardon the murderer instead of retaliating, they're obeying an ethical principle and achieve a virtue. This is a great capacity, this ability to forego your own right. At Locke's time, this ethical part of tolerance was one of the most important and often-emphasized.

Of course another aspect of tolerance is its pragmatism - in fact, its practicality. At Locke's time they reasoned that recourse to violence, reacting to differing opinions, and eliminating dissident groups would in practice be hugely detrimental to civilized co-existence among people. In other words, lessened violence would be an inducement to peace and tranquility. As a result, if someone desires peace, it's mandatory for him to tolerate the opinions and varying lifestyles of others.

This is an absolutely primary idea for tolerance; of course the concept rapidly evolved from here. Unfortunately, we in the Arab and Iranian worlds have not progressed very far from this first stage. The common understanding has to do with whoever's speaking. As in: I'm Shi'i, it's no difficulty for me to put up with these Sunnis; or: I have such-and-such an opinion, I can put up with those who aren't of the same mind. I'll let them speak. In fact one of the most well-known Lebanese intellectuals of the 20th century, Abdollah Ala'ali - very much a man of letters, upon whom the title "Jaahez al-Asr" was bestowed - rendered "secularism" (a concept for which Arabs now use the term "almaaniat") as "helmaaniat," associating concepts of fortitude, forbearance, and continence. He said this was in fact one of the most important features of secularism: forbearance, patience, sufferance of others and other choices, accepting a plurality of views and living with them. In fact this means we recognize no difference, determination, or change in the concept of right - that our concept of right is still an old-fashioned one.

It means also that we are thinking abstractly about the concept of reality. In other words, when we say "I tolerate another person," it means first that we recognize a right for ourselves we do not similarly extend to another; rather, we simply put up with the other. We just give him permission to speak. For instance: If I'm part of the Shia majority, I let the Sunnis speak. As a member of the Shia majority, I let the Bahai's go on living in the country. I put up with them. This doesn't mean I'm recognizing for them the same right I recognize for myself. Secondly: when we say we tolerate others, we assume that we're in the right. That we know reality - in this case, Shi'ism - and that it's perfectly clear that Sunnism is bogus, that the Bahai religion is bogus, that the creeds of others are bogus. That, because we'd prefer not to have violence, we are disinclined to kill them outright, instead settling for the virtue of tolerance.

The reality is that the concept of tolerance, at least in the last one or two centuries, has been employed with entirely different meanings in Europe and the East. In the first place, tolerance is not just a personal ethical trait - as if a burden only an individual can shoulder, something only the individual is accountable for. As if, if tolerance does not exist in a society, a few individuals sporadically take charge of it. Not at all!

The issue of tolerance is taken off the shoulder of the individual as its' sole bearer and placed at last on institutions. What does this mean? That legal and political institutions must recognize equal rights for all: in the first place for all human beings, in the second for all citizens, without regard to race, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. They must safeguard these rights.

Put differently: confronted with different opinions, sexualities, races, and ethnicities, the government must remain impartial. The government cannot act to further the interest of any particular group, even if that group is a majority. Likewise, political and civil institutions in the country must be strengthened and empowered enough to defend people's rights and not permit them to be violated.

As a result, it is imperative that legal and civil organizations not countenance intolerance, and in fact work to oppose it. It is here that tolerance exceeds any mere "putting up with." Tolerance is entirely at odds with indifference, disregard, and

carelessness. In fact institutions must actively and vigorously pursue it in order to safeguard the rights of individuals and prevent their violation. This is all one issue.

Accordingly, tolerance requires a fundamental change in the concept of right, in the political order, and in the legal system.

Secondly: tolerance requires the recognition of individual freedoms, social freedoms, religious freedoms, and the freedom of thought and expression. You live in conditions in which you don't enjoy freedoms of thought or expression, individual or social freedoms. You don't have a government that recognizes these liberties, nor do your legal and civil institutions guard and protect them. As a result, there will be no tolerance.

Therefore, in a framework like the Islamic Republic's - which is in the first place ideological, which recognizes Shi'ism as an official religion, which is predicated on Islamic jurisprudence, and which sanctions a great many prejudices - there can be no tolerance. Nor can tolerance be reduced to an individual ethical principle, as it can't be realized until various institutions, the legal system, the educational system, and the political system in this society accept the equal rights of persons and citizens and their freedoms of action and behavior.

An extremely important thought, and also our last: tolerance is the product of a worldview, the product of a new idea of truth. This idea that I, as a human being, am capable of having an opinion which entirely right, is fundamentally at odds with the concept of tolerance. The concept of tolerance is more about "self," rather than "other": "self" being open to "other." It concerns the fact that I come to accept that my mind, without the mind of the other, is unable to think. That all forms of cognition depend on this other: if the other didn't exist, I couldn't learn language, and without the presence of another I could never really speak or utter anything. Thus, just as the presence of another is essential for speaking, it's also essential to thought. And this other I'm referring to is not just some other person: it's the other that thinks in another way, sees the world in another way, regards reality in another way.

Therefore if I wish to think at all, it's required of me to be open to the other. Not just for peace and quiet, but as a human being for whom thought is a defining quality, I have need of the other. Because I have this need, I recognize in that other the right I recognize in myself. The very freedom I respect for myself, I also extend to the other.

Tolerance, then, is no longer forbearance. Nothing on the order of: "Sure, there's some person thinking wrongly, but it's no problem. Leave him be, let him go on living." Not at all! Tolerance means not just that I recognize myself as equivalent in rights and in cultural and political privileges to another. It means also that I recognize my need of the other, and that because I depend on the other I can't even conceive of doing violence to him, of effacing or limiting him. There is no "self" without "other."

I hope that the points I've raised have helped clarify these issues to some small extent. I'm certainly grateful you've listened to this short presentation.