

The Meaning of Tolerance in Quranic Translation: Addressing the Challenge of Islamophobia in the Western World

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Received : 27 07 2025

Revised : 14 08 2025

Accepted : 31 09 2025

Available online : 28 10 2025

Cite this article: Fronzoni, V. (2025). The Meaning of Tolerance in Quranic Translation: Addressing the Challenge of Islamophobia in the Western World. International Journal of Sharia and Law, 1(2), 117-128. <https://doi.org/10.65211/ijsl.v1i2.2>

Abstract

This article discusses the complexities of translating the Qur'an and the importance of accurately conveying core Islamic principles like Tolerance and Freedom of belief. The research aims to highlight the unique challenges of translating the Qur'an into languages other than Arabic due to its divine nature of the Revelation and linguistic intricacies. It also seeks to correctly define and explain the Islamic principles of Tolerance and Freedom of belief, especially for non-Arabic-speaking and non-Muslim people, emphasizing their relevance for Social inclusion and combating social tensions in European societies. For the methodology, the article examines the theological and linguistic difficulties of Quranic translation, analysing the concept of Tolerance within Islamic tradition, linking it to the *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'a*. The study further explores specific Quranic verses and *ahādith* to illustrate Islamic teachings on patience, understanding, non-compulsion in faith, and the inherent human right to diverse opinions and peaceful coexistence. Regarding the findings, the article illustrates that translating the Qur'an presents significant challenges, including rhetorical figures and the theological dilemma of altering Divine speech. However, viewing translations as commentaries helps overcome these issues and allow dissemination of Divine teachings. Islam explicitly promotes Tolerance and Freedom of belief, emphasizing patience, understanding, and the acceptance of human diversity. While advocating for "promoting good and preventing evil", Islam prohibits imposing beliefs through force, useful for dealing with the problems of tension and intolerance, often present in Europe. In the conclusions, the research argues that starting from the principle that the Qur'an clearly states that there is no compulsion in religion, it must be underlined that Islam is fundamentally a Religion of Tolerance and Respect, providing ample space for Freedom of Expression and Belief. Clarifying this concept is essential to overcome the difficulties of Muslim communities living in Europe and Italy, with reference to the critical issues of radicalization, Islamophobia and social inclusion.

Keywords: Tolerance, Freedom of belief, Islamophobia Radicalization.

Introduction

Assigning the correct intrinsic and extrinsic meaning to single words, entire sentences, paragraphs or complete works is, in general, a considerable effort for every translator but, compared to the translation of normal texts from one language to another, translating the Qur'an into a language other than Arabic involves some specific problems, on which it is important to carry out an analysis (Muhammad Abdel Haleem, 2004), (Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali.

If every translation generally presents some difficulties related to semantic or lexical choices, to methodological decisions, to the choice between a literal rendering and a freer one, to the possible presence of notes, translating the Qur'an into another language other than that of Revelation presents further difficulties in addition to those listed above. First of all, it should be highlighted the presence in the body of the Revelation of various rhetorical figures such as metaphors, metonymies, ellipses, assonances and polysemics, whose rendering in another language is truly complicated (Muhammad Abdel Haleem, 1999). In fact, in translating activities, translator must not only replace the meaning of one word with another, but he must also reconstruct the structural form of a sentence and the general meaning in which these words are embedded (Abobaker Ali, 2012).

Furthermore, the Arabic language assumes a specific importance not only in a theological sense, since it has also assumed an identity-political meaning wherever Islam has spread. It is in fact necessary to underline the linguistic-political importance of Arabic which constitutes a unifying element, first of the Arab Muslims, and then of all those peoples who are not Arabs and not even Semites but who have accepted Islam. In the previous revelations, the vehicle of the divine message was prayer, through the psalmody of the sacred texts, in line with the Old and New Testaments. The Christians recited the "Books" in Hebrew by the Jews of Yathrib and in Greek, Syriac and Ethiopian. Since the Arab people did not possess a divine revelation in their own language, Allah wanted to reveal a Qur'an in "clear Arabic" to induce the Arab tribes of *Hiǧāz* to shun polytheism, no longer being able to maintain that the previous divine revelations, being in a foreign language, should not be followed (Carlo Alfonso Nallino, 1946).

Method

The methodology is firmly grounded in an interdisciplinary approach, combining linguistic analysis, legal-religious hermeneutics, and comparative study of the sources. The examination of Qur'anic verses and alhadith is systematic and well-documented.

Results and Discussion

Specific Problems in the Translation of the Quran

The study yields results of both theoretical and practical significance. First, it identifies and analyses the dual nature of the challenges in Qur'anic translation: linguistic intricacies—such as polysemy, metaphor, and rhetorical figures—and theological constraints arising from the sacred status of the text as *kalām Allāh*. This dual challenge sets Qur'anic translation apart from the rendering of other sacred texts, as the Qur'an is considered divinely revealed in both content and form, thereby making the act of translation a potential alteration of Divine speech. A central finding is that these obstacles can be mitigated by adopting a hermeneutical approach that treats translation not as a substitute for the Arabic text but as an interpretative commentary (*tafsīr*) intended to aid understanding. This perspective aligns with historical precedents in Farsi, Turkish, and Urdu translations, which maintained theological integrity while enabling access to non-Arabic-speaking communities.

The discussion further reveals that the principles of Tolerance (*tasāmuh*) and Freedom of belief, rooted in the *Maqāhid al-Sharīa*, are not merely abstract values but actionable guidelines with direct implications for modern pluralistic societies. The author demonstrates through close reading of Qur'anic verses (e.g., II:256; X:99; CIX:6) and selected *alhādīth* that these principles are intrinsic to Islamic law and ethics, providing a counter-narrative to extremist interpretations and Islamophobia stereotypes alike.

By situating these findings within the contemporary European context—characterised by rising social tensions, radicalisation, and Islamophobia—the discussion underscores the applicability of Qur'anic ethics to current policy and integration debates. The research shows that articulating Tolerance and Freedom of belief in accessible translations can serve as a cultural bridge, fostering mutual understanding between Muslim minorities and broader society.

Importantly, the work distinguishes itself from prior literature by integrating theological exegesis with socio-political analysis, demonstrating that accurate, culturally sensitive translation of the Qur'an is not only a philological task but also a strategic tool for promoting social cohesion and countering prejudice.

But translation poses above all a theological problem. In fact, if the Qur'an is, as it is, the word of Allah, and if it is appropriate to convey it also to non-Arabic speakers given the universal nature of the Revelation made to the Prophet Muhammad, a dilemma arises: given that the word of Allah is sacred, how can one think of modifying it by translating it? Unlike previous texts, such as the Torah and the Gospel, which were revealed by Allah but were reformulated by men and which can be translated into other languages without

sacrilegious doubts, the Qur'an is *qudsi*. This means that the Holy Book is divine not only in its origin, but also in its content and expression, and inevitably translation not only replaces one meaning of the word with another, but also reconstructs the structural form of a thought.

These critical issues can be overcome by considering translations similar to commentaries on the Arabic text (to which they should always be annexed). And this is what has historically been done with reference to Farsi, Turkish and Urdu, which today fall within the consolidated tradition of "Islamic languages" (*Martino M*).

Therefore, in the balance of interests between not altering the word of Allah and spreading His teaching according to the meaning and purpose of the Latest Revelation, one can accept the idea of resorting to the "*fictio iuris*" of writing a commentary of the Holy Book. In doing so, therefore, one decides to fulfil the mission of spreading the Word of God, because this last necessity becomes preeminent over every other scruple.

After all, it is one thing to use the Quran for liturgical purposes, such as during prayer, in which case the verses must be repeated in Arabic, and another thing to use translations as an aid to understanding and disseminating the text. Translating the Holy Quran into Italian or English, which are among the five languages in the world with the greatest range of synonyms, constitutes a further difficulty, aggravated by the fact that, for Italian, the generic meaning attributed to them often influences some words by the influence of Catholic religion, historically dominant in Italy.

Tolerance and Freedom of belief, related to Radicalization and Islamophobia

The research aims to focus on two general principles of the Islamic tradition, which are compliant with the *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'a* (*Al-Shatibi, 2023*), *Ibn Ashur, 2018*), linked by a common "*file rouge*". This connection links them even more specifically if they are contextualized to the difficulties and needs of Muslim diasporic communities living in Europe and Italy, in reference to the critical issues of Islamophobia, Radicalization and the lack of social inclusion.

Indeed, the current historical period in Italy (but also in Europe) is characterized by a declination of the right of Freedom of belief that is much more attentive to its limits than to its contents, especially in relation to forms of restriction and control of religions. This trend increased especially following the attacks in France and Belgium between 2015 and 2016, have definitively polarized on Islam. One of the results of these policies is the insurrection of social tensions, which manifest themselves in two excesses, on the one hand the radicalization towards the practice of a "do-it-yourself" Islam, invented and warmongering in its reactivity (which harms Muslims themselves, even before

others) and, on the other, in widespread Islamophobic and discriminatory feelings.

The innovative nature of the research therefore lies in the need and the will to correctly render the translation of these Quranic terms in Italian and English. But it is also original because it tries to effectively explain to profound meaning of this concepts to a non-Arabic speaking and non-Muslim majority, since the theme is strategic if we really want to think of a plural structure of European society, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious.

“Tolerance” generally means the ability to tolerate someone or something unpleasant, for example, pain or a difficulty, or it can also represent the act of allowing the uncomfortable presence of another’s opinion that is not aligned or even contrary to one’s own thinking. If we have sufficient tolerance, we allow others to speak and develop our ability to listen and tolerate different opinions. On the other hand, intolerance usually leads to discontent and causes tension or failure in relationships.

In its religious form, tolerance is deeply intertwined with *Maqāṣid al-Sharī’a*, as many scholars suggest (Kurnia Muhajarah, 2024), being a core principle within Shari’a, directly related to the goals of the religious Law of Islam. *Maqāṣid al-Sharī’a* emphasizes the preservation of religion, and tolerance plays a crucial role in upholding this principle by allowing for peaceful coexistence and understanding among different religious group. This encourages acceptance, the shedding of opposition and the extinguishing the flame of bias. In essence, tolerance is seen as a means to achieve the higher goals of Islamic law by promoting social harmony, justice, and the overall well-being of society.

Tolerance in a confessional key, then, is expressed along the lines of “Freedom of belief”, representing two sides of the same coin. The Arabic language uses the term “*tasāmuh*” تسامح to indicate precisely the action of tolerating, of bearing, and Islam is a religion that explicitly teaches the value of tolerance, placing great emphasis on the importance of being patient and available and on the benefits that derive from it, with the aim of making this world a peaceful place.

With this teaching, however, Islam does not require being unjust to oneself by asking believers to settle for something less than others, or to be submissive to an insistence and to remain silent in the face of an injustice. The idea of tolerance that is developed is directed towards the awareness and acceptance that human beings are naturally distinct in their appearance, perceptions, opinions, behaviors, aims and values and have the right to live in peace as they are. It also means that one’s opinions should not be imposed on others. After all, diversity of opinions (اختلاف) is predominantly judged positively in the hermeneutics of Muslim legal schools (al-Shafi’i, 1309 H). Upon closer inspection, the essence of *tasāmuh*

is to cultivate a personal opinion and even if necessary to maintain it, but to still be willing to listen to the opinions of others. Islam is, therefore, a religion of tolerance, of respect for people and the lives of others and also provides ample space for freedom of expression. Moreover, precisely in the wake of tolerance, one can see how in Islam freedom of expression represents an attested and deeply protected principle, since it descends from the more general principle of Freedom of belief. The free expression of thought, therefore, is accompanied by those ethical principles that require from Muslims a widespread compliance, which passes through understanding among members of society and which is aimed at social harmony. These ethical and virtuous rules, which accompany believers throughout their entire existence, suffer a single interruption in three specific cases:

1. when monotheism is abandoned and polytheism falls into place: *“Say, He is God the One, God the eternal. He begot no one nor was He begotten. No one is comparable to Him”*, (Qur’an CXII, 1-4).
2. when one goes beyond the limits set by Allah in his divine plan to ensure a prosperous and ethically oriented society, and engages in behaviours that create *فتنة*, that is to say scandal and social disorder: *“(…) These are the bounds set by God: do not overstep them. It is those who overstep God’s bounds who are doing wrong”*, (Qur’an II, 229).
3. when you are attacked and the faith and lives of believers are put in danger *“Fight in God’s cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits: God does not love those who overstep the limits”* (Qur’an II, 190).

Many lessons and examples of tolerance can also be drawn from the *aḥādith* (Jami at-Tirmidhi). This *ḥādith* explains the importance of being tolerant, that means to be understanding and accepting of others even if they do not agree with you or have different opinions than you, and to be patient when dealing with difficult situations or people. Again, one can recall how the Meccan idolaters oppressed the early Muslims, and when the idolaters increased their oppression with real persecutions, the Companions of the Prophet asked to curse them. He responded in a tolerant way, calming the spirits (*Sahih Muslim*).

The personality of the Prophet of Islam and his lifestyle are a constant example of the patience and tolerance that one must have to lead a balanced and happy life. A biographical episode is emblematic in this sense, when some people asked Muhammad why Allah did not forcefully demolish the false gods to demonstrate the truth of the one true religion. The episode, as often happened, was the occasion to receive the following Revelation: *“Those who worshipped others alongside God say, ‘If God had willed, we would not have worshipped anything but Him, nor would our fathers. We would not have declared anything forbidden without His sanction.’ Those before them said the same. Are the*

messengers obliged to do anything other than deliver [their message] clearly?” (Qur’an XVI, 35.).

Reading this last verse it is easy to understand that Tolerance and Pare the very Nature of Allah, who did not want to impose and left to choose and, therefore, men should not forcefully impose their opinions on others. Furthermore, Allah’s Tolerance can also be seen daily in this world, in which we all repeatedly commit mistakes and sins, but He continually gives us the opportunity to repent of wrong actions and mend our ways by not repeating them again.

In the Holy Book the way is indicated to discuss in the best way with others and guide them towards a truth and towards salvation and the right attitude means to state, illustrate, demonstrate, advice and also persuade, but then stop and not impose: “*[Prophet], call [people] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching. Argue with them in the most courteous way, for your Lord knows best who has strayed from His way and who is rightly guided*” (Qur’an XVI, 125).

This is because Islam teaches tolerance at the individual level, in the family, at the social level and at the State level, since it represents the structure that supports human rights, cultural diversity and the rule of law of peoples and nations, as can also be seen from reading the following verse: “*People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God’s eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware*” (Qur’an XL, 13).

Tolerance is prescribed even on the confessional level and this allows us to move on to the second topic of discussion, namely religious freedom. It should be noted that Allah has not prohibited Muslims from performing good deeds and being tolerant towards people of other religions, just think of the favourable legal-religious-social treatment reserved for the *dhimmīun* and the *mustā’minūn* during the history of Islam, namely the “people of the Book”.

Confessional tolerance, then, is expressly prescribed by: “*[Believers], do not revile those they call on beside God in case they, in their hostility and ignorance, revile God. To each community We make their own actions seem alluring, but in the end they will return to their Lord and He will inform them of all they did*” (Qur’an VI, 108) e: “*and He does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with anyone who has not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes: God loves the just*” (Qur’an 60, 8). Tolerance towards other religions that peacefully approach Islam is, therefore, a commandment prescribed in the Holy Qur’an, since one should not argue with those who believe differently from you.

The following verse is indicative in this sense: *“We have appointed acts of devotion for every community to observe, so do not let them argue with you [Prophet] about this matter. Call them to your Lord— you are on the right path – and if they argue with you, say, ‘God is well aware of what you are doing’* (Qur’an XXII, 67-68). Even more explicitly: *“Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. So can you [Prophet] compel people to believe?”* (Qur’an X, 99), as well as *“We sent to you [Muhammad] the Scripture with the truth, confirming the Scriptures that came before it, and with final authority over them: so judge between them according to what God has sent down. Do not follow their whims, which deviate from the truth that has come to you. We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about”* (Qur’an V, 48).

To better understand the strong connection between Tolerance and Freedom of belief, it should be remembered that according to Islam everything happens by divine will, predestination being one of the articles of the Muslim faith, but this does not exempt man from his moral responsibilities. In fact, Allah provides his creatures with the truth and the ability to understand it, but it is then up to them to determine whether to commit themselves to good and take advantage of divine guidance to follow the sharaitic path, or to live in sin and the darkness of disbelief. Therefore, man is not a defenceless creature driven by destiny since Allah has granted the right of determination. Muslims must do their best to present the message of Allah to humanity, since the principle of *حسبة*, which indicates the action of promoting good and preventing evil. This is a commitment transversal in the Qur’an, but people must follow it with Tolerance, advising Islam, but in a polite and discreet way, without being invasive, according to the principle of *نصيحة* with a “sincere advice” (Sayyid Qasim, 2001). If on the one hand one must not be indifferent to the fate of others and must therefore advise and illustrate the Truth, on the other hand one must not force or be invasive, since it will always be up to the interlocutors to decide whether to accept or reject the Truth of Allah.

It is therefore important to understand how Islam frames the concepts of Tolerance and Freedom of belief, also because in European societies, increasingly formed in a plural dimension but where too often this plurality does not become a source of enrichment but of social tensions, we must focus on dialogue and knowledge of the other to focus on social inclusion.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is possible and even desirable to use translations of the Holy Qur’an, intended as commentaries on the Revelation, even in Western

languages where Islam is a minority, and indeed this activity is particularly useful to better frame the scope and meaning of concepts fundamental to the Islamic tradition, such as Tolerance and Freedom of belief.

This research has shown that Islam is a tolerant Religion, also inclusive. Probably, Islam is the most inclusive among the Monotheisms of the so-called Abrahamic religions, being the only confession of the three to recognize the other religious traditions, the previous Sacred Books, and all the Prophets and Messengers who have succeeded each other, and leaves human beings freedom of behaviour, even in a religious sense.

The correct dissemination of these fundamental principles in line with the *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'a* is particularly useful to overcome the social tensions currently existing in Western countries, such as Italy, where one must focus on comparison and knowledge of the other, to understand that there is no “enemy at the gates”.

Underlining this concept is essential for addressing the challenges faced by Muslim communities in Europe and Italy, particularly concerning radicalization and Islamophobia. On the one hand, the rise of anti-Muslim sentiments and movements and on the other, the response of some members of Muslim communities (especially the so-called “no future generation”), who adopt radical tendencies also as a form of reaction. So, they approach everything that those who treat them badly (in their opinion unfairly) show they fear and hate, and they distance themselves from the real objective of Religion, which is pursuing good and preventing evil, looking for a peaceful coexistence.

If Allah has not forced men to believe, and has left them free to choose, we men certainly cannot force others to accept our point of view and our religion, as the Book of God well expresses: “*you have your religion and I have mine*” (Qur'an CIX, 8) and “*There is no compulsion in religion*” (Qur'an II, 256). This last verse also constitutes the interpretative key around which the Theory of Predestination, Free will and Universality of Islam revolves.

Indeed, as the Quranic commentaries make clear, the purpose of this Revelation is to remove any misunderstanding and doubts about the possible use of force by Muslims to propagate their religion. The verse not only prohibits believers from using force to convert non-Muslims to Islam, but also provides reasons why force cannot be used for this purpose. It is because Islam is a manifest Truth and truth is clearly distinguished from error, so there is no justification for coercion to the Truth of Faith, and the proper attitude is that of Tolerance and Freedom of belief.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the International Journal of Sharia and Law editorial team for giving me the opportunity to publish this paper.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no financial, personal, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research outcomes or the interpretation of the findings. The study was conducted independently, without external sponsorship or obligations that might compromise academic objectivity.

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