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The Spirit of Tolerance in Islam is the fourth in a series of Occasional Papers published by the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), which address “broad themes of the relationship between religion and society, with special reference to Islam” (vi). It is also the second such publication authored by Reza Shah-Kazemi as a Research Associate at the IIS, the first being Spiritual Quest: Reflections on the Qur’anic Prayer According to the Teachings of Imam ‘Ali.

This short work is part of a larger body of literature that has attempted to address concerns that have arisen about Islam’s ‘intolerance’. Reza Shah-Kazemi attempts to dispel this myth by examining the Islamic roots of tolerance, through both historical examples and Qur’an and hadith traditions. In Part One of the book, he outlines five clear examples of tolerance as it was practiced in Islam under the Ottomans, the Mughals, the Fatimids, and the Umayyads of Cordoba, and also considers the nature of Dhimmis or ‘protected minorities’ as this concept relates to notions of tolerance in Islam. Through these historical examples, Shah-Kazemi argues that tolerance was the norm in Islam since its inception, and that, “in fact, it was the Christian world which learnt about the meaning of tolerance from the Muslims: the trajectory of tolerance was from East to West” (4). However, illustrative examples are not in and of themselves sufficient for Shah-Kazemi’s point, which is that Islam is rooted in a maximalist, sacred notion of tolerance. In order to support this claim, he turns in Part Two of this book to tolerance as it appears in revealed knowledge. Focusing most especially on the Qur’anic verse 5:48, he highlights four key principles, namely: the Qur’an’s confirmation and protection of all divine revelations that precede it; the divinely-willed nature of the plurality of faiths; the healthy competition engendered by this diversity, especially as each one attempts to best the other in ‘good works’; and finally, that differences will inevitably arise out of this kind of variety in faiths, but that these differences are “to be tolerated on the human place, and will be finally resolved in the Hereafter” (89). He then concludes his argument with a brief examination of the prophetic paradigm, citing Muhammad’s example of compassionate forbearance.

Though he at times borders on apologetics, overall, Reza Shah-Kazemi constructs a sound and well-supported argument. He clearly illustrates the ways
in which both the Qur’an and prophetic example can be read to not only encourage but demand tolerance as an expression of faith in Islam. In his historical examples as well, he is able to show that tolerance and open-minded policies were the norm in many Islamic empires, and makes a strong case that a sacred notion of tolerance was at the heart of these policies. Generally, this book provides a simple, clear, and easy-to-read summary of the ways in which the spirit of tolerance in Islam is understood by many, academics and practicing Muslims alike.