

The Idea of Peace in the Hierarchy of Islamic Values

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I would like to offer some thoughts and references relating to the idea of Peace in the hierarchy of Islamic values, or the role which the idea of Peace plays in the Islamic world-view. However, before I begin my presentation I would like to say - keeping in mind Professor Mark's wonderful insight that there is a time for everything - that, in one sense, this is a very good time to be talking about Islam because after centuries of near total-neglect, it has suddenly burst in on the world, and people want to know what it is. But, in another sense, it is a very bad time to be talking about Islam because the Islam which has played such a dramatic role in the world in the recent past is not necessarily its best representation although in every religious tradition there is some discrepancy, sometimes even wide discrepancy, between theory and practice, or between ideals and realities. That there is a divergence between what Muslims profess Islam is, and what it appears to be, in fact, cannot be denied.

But the problem is more serious than non-conformity between the "*ought*" and the "*is*." There is ambiguity, confusion, or controversy, regarding Islamic ideals themselves, and one such ideal is Peace. Due to a variety of reasons, Muslims have not been able to develop an apparatus, psychological and methodological, to be able to evaluate both their ideals or realities critically or objectively. In order to do any kind of justice to such a wide-ranging subject, it would be necessary for me to spend a long time explaining what Islam is in its larger framework and then focusing on its individual components. Since I have but a few minutes I will have to be very selective. If there are things that I do not adequately explain now, please feel free to question me during the discussion period.

I would like to begin by making a statement about the Qur'an, the revelation on which Islam is founded. Not even many scholars of Islam realize fully what the Qur'an means to Muslims, or how they view it. There are other books of revelation held to be sacred by the adherents of different faiths, but in most cases it is accepted that there is a human element in them. Even though believed to be divinely-inspired, the authors of many books of revelation were accepted as human. This is not the case with the Muslims' perception of the Qur'an. To Muslims, the Qur'an is the actual Word of God transmitted by the angel of prophecy, Archangel Gabriel, to the Prophet Muhammad, who transmitted it to the people. Nothing is more offensive to Muslims than the statement "Muhammad says in the Qur'an," because that challenges the very authenticity of the Qur'an itself. The absolute authority the Qur'an has for a Muslim must, therefore, be recognized before there can be any meaningful discussion of Islam.

Taking the Qur'an to be the central document on which Islam is founded ideally, let us see what value it attaches to the idea of Peace. It is significant to note that the Qur'an describes *Allah* or God as "*As-Salam*" - the Being who is the source of Peace and who assures peaceful existence to all beings - and the way of life to be followed as "*Islam*" which basically means

Peace. Another name of God is “*Al-Mo’min*” - the Being who shelters and protects all beings in every sphere of life. The true believer is also called “*mo’min*” whose life exemplifies Peace. In Surah 5: *Al-Ma’idah*: 17-18, the Qur’an refers to itself as

“...a (new) light...
Wherewith God guideth all
Who seek the good pleasure
To ways of peace and safety,
And leadeth them out Peace
Of darkness, by his Will,
Unto the light, - guideth them
To a path that is straight.”

In Surah 10: *Yunus*: 25, the Qur’an “summons humankind to the House of Peace,” and in Surah 6: “*Al-An’am*”: 128, it states that for those who follow its teachings, the reward

“will be a House
Of Peace in the presence
Of their Lord.” (Translation of the above citations is by A. Yusuf Ali)

Not only is the idea of Peace strongly emphasized by the Qur’an, but it also permeates the daily lives and discourse of Muslims. I could cite multiple examples to show that Islam abounds in theological resources which establish the supreme importance of Peace as an ideal state. At this point a critic might say, “That sounds marvelous, but if Peace is so central to the Islamic world and value-system, where in actuality is that Peace? Why are the Muslims so bitterly divided by bickering, fighting and dissension? If Peace is such a fundamental value in Islam, why is there so much talk of ‘holy war’?”

In my opinion, these questions are valid questions and must be answered if the Islamic or Qur’anic claim that Islam is a way of life centered on Peace rather than its opposite is to be taken seriously. I think a good part of these questions can be answered by analyzing the concept of Peace in Islam or the Qur’an. What is the meaning of Peace in Islam? Is it merely the absence of war, or is it something more? One of the central terms for Peace in Arabic is the root-word “*a-m-n*” which means being free from fear, being secure and at rest. From “*a-m-n*” are derived words such as “*mo’min*”: one who gives assurance that Peace will prevail, “*ameen*”: one who is trusted, “*amanat*” : that which is given in trust, and so on. It is clear then from the context in which the root-word “*a-m-n*” and its many derivatives are found in the Qur’an that Peace does not refer to a state merely characterized by absence of war. It is a state related to the ideas of trust and security and freedom from anxiety.

Having explained through various references what Peace means, the Qur’an also describes the way of obtaining this Peace. To put it into very simple terms, what the Qur’an says is as follows: God, the God of all the universes and all the peoples, has created life as a means of sustaining life. The purpose of life is not freedom from the burden of Original Sin (an idea not found in Islam) through renunciation of the material world (Islam does not sanction monasticism), or through redemption (there is no concept of a redeemer or redemption in Islam). The purpose

of human life, then, is not to merely seek “salvation,” - to use a Christian term - but to use God’s greatest gift to humankind which is described very clearly as intellect which elevates human beings not only above the animals, as the Greeks have said, but above the angels, to create a social order in which God’s important attributes become actualized. Amongst these attributes are “*Al-Aleem*” (One who has knowledge) - a title used 158 times in the Qur’an. Amongst God’s most popular names are “*Ar-Rahman*” and “*Ar-Raheem*” which are generally translated as “Most Merciful” or “Most Compassionate,” but the root-word of both names “*rahm*” refers to One who nourishes, or nurtures, who carries to fruition, who is a means of evolution or development. These names of God point, therefore, not only to the highest degree of mercy and compassion but also to God seen as an evolutionary force leading to the development of the human person.

According to the Qur’an, a society at peace would be one in which ignorance and oppression have been eliminated, where the means for sustaining and developing human potential are accessible to all, where justice prevails, where people would be relieved of the fears, uncertainties and anxieties which plague most of humankind.

To recapitulate and to sum up what I have said so far: the idea of Peace is very central to Islam, but the Qur’an does not understand it to be a passive state of affairs, a mere absence of war. A peace generated by a thing such as the Cold War would - in Qur’anic terms - not only be unholy, but unreal, because it does not guarantee the existence of those conditions required for the actualization of human potentialities or the fulfillment of the total human being. Without the elimination of the inequities, inequalities or the injustices which pervade the personal and collective lives of people, it is not possible to talk of Peace in Islamic terms.

Many contemporary Muslims do not have a clear understanding of the comprehensive meaning of the word “*Islam*” or what the idea of Peace actually entails. When the Iranians or other Muslims use the word “*jihad*” to refer to their struggle against oppression and injustice, they use the word correctly, because “*jihad*” (which literally means striving against all that disturbs the condition of Peace as I have defined the term), is an Islamic obligation. But “*jihad*” is not merely removing the source of the wrong, it is also restoring the source of the good. It is not merely removing that which disturbs the condition of Peace but it is restoring Peace itself. And there can be no Peace in a state of social-economic-political anarchy. The greatest “*jihad*” for Muslims lies not in the making of war, but in the direction of making peace, provided they understand that peace is a dynamic state predicated on the idea of justice for all - justice not merely in the legal sense, but also in the social-economic-political and personal sense e.g., justice between man and man, and what is even more important, justice between man and woman. It is interesting to observe that there is more Qur’anic legislation in the relation between the two sexes, men and women, than on any other subject.

There is no time to go into the reasons and causes that characterizes Muslim thinking today, but I would like to mention two points that seem to me of paramount importance. First, there has been a systematic elimination of intellect from Islamic societies over a long period of time, and particularly since the Second World War. There are many reasons for it, but the result is that there are few intellectuals left in the Muslim world. Most of them are either exiled, or imprisoned or killed. Thus many Muslims ask themselves who is going to work out the implications of Islamic ideals, or to translate these ideals into viable institutions and structures. The second

question relates to what I call the problem of the Muslim self-image, or how Muslims see themselves. In order to explain this, let me take a brief moment to explain what I mean by “self-image.” The Jews have seen themselves over the centuries as the Chosen People, and they interpreted their “chosenness” in two senses. To them, being “chosen” - on the one hand - meant that they had a rather monopolistic relationship with God, that they were especially privileged in some kind of way. But it also meant to them that they were elected to suffer in the name of God, and this second idea of “chosenness” has enabled the Jewish people, who have been among the most heavily persecuted in the history of the world, to sustain their identity.

The Hindus have seen themselves as the great assimilators. So whenever Hinduism has been confronted by a challenge, it has never reacted in anger, but always asked the question, “What do you have to say to me, what do you have to offer?” and assimilated the response. That is how it was able to overcome gigantic challenges such as Buddhism that arose in the 6th century in India.

How do Muslims see themselves? Again, it is a very complicated question and all I can say right now is that historically Muslims have always identified Islam with power (particularly political power). This derives from the early history of Islam when Muslims created one of the most spectacular civilizations the world has ever known. It was a tremendous success story, so the idea is firmly rooted in the Muslim psyche that if Islam is working in the world, then it has to be politically powerful and successful. An implication of this idea is that, unlike other peoples such as Jews and Hindus, Muslims do not have the psychological resources to deal with lack of power. When they are confronted with a situation where they have lost power, as was the case at the beginning of the colonial period where they were totally bereft of power, they tend to react and try to regain the lost power because they believe that they are its rightful inheritors. But if they succeed in regaining power, they generally do not know what to do with it. They have not worked out the fundamental question of how power is to be used or distributed. This is primarily the task of thinkers who unfortunately are scarce.

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