

Justice, Peace and Prophet Muhammad



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Al-Islam.org

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Publisher(s):

North American Shia Ithna–Asheri Muslim Communities (NASIMCO) [4]

A short text on the topic of Islamic emphasis on justice and peace between peoples of differing backgrounds and religions, as seen through Qur'anic verses and the honorable treatment of his opponents by Prophet Muhammad.

Category:

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Topic Tags:

Peace [7]

Justice [8]

Miscellaneous information:

Justice, Peace and Prophet Muhammad by Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi (This article is an expanded version of the talk given at the Canadian Parliament, Ottawa on 20 September 2006) Published by: North American Shia Ithna–Asheri Muslim Communities (NASIMCO) 2006 / 1427

Featured Category:

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I begin with the Islamic greeting, *as-salāmu ‘alaykum*, which is a greeting of peace for all of you, for my sisters and brothers in faith as well as for my sisters and brothers in humanity.

These words of courtesy expressed for non-Muslims as “sisters and brothers in humanity” are nothing new in a Muslim’s psychic. Fourteen centuries ago when Imām ‘Ali bin Abi Tālib, the son-in-law and

successor of the Prophet, appointed Mālik al-Ashtar as the governor of Egypt, he wrote an epistle for him which outlined the basic rules of governance. Since Egypt was a multi-faith province of the then Muslim Empire, ‘Ali instructed his new governor as follows:

Infuse your heart with mercy, love and kindness for your subjects. Do not stand over them like greedy beasts who feel it is enough to devour them, for they are of two kinds: either they are your brethren in faith or like you in creation. ¹

This sense of respect for non-Muslims has been an integral part of Islam, the faith brought to us by Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.), a prophet who is followed by one-fifth of the human race and a prophet who is ranked by Michael Hart as “the most influential single figure in human history.” And, therefore, it is important to know him and his people.

Dialogue between civilizations is an urgent need of our time. It is indeed sad to see that even though we live in the era of fast and vast means of communication, nations and religious communities have not yet been able to have a meaningful dialogue with one another.

It is in this background, that I believe the timing of this program at the Canadian Parliament is very appropriate *since* we have just gone over a major speed-bump on the road of interfaith dialogue, a speed-bump in which the Prophet of Islam was maligned as a person who brought nothing but “evil and inhuman” teachings.²

1. See the compilation of Imam ‘Ali’s sermons, letters and sayings compiled by Sayyid Razi in Nahju ’l-Balāgha, letter no. 53. Nahjul Balagha is available online at www.al-islam.org [11]

2. This refers to the statement of Pope Benedict XVI at an university in Germany where he gave a lecture on 12 September 2006 on “Faith, Reason and the University.” In it he quoted the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus as follows: “Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.”

Who was Prophet Muhammad? And what was his mission?

For us Muslims, Prophet Muhammad is the last in the series of 124,000 prophets whom God sent for guidance of human society.

Almighty God says in the Qur’ān,

“Certainly We have sent Our messengers with clear guidance; and We sent down to them the Book and the scale so that humans may conduct themselves with justice.” (Surah al-Hadid, 57:25)

All great prophets of God –Adam to Noah, Abraham to Moses, Jesus to Muhammad– came to establish justice in society.

All humans wish for peace in this world. But peace cannot be achieved in vacuum. It is inter-twined with justice. To have peace, justice must become the foundation of our social system; otherwise, we cannot achieve a durable peace.

What is Justice?

Justice means putting everything in its rightful place; it means balancing things in the proper order; it means creating harmony. If one starts putting things in the wrong places, then he disrupts the social harmony and disturbs peace.

Peace in society depends on peace within ourselves. According to Prophet Muhammad: we must foster the sense of justice within ourselves by creating harmony between our emotions of anger and greed on one the hand, and our reason and intellect on the other hand; between the physical dimension and the spiritual dimension.

A just person is one who controls his anger and his greed by the power of reasoning. This act of controlling one’s anger and greed by the power of reason has been described by Prophet Muhammad as “the major jihād”.

Once, when the Muslim army returned to Medina from its mission, the Prophet greeted the soldiers by saying, “Welcome to the people who have performed the minor jihād, and have yet to go through a major jihād.”

The soldiers asked, “O Prophet of God! What is the major jihād?”

Prophet Muhammad replied, “The spiritual jihād.”

The spiritual jihād is not an easy jihād. You have to gain control over your strongest emotions, and live according to the voice of reason and conscience. Only those who can conquer their egos can truly establish peace in society.

The Prophet of Islam was ahead of his times in promoting peace and justice in society. It would be worthwhile to look at how he dealt with non-Muslim minorities and with the enemies during the war time because the true worth of a society manifests when it is put under pressure.

With Non-Muslim Minority in Medina

The Prophet and his followers were a persecuted minority in Mecca. When the torture became unbearable, he migrated to Medina, a city in northern Arabia, most of whose inhabitants had already accepted Islam. Once he settled in Medina, the Prophet realized that there was a minority Jewish community in that city that had no inclination to accept Islam. He met them and invited them to a pact with the Muslims so that each religious group in Medina knew its rights and obligations. Some relevant part of the charter reads as follows:

- The Jews who enter into this covenant shall be protected from all insults and vexations; they shall have an equal right as our own people to our assistance and good offices. The Jews of the various tribes...and all other non-Muslim residents of Medina shall form with the Muslims one composite nation
- They shall practice their religion as freely as the Muslims.
- The allies of the Jews shall enjoy the same security and freedom. The guilty shall be pursued and punished. The Jews shall join the Muslims in defending Medina against all enemies. The interior of Medina shall be a sacred place for all who accept this Charter. The allies of the Muslims and of the Jews shall be as respected as the principal parties of this Charter.

This agreement between the first Muslim community and the Jewish community in Medina shows the sense of justice portrayed in the Prophet's character in dealing with minorities. It also clearly shows that the Prophet did not spread Islam, even in the city of Medina, by force; on the contrary, he promoted peaceful co-existence with followers of other faiths, especially Jews and Christians. Out of the three Abrahamic faiths, it is only Islam which has recognized Judaism and Christianity on a theological level; the Jews and the Christians are known, in Islam, as *Ahlul Kitāb*, the People of the Scriptures.

Following the example of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) many rulers in Muslim history maintained peaceful and cordial relations with their non-Muslim subjects. If we were to compare the attitude of the Muslim rulers towards the minorities living under their rule during the nineteenth century—with the attitude of the Europeans and the Americans towards their minorities, I dare to say that the record of the Muslims would be much better. Professor Roderic Davison, a prominent historian of the Ottoman Empire, writes, “It might in fact have been argued that the Turks were less oppressive of their subject people than were Prussians of the Poles, the English of the Irish, or the Americans of the Negroes...There is evidence to show that in this period [i.e., late 19th century], there was emigration from independent Greece into the Ottoman Empire, since some Greeks found the Ottoman government a more indulgent master [than their own Greek government].”¹

If you study the medieval history of Europe, you will see that the only model of a peaceful multi-cultural and multi-faith society was Spain under the Muslim rule—a Spain in which Christians, Jews and Muslims lived in peace and harmony.

Non-Muslim Relatives & Neighbours

An Islamic injunction about loving and caring for a neighbour covers all kinds of neighbours:

“Worship God and do not associate anything with Him, and be good to the parents and to the relatives, the orphans, the needy, the neighbour who is your relative, the neighbour who is not your relative, the fellow traveler, the wayfarer and the slave. Verily God does not love one who behaves proudly and boastfully.” (Surah an-Nisaa, 4:36)

Even if a Muslim’s parents are idol-worshippers, Islam –the religion of monotheism– instructs him to respect and be kind to them. Almighty God says in the Qur’ān:

“And if they [that is, your parents] insist on you to associate (an idol) with Me... then do not obey them; however, live with them in this world kindly...” (Surah al-Luqman, 31:15)

With Enemies in the Battle Field

The Qur’ān instructs the Muslims to maintain justice even when dealing with their enemies.

“O you who believe, be maintainers of justice (and bearer of) witness for (the sake of) God. Let not hatred of a people incite you to act unjustly; be just—this is nearer to righteousness. And fear God surely God is aware of what you do.” (Surah al-Maida, 5:8)

The first battle in the Muslim history is very significant. It took place in the 2nd year of the Muslim calendar between the Muslims and the polytheists of Mecca. Even though outnumbered and ill-equipped, the Muslims defeated the Meccans and took seventy prisoners of war.

The norm among all societies at that time was to either kill the POWs or make them slaves. But Prophet Muhammad instructed the Muslims to treat the POWs humanely; they were brought back safely to Medina and given decent lodging in the houses of the people who had taken them prisoners. The Qur’ān decreed that the POWs must not be ill-treated in any way.

According to a Western biographer of Prophet Muhammad, Sir William Muir, “In pursuance of Mahomet’s commands, the citizens of Medina...received the prisoners and treated them with much consideration. ‘Blessings be on the men of Medina’, said one of the prisoners in later days, ‘they made us ride, while they themselves walked, they gave us wheaten bread to eat when there was little of it; contenting themselves with dates.’”

The way the Prophet dealt with the prisoners was very revolutionary. The poor prisoners were released free; those who came from affluent families of Mecca were returned for a specified ransom. (See the Qur’ān: Surah Muhammad, 47:4) But the most interesting case was of those prisoners who were literate – the Prophet Muhammad made a deal with them that they could go free if they could teach ten Muslim children how to read and write.

Even the rules of engagement during war are also important. Whenever Muslims embarked on the minor jihād, a defensive jihād, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) had standard instructions regarding non-combatants and also the environment:

- “Do not violate the treaties.”
- “Do not kill an old person or a child or a woman.”
- “Do not cut down a tree.”
- “Neither burn down the palm-trees nor drown them with water.”
- “Do not cut down a tree bearing fruits.”
- “Do not drown the plantations.”

- “Do not poison the water of the infidels.”²

All this was done fourteen hundred years ago; long, long before the Geneva Convention came about.

In background of the secret prisons run by the CIA, ‘the manual of torture’ written by the US army to interrogate the prisoners, and the disclosure of torture in Abu Ghuraib prison, I can proudly say that the example and teachings of Prophet Muhammad about Prisoners of War (POWs) are “definitively good and humane” even according to the standards of the 21st century.

1. Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire 1856–1876* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963) p. 116.
2. Al-Hurr al-‘Amili, *Wasā’ilu ’sh-Shah*, vol. 11, p. 43–45.

The Prophet Muhammad also specified the rights of animals. He said:

- (1) Not to burden it with a load beyond its ability.
- (2) Not to make it walk more than its ability.
- (3) When you reach a rest area, first you, the rider, must provide the fodder for your animal before taking care of your own needs.
- (4) Whenever you pass by a pool of water or a river let the animal quince its thirst.
- (5) Do not hit on its face because it also praises its Lord.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the essence of a meaningful dialogue between civilizations is to find ways and means to bring the religious communities to practice the ideals preached by the great Prophets of God.

We have to challenge the extremists on both sides:

1. to the Bin Ladens who hurt and kill innocent civilians while the Prophet Muhammad taught compassion and kindness even to animals and plants;
2. to the fundamentalist Christians of southern US who formulated a ‘just war’ argument soon after 9/11 and back the US war on theological grounds while Jesus taught compassion and forgiveness by saying whoever smites you on your one cheek, ‘turn the other too.’

The solution to contemporary problems is not less religion, the solution is more religion in order to bring the ideal preached and the practice implemented to one another. The Muslims should get closer to the example of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) and the Christians should get closer to the example of Prophet Jesus (a.s.)—only then we will have a durable peace on the globe.

I end with the famous prayer taught to us by the Family of the Prophet:

“O Allah, You are the peace, from You emanates the peace and to You shall the peace return.”

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