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Boundless Peace and Friendship in the Qur'an

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Abstract

One of the most significant current discussions about Islam is that of peace. What does the Qur'an say about peace and war, and how did the Prophet Muhammad (s) deal with those who did not accept Islam as a way of life? This paper examines the solutions the Qur'an provides to prevent bloodshed and its emphasis on peace towards humankind.

According to its teachings, preventing factors that lead to violence such as disputation, unjustified killing, and holding feelings of vengeance are some actions and feelings people are to refrain from. Allah has set worldly punishments as retaliation for those who unjustly kill or injure others.

Moreover, the Qur'an sets principles of settling peace, while the Prophet (s) was an exemplar of those standards in assuming the role of the peacemaker with polytheists and atheists, as well as with the People of the Book.

Islam highly regards those with a peaceful attitude provided that those who trample on the rights of others are to be firmly resisted in this world, and will face judgment for that act in the afterlife.

Introduction

According to the Glorious Qur'an, an important characteristic of the Prophet Mohammad (s) is that he was sent as

"a mercy to the people of the world". **(*21:107*)**

Part of this mercy is exhibited in inviting people to peace and friendship. During the establishment of the Islamic government in Medina, the Prophet's first missions were to establish peace, friendship, and

brotherhood as commanded in the Qur'an. For many years, the Prophet (s) was asked by God not to use any militant exercise including defensive war as a resort in his encounter with the enemies of Islam. The efforts were made to treat the enemies, including the polytheists and atheists, with as much mercy as possible.

The People of the Book were dealt with in the same manner. In what follows, we will study two points. The first regards the solutions Islam provides to prevent bloodshed and conflict; the second is how to treat polytheists, atheists, and the People of the Book with a peaceful attitude with the exception that all oppressors must be firmly resisted.

Preventive factors that lead to war and bloodshed

Preventing serious conflict is essential in establishing peace and harmony. That is, preventing war is more important than putting war to an end. The holy Qur'an affirms this matter and offers solutions to avert war. Below we point to some of them:

Prohibiting Disputation

Disputing and illogical argumentation is one factor that brings about war and quarrelling. Disputing is understood as speaking while stubbornly persisting in opinions that are not accepted by the other party. Islam recommends arguing based on reason. This type of argument is called "al-burh n" and Allah (swt) asks those who do not rationally accept Islam to "Present your reason," a verse repeated four times in the Qur'an (2:111; 21:24; 27:64; 28:75).

In this verse, Islam does not support the imposing belief without reason; its aim is to allow for a respectful intellectual discussion. If the unbelievers find their own reasons insufficient and realize Islam's plausibility, they will accept this religion.

Another verse that reads "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256) is also a witness to the fact that the principles of religion must not be reluctantly accepted: it must be based on reason. Ibn Mas'ud and Ibn Zayd, two of the Prophet's disciples, misinterpreted this verse when they mentioned it to have been abrogated by the verse of sayf (sword) because Islam does not resort to force in accepting its principles, nor does it confirm its claim via war.

On the contrary, it intends to present its reasons and distinguish truth from falsehood based on reasoning, as the next verse says, "The right direction is henceforth distinct from the false one." This indicates that at the beginning, there was no reluctance; accepting Islam must be based on rationale, and if a Muslim acknowledges Islam without certainty his acceptance of Islam will not mean anything. The opinion of all Shi'ite jurists is that following (taqlid) is not permitted in the principles of religion. And it means that believing in Allah, His Prophet (s), and other articles of faith must not be reluctantly accepted.

Thus, the verse “There is no compulsion in religion” has not been abrogated and if Islam’s plausibility is not confirmed, we must not force one to accept it as those who accept the truth when it is presented because Allah created mankind with the ability to distinguish right from wrong. We conclude from the above that the Qur’an invites mankind to rationally think and converse while prohibiting disputation and obstinacy as that which brings about war and bloodshed.

Islam and the Qur’an have tried to prevent war and quarrelling via prohibiting disputation. Reflecting on the verses such as 2:134 and139, and 11:121 and 122, one may come to the conclusion that when discussing an issue, disagreements do not produce good results; both parties should stop arguing and leave it to God.

Profanity even as retaliation has been prohibited; the believers are asked to avoid it. The Qur’an says:

Do not abuse those whom they invoke besides God, lest they should abuse God out of hostility, without any knowledge. That is how to every people We have made their conduct seem decorous. Then their return will be to their Lord and He will inform them concerning what they used to do. (***6:108***)

Therefore, the first factor which has an important role in preventing quarrelling and war is to avoid disputation and illogical argumentation. People are expected to leave the matter to God. The Qur’an also assures humankind that every nation is responsible for its own deeds:

That was a nation that has passed: for it there will be what it has earned, and for you there will be what you have earned, and you will not be questioned about what they used to do. (***2:134***)

Any nation or man by any religion will be punished as a result of his own bad deeds and the false religion of a nation will not result in the punishment of other nations. In this way, Islam prevents void disputing. Due to its importance, this idea is repeated in the same chapter:

That was a nation that has passed: for it there will be what it has earned, and for you there will be what you have earned, and you will not be questioned about what they used to do. (***2:141***)

In chapters/verses 43:83 and 70:82, God asks the Prophet (s) to “let them gossip and play until they encounter their day which they are promised.” Thus, the Prophet (s) is asked to leave those who are not ready to engage in a rational discussion until the Day of Judgment in which their destiny will become clear.

Prohibition of unjustified killing and its divine punishment

In the Qur’an, one of the most terrible heavenly punishment is for those who unjustly kill another person:

That is why We decreed for the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul, without [***its being guilty of***] ***manslaughter or corruption on the earth, is as though he had killed all mankind, and***

whoever saves a life is as though he had saved all mankind. Our apostles certainly brought them manifest signs, yet even after that many of them commit excesses on the earth. (***5:32***)

In this verse, killing one person is likened to killing mankind from Adam's creation to the end of the world. There are several traditions that explain this verse:

If one person kills another unjustly, he will be judged equal to a killer of mankind and if he repeats this crime, his punishment will be more severe.

Fear of divine punishment is an internal sanction and factor that helps prevent bloodshed. The internal preventing factors are more important than the external ones, because there is no way to escape from them.

So in addition to considering the external preventing factors, Islam tries to strengthen the internal factors in order to prevent many crimes. Islam not only sets a heavenly punishment for murderers but it also forbids any kind of oppression and injustice, even minor crimes, and settles heavenly punishment for it to prevent oppressors.

Shi'ite jurists unanimously agree that one of the conditions for attaining Imamate is that the Imam must not have committed any oppression or injustice in his lifetime. Before his demise, Imam Sajjad (a) embraced his son Imam Baqir (a) and told him what he himself was told by his father Imam Husayn (a): "O my son, avoid oppressing anyone who does not have any supporter but Allah."1 Allah has prevented quarrelling, war, and bloodshed by prohibiting oppression and injustice and setting divine punishment for murdering believers.

Islamic law not only prohibits oppressing Muslims; rather, the same applies with regards to oppressing Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Persecuting them under an Islamic government is forbidden and results in punishment.

The Prophet (s) said: "Anyone who troubles the People of the Book who live under the security contract, it is as if he has troubled me." In this manner, by forbidding oppression and distressing others, and considering the heavenly punishment for the oppressor, even to non-Muslims, Islam provides the ground for peace and friendship for humankind.

Setting worldly punishment

Allah has prescribed retaliation as a worldly punishment for those who unjustly kill or injure others: "There is life for you in (the law of) retaliation." (2:179) Retaliation is necessary, since it contributes to the continuity of human life and helps to avoid chaos. Islam has set worldly punishments not only for those who unjustly kill Muslims but for those who kill the infidels who do not fight against the Islamic government as well. All Muslim jurists unanimously agree that if a Muslim unjustifiably kills a non-Muslim, he must be punished. If the murderer, after being punished, kills another member of the People

of the Book, he will be killed in retaliation. According to jurists, if a Shi'ite Muslim kills another Muslim, he will be retaliated, regardless of the murderer's nationality or the victim. Thus, Islam has prevented bloodshed and quarrelling by considering retaliation for unjust murder.

1 Al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 331.

Controlling feelings of vengeance

Before the advent of Islam, Arab tribes held the vengeful practice of killing not only the murderer, but also the members of his tribe. Throughout history, many great wars took place between the tribes as a result of one or a few murders. The Qur'an's dictum

"...but let him not commit excess in slaying. Lo! He will be helped" (***17:33***)

is ordered to prevent hostility and warfare. Allah sentences the murderer and advises the victim's relatives not to feel compelled to take revenge by killing the murderer's relatives or other members of his tribe, city, or country. This in turn prevents great wars that result in the killing of many innocent people.

Moreover, Islam has defined the way in which to punish the murderer and prohibit him from horrible killings to control the revengeful feeling of the killed person's family. It has explained that guardians of the murdered are not permitted to act as they wish.

Imam Ali (a) stated in his will to his sons Imam Hasan and Imam Hussein (a) that should he die by Ibn Muljim's stroke, he should retaliate by only one stroke of the sword. The Imam also reminded his sons of the Prophet's statement to "abstain from mutilating the dead body, even the body of a wild dog."2 Here, Islam tries to remove hardheartedness by controlling vengeful feelings and disallowing anyone to commit crimes against the murderer.

Boundless peace and harmony

Islam emerged in a society which suffered from racism and discrimination. They believed in superiority of the Arab race and took pride in their tribe and language. Islam nullified this attitude by regarding superiority only in piety:

O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most Godwary among you. Indeed God is all-knowing, all-aware. (***49:13***).

One of the Prophet's great teachings was that differences in race and ethnicity were merely a reason for recognizing and acknowledging each other. If mankind were similar in appearance, recognition would be difficult; thus, these differences do not indicate any superiority or inferiority. Islam invites all to be brothers and sisters to one another and eliminate feelings of superiority.

Moreover, Allah invites His Prophet to show humility to the believers:

"Lower thy wing (***in tenderness***) ***for the believers"*** (***15:88***)

and

"lower thy wing (***in kindness***) ***unto those believers who follow thee."*** (***26:215***)

"Lowering the wings" is an allusion of the utmost humility that one can show to another person.

Allah advises man to display humility to his parents (17:24) and to the believers. Allah also asks Muslims to be affectionate to other Muslims despite any differences that may exist between them.

The Qur'an names Muslims of any race and tribe "brothers" of one another:

"The believers are naught else than brothers" (***49:10***)

and because of it, they must set the brotherhood relation with each other. The Prophet in his first undertaking in Medina established the brotherhood relation between Muslims who harbored hostility among each other. Islam removed this hostility:

Hold fast, all together, to Allah's cord, and do not be divided. And remember Allah's blessing upon you when you were enemies, then He brought your hearts together, so you became brothers with His blessing. And you were on the brink of a pit of Fire, whereat He saved you from it. Thus does Allah clarify His signs for you so that you may be guided. (***3:103***)

Deeds such as slandering and backbiting, which provide the ground for quarrelling and disputing, have also been prohibited

and their punishment is known to be much more severe than those which are personal. Similarly, deeds such as establishing friendly relations and peace are rewarded much more than those good deeds which merely affects the agent himself. In his will, Imam Ali (a) indicates the value of peaceful relations by quoted the Prophet (s) who said, "Settling peace and friendship is better than one year of praying and fasting."

The principle of settling peace and friendship among people

Explaining the mission of the Prophet (s), the Qur'an says:

"We did not send you but as a mercy to all the nations." (***21:107***)

This verse shows that Islam itself is based on mercy and kindness and indirectly asks Muslims to treat mankind with mercy and peace. The Qur'an also says:

And when we made a covenant with the children of Israel: you shall not serve any but Allah and

(***you shall do***) ***good to*** (***your***) ***parents, and to the near of kin and to the orphans and the needy, and you shall speak to men good words and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate. Then you turned back except a few of you and*** (***now too***) ***you turn aside.*** (***2:83***)

In this verse, God instructs people to treat one another with respect and kindness. Practicing good conduct is not exclusive to using good words with one another; it must be observed in all aspects of one's life:

Allah does not forbid you in regard to those who did not make war against you on account of religion and did not expel you from your homes, that you deal with them with kindness and justice. Indeed Allah loves the just. (***60:8***)

Elsewhere, the Qur'an praises

"those who restrain their anger and pardon men" (***3:134***).

It means that virtuous people, both Muslims and non-Muslims forgive mankind, pardon their mistakes, and do not compensate evil with evil. Considering the previous verse, God has ordered the Prophet of Islam (s) and the people who invite others to Islam to treat their enemies peacefully, confront them with patience and forbearance, and to forgive their ill-treatment.

This friendly and honorable behaviour may transform the enemy to become an intimate friend. Prophet Muhammad said, "Behave well with those who mistreat you." Thus, it becomes clear that in Islam having peaceful behaviour is a general principle, although in some cases, such as when there is a case where a systematic violation of one's rights is carried out, an exception may be made to it.

The Prophet's peaceful conduct with polytheists and atheists

In spite of the pressures the Prophet faced during his residing in Mecca and before immigrating to Medina which lasted 13 years, he had been ordered to be patient with the polytheists despite their hostility and prohibited retaliating the militant enemies. This was ordered until the verse

"Sanction is given unto those who fight because they have been wronged; and Allah is indeed able to give them victory." (***22:39***)

was revealed in Medina. Based on the commentaries of the Qur'an and hadiths, this verse was the first to be revealed in Medina. Thus, the Prophet and his disciples were permitted to fight with the polytheists in order to protect themselves against the oppressors and their hostility.

Many events during the Prophet's time indicate that he made extreme efforts not to shed blood. For example, when the polytheists broke the Hudaybiyyah Peace treaty, the Prophet honourably refrained from bloodshed though he had an army of 1000 equipped soldiers; instead, he took advantage of intermediating with his uncle Abbas.

This was an effort to capture Mecca in peace. By reflecting on the Prophet's behaviour toward the Qurayshi polytheists, especially their chiefs, we can understand the real meaning of verse 107 in chapter 21, which states,

"We did not send you but as a mercy to all nations."

The Prophet's kindness is also depicted in his treatment towards the polytheist leaders who committed heinous crimes. When Abu Sufyan, the chief of the polytheists, converted to Islam, the Prophet introduced his home as a peaceful place when he stated, "Anyone who takes refuge in Abu Sufyan's home or who closes the door of his home or takes refuge in Masjid-al-Har m will be safe."

Another example is the Prophet's behaviour toward Safw n ibn Umayyah, a famous criminal whose name was listed among the ten persons whom the Prophet (s) described as those who had to be punished because of their numerous crimes. The Prophet (s) forgave Safw n through Umayyah ibn Wahh b, one of the Prophet's disciples and invited him to Islam.

In response, Safw n asked the Prophet (s) to give him two months to consider this offer, upon which the Prophet (s) gave four months. The Prophet's behaviour shows that he (s) never intended to impose his beliefs: conversion to Islam must be based on insight and awareness. Instead of confiscating his properties or taking part of it for free, when the Muslims were in need, the Prophet (s) asked Safw n to give 70 armours as a guaranteed loan.

In another instance, when the Muslim army was entering Mecca, Sa'd ibn 'Ub dah was carrying the flag. As he was passing by Abu Sufyan, he cried, "Abu Sufyan, today is the day of fight and bloodshed. Today, God makes the Quraysh despised and humble." When the Prophet (s) heard these words he stated, "No, today is the day of mercy and kindness. Today is the day in which God will endear the Quraysh." According to Ibn Hish m and V qidi, after the above-mentioned conversation, the Prophet removed Sa'd ibn 'Ub dah of the flagman position and gave it to Imam Ali (a). After capturing Mecca, despite Quraysh's hostility, the Prophet (s) stated, "Proceed. All of you are free." Addressing the Prophet (s), God says in the Qur'an:

Thus it is due to mercy from God that you deal with them gently, and had you been hard-hearted, they would certainly have dispersed from around you. (***3:159***)

In the year nine A.H., verse 5 in chapter 9 was revealed and until that time permission was not given to attack the idolaters despite all their mischief. Until that time war had not been legislated. This means that the polytheists had the opportunity of more than 20 years to study Islam and put forth any objections or refute its claims. They did not do so and instead continued to trouble the believers and prevent God's message from reaching His people; finally, God revealed the above verse. Nonetheless, immediately afterwards God says:

And if one of the idolaters seek protection from you, grant him protection till he hears the word of

Allah, then make him attain his place of safety; this is because they are a people who do not know. (***9:6***)

This verse modifies verse 5 and indicates that if one of the polytheists takes refuge from you and is not informed about Islam and asks for an opportunity to research Islam's truth, even during war, you must accept his request. Of course, this verse uses the phrase “hearing the word of Allah,” but exegetes take it to mean to study Islam in general.

The one who wants to know more should be given a chance to return home or to a safe place. Thus, the initial war is not against those who have not been informed about Islam; it is carried out against oppressors who reject Islam due to their interests and may even resort to fighting against them. The permission must also come from God.

Defensive nature of the initial war

Defensive aspects of the initial war will become clear after surveying the following verses. The first and foremost ones to be fiercely resisted against are the war makers and those who follow them, as stated in verses 12, 13, and 36 of chapter 9:

But if they break their pledges after their having made a treaty and revile your religion, then fight the leaders of unfaith – indeed they have no [commitment to] pledges – maybe they will relinquish.

Will you not make war on a people who broke their pledges and resolved to expel the Apostle, and opened [hostilities] against you initially? Do you fear them? But Allah is worthier of being feared by you, should you be faithful.

…Fight all the polytheists, just as they fight you all.

These verses include the recurring command of war to be used only as a defensive strategy knowing too well that the opposite sides are war seekers who plan and/or commit atrocious acts towards humanity. The order to initiate war was never put into action: Allah's purpose was to threaten the polytheists and intimidate the proud monarchists. Narrated by historians, after the revelation of the above verses, the polytheists converted to Islam in groups after realizing its truth; the prophet (s) was not required to execute this verse. Therefore, the war in Islam is “defensive war” in principle, and God prescribes it only when necessary.

Peace and friendship with the People of the Book

Muslims are encouraged to strengthen their relationship with the People of the Book, namely, the Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, though some of them may have on occasions attempted to question Muslims' faith or make them turn away from it. God urges Muslims to treat them with mercy and kindness and to strive to seek companionship:

And argue not with the people of the scripture unless it be in (a way) that is better. **(*29:47*)**

If a conversation leads to an argument, Muslims must observe respecting the other side by gently arguing their points, while avoid insulting and inappropriate talk. There were cases in which the Prophet (s) was compelled to fight some of the People of the Book. For example, after some Jews in Medina acted against the peace treaty between themselves and the Prophet (s) in an attempt to overthrow Islam, the following verse was revealed:

Fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the latter day, nor do they prohibit what Allah and his messenger have prohibited, nor follow the religion of truth, out of those who have been given the book, until they pay the tax in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection. **(*9:29*)**

This verse was revealed in the year nine A.H. after the three Jewish tribes of Medina, namely Banu Qaynuq ', Banu Nadhir, and Banu Qurayzah, concluded a peace treaty with the Prophet (s) and all three broke it. They were therefore to be punished for their deeds. Thus, in the above verse, God orders Muslims to fight with the People of the Book if they reject the laws of the Islamic government, such as paying tax (instead of zakat and in return to services they receive from the government) and avoiding hostility against Muslims.

The meaning of the phrase "They are in a state of subjection" which some of the clear-sighted exegetes have mentioned in their commentary, is that they must accept these laws, in addition to observing the state's laws. It does not mean Muslims have been permitted to insult them when they take tax from them.

According to the Prophet's peace contract with the Najr n Christians in the tenth year of Hijrah, we can understand that the People of the Book (including Christians and Jews) who lived in an Islamic country accepted to pay tax and in return, the Islamic ruler was responsible for their security. Though the great Prophet of Islam had complete authority and was therefore able to encounter them in any manner, he yearned for harmony and endorsed the peace contract.

The holy Qur'an declares that the general principle for treating unbelievers who have not fought with Muslims as follows:

Allah does not forbid you in regard to those who did not make war against you on account of religion and did not expel you from your homes,that you deal with them with kindness and justice. Indeed Allah loves the just. **(*60:8*)**

Based on this holy verse as a general principle that Muslims must treat all people who do not intend to kill Muslims, occupy their land, and/or drive them out of their homes, with kindness and justice.

Conclusion

Islam invites all mankind towards peace, regardless of one's nationality or religion, and recommends them to base their dealings on peace and good conduct.

Of course, there may be narrowly defined exceptions, but the general principle is that Muslims must be companionable towards themselves or others and must live in peace with one another. Tribal, racial, or language differences must not cause the self-glorification that result in humiliating others. Muslims must also gently and kindly interact with non-Muslims.

This general principle is not to be mistaken for contradicting the notion of fighting to resist the oppressors and defending one's rights. Islam invites all people to peace and friendship and invites other religions to converse in such a spirit. This general principle does not contradict resisting against the oppressors and defending one's rights.

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2. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 401, p. 104

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