

# Peace

## Peace in the Islamic Tradition

Dr. Liyakat Takim

The Qur'an asks human beings to be morally upright and help establish a peaceful and just social order. The Qur'anic view of a peaceful world and tolerance between human beings is interwoven to its view of a universal moral discourse that unites all earthly citizens. For the Qur'an, human beings are united under one God (2:213). They are created with an innate disposition (*fitra*) that leads to knowledge of and belief in God. In fact, the Qur'an posits a universal morality for humankind that is conjoined to values ingrained in the conscience of all human beings (30:30). This suggests a universal, ethical language that all human beings can connect to and engage in. As the Qur'an states, "He (God) has inspired in [human beings] the good or evil [nature] of an act, whosoever has purified it (the soul) has succeeded, one who corrupts it has surely failed." (91:8-10). The Qur'anic concept of a universal moral order is thus grounded in the recognition of an innate disposition engraved in the human conscience. Through this notion, Islam embraced certain universal human values that could form the basis for interaction with a diverse "other."

Human beings are to strive towards virtuous deeds (5:48), for the most noble person in the eyes of God is the one who is most pious (49:13). These and other verses command Muslims to build bridges of understanding and cooperation with fellow human beings so as to create a just social order.

Peaceful co-existence further necessitates that people abstain from abusing those who do not share their beliefs. Deriding and mocking others can often engender violence and hatred. Therefore, the Qur'an urges the respect for the beliefs of others. The Qur'an further states, "Had God willed, they would not have been not idolaters; and We have not appointed you a watcher over them, neither are you their guardian. Abuse not those to whom they pray, apart from God, otherwise, they will abuse God in revenge without knowledge. So We have decked out fair to every community their deeds; then to their Lord they shall return, and He will tell them what they have been doing" (6:107-108).

The ramification of the preceding passages is that, since guidance is the function of God, it is He alone who has the right to decide the "spiritual destiny" of human beings. The Qur'an categorically maintains that the ultimate fate human beings be left to God, the true judge of human conduct. Not even the Prophet has the right to judge the ultimate fate of human beings. As it states, "Upon you [O Prophet] is the deliverance [of the message], upon us is the reckoning [of the deeds] (13:40)." In another verse, the Qur'an states, "Had God willed, they would not have been idolaters. We have not appointed you as a watcher over them, neither are you their guardian (6:107)." By elevating judgment to the divine realm, the Qur'an accommodates the space for coexistence on the human plane.

The Qur'an also asks the Prophet to pursue peace rather than warfare. As it says, "If they (your enemies) incline toward peace then you should incline toward it too (8:61)."

There have been many instances where Muslims have co-existed peacefully with non-Muslims. Indeed, to portray Islam as intrinsically violent and incompatible with Western values is to ignore Muslim engagement with and contribution to Western civilization. The tendency to view Islam through violence and militant lens distorts the view that Islam has a rich cultural heritage and precepts that necessitate co-existence with the other. Spain is a great example where Muslims not only co-existed peacefully with Christians and Jews, but also protected them and shared their scientific achievements with their counterparts. For much of Islamic history, Muslim societies have been remarkably open to the outside world.

The vast expanse of the Muslim world inevitably meant that it came to encompass a variety of civilizational and cultural forms. By the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Muslim-majority world showed a remarkable variety of institutional forms from North Africa to South Asia, up to and including the hinterland of the Chinese empire, and soon thereafter emerged as a dominant force in Southeast Asia. Historically, Islam has exhibited much tolerance to members of other faith communities such as in Spain, India, the holy lands, Turkey, Africa, and Indonesia.

Due to the status and protection the Qur'an accorded to the people of the book, violence and genocide against them became virtually impossible. Jews in Islamdom did not face a tradition of anti-semitism even though the people of the book in general were regarded as second-class citizens. They had full religious liberty and were allowed to manage their own affairs. They were also able to participate in mainstream culture and commerce. This is one reason why Sephardic Jews were treated much better by the Muslims than Ashkenazim were treated by Christians.

In conclusion, it is correct to state that the quest for peace challenges us to reevaluate how we have viewed the other. It also necessitates a shift in paradigm, asking us to embrace those we have previously excluded or demonized. The challenge is to seek opportunities for interpretations that can make a community see the enemy in a new way. This is an important measure to establish peaceful relationship. There is a concurrent requirement to move away from defining ourselves over and above an enemy "other." The starting point is to re-examine traditions that draw boundaries of exclusion and marginalization. Peaceful coexistence is only possible when we no longer see a group as the other but as a concrete human community with ancient values and norms. Ultimately, peaceful relations between human beings is grounded on a community's construction of an order based on egalitarianism, justice, and a concern for the moral and social well-being of all its citizens.

PEACE - AND WAR

By Dr. James Gaffney

Peace is a concept whose importance in the three kindred religions of Jews, Muslims, and Christians is attested by its immemorial use as both a blessing and a greeting. The idea itself is not, of course, inherently religious. In popular usage it is most commonly employed in contrast with conditions opposed to it. For modern persons the most familiar such contrast is undoubtedly between peace and war, but this is a specific instance of a much broader contrast. Although the concept of peace is largely restricted

to life, and especially human life, it has in the past been applied much more widely, to smoothly functioning, gracefully organized entities. On this basis the term has even been applied to war itself, implying a military campaign that was proceeding flawlessly, according to a wise plan, towards an intended outcome. The essential idea is that of effective harmony, which both satisfies and gratifies. St. Augustine's often-quoted description of peace as a serenity deriving from right order, *tranquillitas ordinis*, is a classic expression of this idea. And since for many theological cosmologies, right order is imposed or enjoined by God, peace can be achieved and preserved only to the extent that God is submitted to. In the case of free creatures, this submission must take the form of obedience to God's law, that is to say, of religious obligation. For Muslims, the very name, Islam, expresses this idea. For Jews, quite similarly, it is righteousness in conformity with *Torah* that brings peace. Christianity builds on this conception, but also develops it in an irreducibly different way.

What most distinguishes Christian theology from that of its parental Judaism, is its variant approach to the notion that peace is achievable by submitting to God's law.

While Christianity does not deny this, it introduces a complication. Christian orthodoxy contends that humanity's inveterate sinfulness, deriving from the first created human beings, has incapacitated their descendants for obeying God's law fully and steadily. The resulting disharmony between creatures and Creator annihilates peace, which can be

restored only if morally enfeebled human beings can be reconciled with a God whom they persistently disobey. That this is possible, but only in union with Jesus Christ who links humanity to divinity and extends divine mercy to human sinners, is the very essence of the Christian Gospel. Thus, the New Testament can say of Christ, "He is our peace," and refer to its own message as a "gospel of peace" (*Ephesians*, 2.14, 6.15). By the same token, peace is the hallmark of that restored harmony with God that Jesus refers to as the "Kingdom of God."

Christianity's distinctive approach to the problem of submitting effectively to God generates a distinctive slant in Christian moral thinking. As peace with God was achieved not by a cessation of sin by human beings, but by God's forgiveness of sinners, the peace that belongs to Christianity is based on and expressed by mercy and forgiveness. The ultimate test of distinctively Christian morality is its readiness to forgive. And the corollary of readiness to forgive is unwillingness to retaliate, to exact vengeance or nurture vengefulness. Thus Jesus' *magna carta* of the Kingdom of God, his Sermon on the Mount, abounds in such phrases as "turn the other cheek," "blessed are the peacemakers," "love those who hate you," and, addressed in prayer to God, "forgive us as we forgive...".

## COMPLICATION OF CHRISTIAN PEACE

Merely to state, however briefly, this account of what Jesus and the New Testament writers understood to be the distinctively Christian attitude towards peace in their relationship with God and with other human beings, must be, for any honest Christian, an occasion of acute shame. To review such an account must be, for any non-Christian, an occasion of acute cynicism. For the public history of Christianity has been for some sixteen centuries, a history of vast undertakings of retaliatory or aggressive violence only intermittently punctuated by periods and localities of peace. Most of this violence has been waged by Christians, much of it in the name of some of Christianity's many subspecies. About this, several things need to be said.

First, Christians who found peace in fostering peace, Christians recognizable by Gospel standards of unselfish mercy, did not cease to exist. They still exist, in great numbers, as anyone whose sociability ranges widely in Christian communities is sure to discover. They exist not only as individuals, but as members of organized Christian communities who are unanimous about these Gospel standards. In the larger, more heterogeneous Christian churches, such standards may be prominent as official doctrine, while little-observed and even little-known by members.

Secondly, although Christianity's theology of peace incurred little criticism and underwent little modification, its practical morality was complicated by events that led to compromises. In the first place, the earliest Christians anticipated a very imminent conclusion of human history, such that the obvious difficulties of maintaining a forgiving, non-retributive way of life could be borne in the assurance that they would soon have their definitive eternal reward. In the second place, Christianity became, after more than three centuries of persecution and alienation, the established religion of the Roman Empire, an empire fashioned and sustained by armed force, and threatened by violent invasion. The abrupt absorption, on political grounds, of nearly all Romans within the Christian Church, filled that church with religiously unmotivated and uninstructed persons who combined as best they could old habits with new observances.

## DOCTRINAL REVISIONS AND DILUTIONS

These new circumstances, unanticipated by any New Testament document, have challenged the ingenuity of Christian pastoral and intellectual leaders from the fifth to the twenty-first century. Two important themes run through many of their efforts. One is a tendency to separate private and personal from public and official morality in the Christian community, encouraging adherence to traditional Gospel standards in the former, while introducing in the latter a flexibility associated with political "realism." Thus, in St. Jerome's normative Latin translation of the New Testament, the "enemies" Jesus calls upon us to love and forgive are rendered as personal enemies (*inimici*), making it possible for users of that text to argue that political enemies (*hostes*) were a different matter. Similarly, St. Augustine absolutely forbade killing a personal assailant even to preserve one's life. But waging and serving in political wars could be justified not only to defend but even to punish "wrongs." His attempts to limit such justification, aided by pagan philosophers, are sometimes considered to be the beginning of Christian "just war" doctrine.

The other notable theme that characterizes these efforts to adjust Christian thinking about peace to changing historical circumstances also rests on a distinction. In this case the distinction is not between private and political life, but between interior dispositions and exterior behavior. Thus, the demands of love and mercy forbid

Christians to entertain feelings of hatred or closely related to hatred. One might, as a soldier in justifiable warfare, a policeman in repression of crime, a judge in imposing capital sentence, or an executioner in carrying it out, kill another human being. But a Christian should do so without rancor, with love, even with tears. No doubt, the notion of lovingly administered slaughter invites mockery. Still, it is fair to say that these distinctions were not introduced by hypocrites but by earnest men seeking some middle ground between the demands of their faith and the pressures of their experience. There is nothing absurd about regretting hurts one feels obliged to inflict or respecting those who must submit to them. At the same time, hypocrites have never ceased to expand and exploit these and similar distinctions.

The reflective Christian concept of peace has changed little since Christianity's first years. But the practical implications of that concept have been variously and controversially understood, while lack of uniformity in practice has left a great many Christians with few convictions in the matter. Platitudes in praise of peace and in disapproval of "unjust" violence are plentiful but often ineffectual. And in these circumstances, the immersion of Christians in secular political communities leaves

decisions about public peace and public violence in great measure detached from anything recognizable as Christian tradition.

Despite these joyless words, Christianity deserves credit for contributions to peace. Chief among these is a long-evolved doctrine of what is morally defensible in warfare, that has been adopted and developed far beyond Christian communities, and had a permanent impact on international law as well as secular morality. Principally, it restricts justifiable warfare to defense against aggression. Even when aggression is real and severe, violent response should be postponed if possible until every other means of settlement is exhausted, and even then never initiated if it is likely to do more harm than good. It prohibits any waging of war that targets or unduly endangers non-combatants, and any continuance of war beyond its objective of repelling aggression. Evidently, doctrine or law of this kind need often to be readjusted in order to accommodate new developments in warfare.

In addition to contributing to law and doctrine concerning justifiable warfare, Christianity has never rejected a pacifist position reminiscent of the first Christian centuries. Under certain kinds of political pressure, pacifism requires heroism, and observance of such heroism has often prompted second thoughts about conventional militancy. Also the renunciation of violent responses to public threats is likely to stimulate the exploration of non-violent solutions. Successful non-violent tactics to restore peace in inter-national and intra-national conflicts have had some spectacular successes, some under Christian inspiration.

### Points of Agreement

Peace is the ultimate goal of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Moreover, peace is understood in all three religions as peace with God, peace with other human beings, and peace with nature. This is enshrined in the picture of the original creation, the Garden of Eden, in which all creatures live at peace with one another and with God. Finally, heaven in each tradition is envisioned as a kingdom of peace, in which all creatures submit to God's will, and so live in peace. This is the core of the Muslim ideal of submission, but is also found in Christianity. As the poet Dante writes: "In his will is our peace."

### Points of Disagreement.

Within this general framework of agreement, there is some disagreement. Christians envision peace as coming through the sacrifice of Jesus, who reconciled humanity with God. Thus it is written “For he is our peace...” (Ephesians 2:14). For Muslims, peace comes from submission to God directly, without the benefit of an intercessor; for Christians, peace is found through the intercession of Jesus.

Points for Further Discussion.

If the goal of both Islam and Christianity is peace, then members of each side have to ask themselves: “Why has there been so much war in each tradition?” This is a point for serious and soul-searching discussion, which will require honesty on both sides.