

The Qur'anic and Prophetic Model of Peaceful Coexistence and Ethical Conduct

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In recent times, Islam has been portrayed in the media as a militant religion, one that promotes violence and the killing of innocent civilians. More than ever, there is a need to understand the Islamic perspective of respect for and living with the “other.” It is imperative to voice an opinion on an issue that is of major concern to millions of people, especially for a religion that has often been targeted as violent and extremist.

In this paper, I will first delineate the Qur'anic position on coexistence with the “other.” How does the Qur'an expect Muslims to live and interact with the “other”? I will also examine how the Qur'anic vision of a just social order was exemplified in the life of the Prophet of Islam who is, after all, the supreme exemplar in the Islamic tradition.

Peace and Co-existence in the Qur'an

Historically, the Qur'anic view of engagement with the “other” was shaped by the socio-political milieu in which it was revealed. Islamic revelation found expression in a pluralistic world in which Muslims had to deal with Arab pagans and adherents of other monotheistic religions. To comprehend the Qur'an's response to the Muslims' interaction with the “other,” it is essential, at the outset, to examine the moral basis of such an interaction and the Qur'an's pronouncement on human diversity.

The Qur'anic view of peace and co-existence is interwoven with its view of a universal moral discourse that unites all human beings. According to the Qur'an, human beings 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."

The basis of such a universal moral order can also be traced to verses like the following, "Humankind, be aware of your duties to your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women (4:1)." The verse suggests a common genesis and unity of human beings based on God's creation. It also implies that human beings have to recognize and live with their differences.

On the basis of universal guidance and a common human origin, the Qur'an posits the presence of an objective and universally binding ethical and moral standard that is accessible to all intelligent beings. A striking feature of the Qur'anic discourse is the emphasis on the capacity of human beings to use their innate intelligence to comprehend universal truths. It is on the basis of their innate capacity and shared moral values that human beings can deal with others based on the principles of fairness and equity.

For the Qur'an, knowledge of the ethical good is grounded on an innate disposition which is ingrained in the human conscience. It is this knowledge that guides human beings towards upright moral conduct. Due to this, the Qur'an commends and

exhorts human beings to perform the good rather than describing what it is. It assumes human beings know the good intuitively. For example, the Qur'an uses terms such as *salih* (moral uprightness) a term which, together with other words from the same root, occurs 171 times in the Qur'an, without defining or describing them. Similarly, the Qur'an does not explain or define *zulm* (wrongdoing) but sets forth the ramifications of vicious behavior. In essence, the Qur'an assumes that good and evil are categories that are known independently of revelation.

The Qur'an also emphasizes individual and collective responsibility in the realization of the ethical good. It is because of this factor that we frequently read of *al-amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l-nahy an al-munkar*, enjoining what is cognitively known as good and prohibiting what is known to be evil. Through this principle, the Qur'an urges human beings to establish the moral good on earth. Those who fail morally become enemies of God as they become agents of corruption and discord on earth.¹

The Qur'an also views human diversity as a basis for understanding and peaceful coexistence. Thus, verse 49:13 states, "O people, We have created you from one male and female (Adam and Eve), We have created you in different communities and tribes so that you may know each other." Stated differently, human diversity should enhance the recognition of rather than confrontation with the other.

Fundamental to the Qur'anic conception of peaceful co-existence is the view that human beings are united under one God (2:213). They 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.

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 and Dialogue with the People of the Book

In the sectarian milieu of seventh-century Arabia, Muslims encountered other monotheists like Christians and Jews. These encounters generated inter-religious polemics, which are reflected in the Qur’anic verses, especially those that were revealed in Medina. In its discourses with the people of the book, the Qur’an invites them to the notion of a shared religious community based on the belief in one God. Thus, the Prophet is instructed to tell them, “Say! O people of the book! Come to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we associate not aught with Him, and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God. And if they turn their backs, say, ‘bear witness that we are Muslims’” (3:64).

¹ Kevin Reinhart, “Ethics of the Qur’an,” in *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*, ed. Jane McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 66.

One of the most potent ways to promote peace is by engaging in inter-faith dialogue. The Qur'an also outlines the form that dialogue should take and the way in which it should be conducted. It suggests that Muslim interaction with the other should be accompanied with proper demeanor and attitude. As the Qur'an states, "Do not discuss with the people of the book except in the best way possible, apart from those who are unjust among themselves" (29:46). Furthermore, the Qur'an states, "God does not forbid you from establishing relations of generosity and just behavior with those who have not fought against you over your religion and who have not evicted you from your dwellings. God loves those who act fairly" (60:8). Verses such as these reflect the Qur'an's response to those who claim that it prohibits Muslims from interacting with non-Muslims.

Peaceful co-existence requires that people abstain from abusing and denigrating those who do not share their beliefs. Deriding and mocking others can often engender violence and hatred. Therefore, the Qur'an urges 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).

Qur'anic tolerance extends protection not only to Muslims and the people of the book (*ahl al-kitab*) but even to strangers who openly declare idolatry. As it says, "If one of the idolaters seeks protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the word of God, and after that, send him to a place of safety" (9:6). The verse instructs Muslims not only to protect but also to ensure that no harm comes to the idolaters when they leave Muslim

territory, and to send them to a place of safety. The discussion above indicates that the Qur'an envisioned a diverse community that was united under common moral values. Human beings are to coexist in peace and harmony. Diversity and differences in faith were to be judged by God only since, "Isn't He (God) the best of judges"(95:8)?

The Ethical Demeanor of the Prophet

Having discussed the Qur'anic ideal of peaceful coexistence based on universal moral values, I will now examine how the Prophet exemplified these Qur'anic ideals. The Qur'an connects ethical values that are ingrained in the human conscience to ethical conduct on earth. The goal of human creation, in the Qur'anic understanding, is to establish a just social order based upon upright moral conduct on earth. The Qur'an presented a challenge to the nascent Muslim community to establish this social order under the charismatic authority of the Prophet Muhammad. The juxtaposition of the temporal and religious realms within the personality of the Prophet meant Muslims could emulate different aspects of his character.

The authority that the Prophet Muhammad had was comprehensive in that his charismatic appeal was linked to his spiritual, military, and political powers. Thus, the all-embracing authority of the Prophet meant that to be a Muslim necessitated acceptance of the different spheres of his authority.

Many Muslims located their moral ideals within the Prophetic example as they saw the Prophet to be the best example of the perfect human being (*al-insan al-kamil*). Imitation of the Muhammadan paradigm is predicated on the Qur'anic injunction to emulate the paradigmatic precedent of the Prophet (33:21). The Prophet was not only a

paragon for the Muslims in general, he was also a spiritual archetype for all humankind. It is this factor that makes him a human being *par excellence*. Muslims try to instill in their lives a sense of the Prophetic experience by imitating his outer behavior.

The Prophet fashioned the moral community of the righteous by outlining principles for ethical behavior and promises for redemption to the faithful. The Prophet himself personified the Qur'anic ethics. Stated differently, what the Qur'an was in book form, Muhammad embodied that Qur'an in a human form. The personification of the Qur'anic ethical ideal is found in the paradigmatic demeanor and character of the Prophet. In the *Nahj al-Balagha*, Imam 'Ali best sums up this ideal. He states: "He was of all men the most open-handed, most stout hearted, most truthful of tongue, most loyal in the keeping of his trusts, most serene of mind, and the noblest in friendly discourse. Those who saw him for the first time feared him, but those who got acquainted with him loved him. Indeed, a man like him I have never seen."² Such was the pervasive and loving character of the Prophet that even Abu Sufyan is reported to have exclaimed that he had never seen a person who was so loved as Muhammad's companions loved him.³

From the brutal and often oppressive tribal milieu, the Prophet tried to carve out a moral environment by living out the Qur'anic ethical ideal. Thus, in another moving statement in the *Nahj al-Balagha*, Imam 'Ali states that the Prophet would sit like an ordinary person, repaired his own shoes, and washed his own clothes. Even though the Prophet could have lived like a king, he chose to live like a simple person." He continues,

² Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 75.

³ 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Hisham, *The Life of Muhammad - Sira Rasul Allah* (trans. Alfred Guillaume) (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 428.

“A simple and austere lifestyle was not imposed on him, rather, he chose to live an austere lifestyle.”⁴

Humility was one of the most outstanding and sublime characteristics of the Prophet. In fact, the Qurayshis were surprised at the Prophet not because he was extra-ordinary but that he was so ordinary. Thus, 25:7 in the Qur’an states: “They (Qurayshis) say, ‘What kind of Prophet is this, he eats food and walks in the street? Why has not an angel been sent with him so that he could also admonish?’” The Qur’anic response was that if angels had been walking on earth, then God would have sent an angel as a messenger (17:95).

The Spirituality of the Prophet

Apart from the Prophet’s ethical demeanor, Muslims replicate his spiritual exercises, and his reported inner states, exemplifying his every act. The Prophet possessed the quality of piety in its most universal sense, that quality which attaches human beings to God and makes them profoundly pious. He had a sense of uprightness which inwardly attached him to God, that made him place the interest of God before everything else including himself.

Many Muslims attempt to replicate the Prophet’s spiritual journey. Spiritual connectedness to the Prophet is correlated to the degree with which a Muslim imitates his spiritual examples. Emulation of the Prophet in every possible way is an important means to attaining holiness, experiencing something of the charisma of the Prophet, and replicating his mystical states. Imitating the spiritual demeanor of the Prophet also becomes a replication of

⁴ *Nahj al-Balagha*, 3rd edition (Karachi: Khorasan Islamic center, 1977), Sermon 163. Shi’is believe that the *Nahj al-Balagha* comprises the sermons of ‘Ali.

his mystical quest. In this way, one can experience the divine in the same way that the Prophet did.⁵

In addition, as Seyyid Hossein Nasr states, the Prophet had a quality of combativeness, of always being actively engaged in combat against all that negated the Truth and disrupted harmony. Externally it meant fighting wars, either military, political or social ones, the war which the Prophet named the ‘little war’ (*al-jihad al-asghar*). Inwardly this combativeness meant a continuous war against the carnal soul (*nafs*), against all that in man tends towards the negation of God and His Will, the ‘great war’ (*al-jihad al-akbar*).⁶

Apart from imitating the different states of the Prophet, Muslims also inculcate and express deep love for him. In fact, love for God is expressed by loving His Prophet. Muhammad’s virtues are frequently recounted and blessings invoked on him. It is the love of the Prophet, as it is experienced by Muslims, that is the strongest binding force of all Muslims, be they peasants or kings. Due to the veneration of and love for the Prophet, the daily prayers of Muslims in different parts of the world contain prayers of blessings on the Prophet. Such prayers, as Valerie Hoffman reminds us, are believed to be extremely beneficial to a person’s spiritual well being.⁷

The Prophet is also loved as he symbolizes the harmony and beauty that pervades all things, and displays the fullness of virtues which allows those who emulate him to

⁵ See Liyakat Takim, *The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam* (Albany: SUNY, 2006), chapter two.

⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: Aquarian, 1994), 73.

⁷ Valerie Hoffmann, *Sufism, Mystics and Saints in Modern Egypt* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 50.

develop and grow in their attributes. As ‘A’isha, the mother of all believers, states in a tradition when she is asked to describe the Prophet, “He lived the Qur’an.”

For Muslims, the love of the Prophet is interwoven to the love for God, for the Prophet himself loved God intensely. Thus, in a famous *hadith*, he is reported to have stated, “O Lord Grant me the love of You, Grant that I love those who love You, Grant that I do the deeds that win Your love, Make Your love dearer to me than myself, family and wealth.”⁸

The Prophetic Example of Peaceful Coexistence with the Other

The community (*umma*) that the Prophet established in Medina comprised not only of Muslims but also the Jews who lived in Medina. The Prophet himself articulated and implemented the Qur’anic demand of peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims. One of the earliest Prophetic documents that is extant is the constitution of Medina. In this document, the Prophet envisions the Jews as being an important component of the Medinan community and outlines the rights and obligations of the Jews of Medina.

The constitution states, “Whoever of the Jews follows us has the same help and support (as the believers), so long as they are not wronged by him and he does not help (others) against them.” The constitution also states, “The Jews of Banu ‘Awf are a community (*umma*) along with the believers. To the Jews their religion and to the Muslims their religion. (This applies) both to their clients and to themselves, with the exception of anyone who has done wrong or acted treacherously; he brings evil only on himself and on his household.” Another article of the document states that, “between the

Jews and Muslims is sincere friendship and honorable dealing, not treachery. There is help for the person wronged.”⁹ Such terms indicate the basis of a pluralistic society that the Prophet envisioned, a society that fully implemented the Qur’anic pronouncement of peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims.

There are many other aspects of Prophetic demeanor that exemplify his interaction with non-Muslims, traits that today’s Muslims need to emulate. The Prophet’s character was based on the Qur’anic preference for forgiveness over revenge. He possessed the quality of magnanimity in its fullness. His soul displayed a grandeur which every devout Muslim yearns to emulate. After conquering Mecca in 630 C.E., the Prophet was in a position to exact revenge from those who had opposed and even tried to kill him. Yet, al-Mas’udi tells us, that the Prophet was magnanimous in his victory. He chose to forgive them, stating, “I will speak to you as Joseph spoke to brothers – you are free today.”¹⁰ It was this genre of demeanor that endeared the Prophet to many people.

The Qur’anic enunciation of not cursing even the enemies was also exemplified by the Prophet. After Tufayl b. ‘Amr al-Dausi converted, he asked permission from the Prophet to preach to his tribe. When the Prophet allowed him, Tufayl went to his tribe, hoping to convert them. However, he returned after a short period, frustrated that his people had rejected his call. He asked the Prophet to invoke a curse upon them. The

⁸ Nasr, *Ideals*, 72.

⁹ See Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 221-4.

¹⁰ ‘Ali b. Husayn al-Mas’udi, *Muruj al-Dhahab wa Ma’adin al-Jawhar* (Qum: Dar al-Hijra, 1983), 2:290.

Prophet refused to do so and instead asked God to guide them. He said, “O God! guide Daus!” Then he told Tufayl, “Go back to your people and preach to them gently.”¹¹

Similarly when Mu‘adh b. Jabal, a close companion, was going to Yemen to proselytize, the Prophet told him, “Deal gently with the people, not harshly; give them good news, do not repel them.”¹² It was through his personal character and gentle preaching that the Prophet was able to reach the hearts of so many non-Muslims.

In conclusion, it is correct to state that whereas the Prophet’s charisma may have dissipated after his demise, his knowledge, piety, and spiritual legacy have inspired different groups of Muslims to emulate his outstanding examples. The profound characteristics of the Prophet have left an indelible mark on the consciousness of the Muslims. The Qur’an itself bears the perfume of the soul of the person through whom it was revealed. As the great philosopher poet ‘Allama Iqbal said:

“You can deny God but you cannot deny the Prophet.”¹³

¹¹ Ibn Ishaq *Sira*, 175-6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 644.

¹³ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 227.