

The Qur'anic Vision: Unity or Uniformity?

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After migrating to the West, most Muslims began exploring the Qur'an in greater depth. Especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many Muslims expressed the desire to understand rather than merely read the Qur'an. However, I believe it is necessary that we go a step further. Muslims now need to *live the Qur'an* rather than merely understanding it. *Living the Qur'an* will challenge us to look at the Qur'an in a completely different way. To start with, we need to look at the Qur'an as a mirror rather than as a window. Stated differently, we need to see ourselves (mirror) rather than others (window) in the Qur'an.

When I talk of treating the Qur'an as a mirror, I mean to state that we should examine ourselves as to where do we fit into the Qur'anic demand of upright moral human beings. Let us remember that the Qur'an goes beyond merely stating its ideals, it wants those ideals to be turned into reality. Hence, it not only talks about principles like *taqwa* but it also articulates the attributes of one who has *taqwa*. Similarly, it elucidates the negative qualities of a hypocrite. Above all, human ethical conduct is central to the Qur'anic understanding of a just society.

Ethical Conduct in the Qur'an

Why does the Qur'an stress ethical precepts? For the simple reason that moral principles unite human beings. All human beings, of any religious, cultural or ethnic background, recognize and cherish principles like dignity, respect, and mercy. Such principles are the beginning point of the human family. Whereas religious laws and

precepts divide us (since every religious community has its own laws), principles connect us in the name of God. Hence, we do not need to share a common religion to get along, instead, we need to share moral commitments.

The Qur'anic view of peace and tolerance is interwoven to 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 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.

Furthermore, the Qur'an 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."

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 tolerant and universalistic tone of the Qur'an can be further discerned from the famous verse, "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:255). The famous twentieth-century Shi'i exegete Muhammad al-Husayn al-Tabataba'i contends that faith is a matter of individual conscience and, as such, it cannot be created by coercion and compulsion. "Belief," al-Tabataba'i continues, "follows reason and understanding; and nothing but reason and understanding can create it."¹ According to Zamakhshari (d. 1144), not only the people of the book but all human beings have the right to exercise free volition in choosing Islam.

¹ Muhammad al-Husayn al-Tabataba'i, *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Qum n.d.), 3:342.

The “no compulsion” verse is not to be limited to the people of the book.² The Qur’an clearly does not advocate the use of force in matters of faith. Thus, verse 10:99 further states, “And if your Lord had willed, whoever is in the earth would have believed, all of them. Can you [O Muhammad] coerce the people to believe?” The overall emphasis in the Qur’an is on voluntary consent to the will of God, which is predicated on the universal guidance that is engraved in all human beings.

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.

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).

Qur’anic tolerance extends protection not only to Muslims and the people of the book but even to strangers who openly declare idolatry. As it says, “If one of the idolaters seeks

² Mahmud b. ‘Umar al-Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshaf ‘an Haqa’iq al-Ghawamiz al-Tanzil* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al- ‘Azali, 1987), 1:387.

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)?

On the basis of universal guidance and a common human origin, the Qur’an posits the presence of an objective and universally binding moral standard that is accessible to all intelligent beings. It is imperative that we not only ponder over the Qur’anic message but work assiduously to incorporate it into our daily framework. Thus, we need to move the Qur’an from our tongues into our hearts; we also need to ensure the body moves according to the Qur’anic ideals.

However, the Qur’an also appreciates diversity within the overarching unity of moral precepts. Indeed, it is correct to state that differences between people are not a problem in the Qur’an. As 49:13 states, we are created in *different* tribes and nations so that we may know each other. Even *differences* in colors and languages are seen as a sign of God. Rather than being concerned about *differences*, the Qur’an is more worried about *indifference* between human beings. Indifference is a problem because it blurs moral boundaries, as human beings are not concerned about the welfare of others.

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).

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.

Jihad in the Qur'an

The Qur'anic vision of tolerance and peaceful coexistence is mitigated by verses that encourage Muslims to wage war. It is important therefore that we properly understand the

Qur'anic pronouncements on *jihad*.³ The Qur'anic world-view is to bring the world under the sway of God's guidance so as to establish a righteous order based on justice and equality. Thus, *jihad* is envisioned as an important tool in the community's attempt to build a world order in which peace, justice, and equality prevail according to God's providence. According to John Esposito, the rationale of the wars was to "spread its (Islam's) righteous order so that ignorance and unbelief could be replaced by just societies throughout the world."⁴

The Qur'anic understanding of *jihad* as warfare is evident in verse 2:193, "Fight them until there is no persecution (*fitna*) and the religion be only for God." In another verse, the Qur'an states, "Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but do not transgress. God does not love those who transgress. And slay them wherever you find them, and drive them out of the places from where they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter (2:190-191)."

The Qur'an sanctions *jihad* to establish a moral order that will protect the welfare of the Muslim community against both internal and external enemies. The permission to engage in hostilities was evidently a response to the threat posed by the powerful Meccan tribes. A prescriptive measure was needed to redress the harm and the wrongs suffered by the Muslims in the face of Meccan aggression. These divinely sanctioned campaigns were a response to the hostility of the Meccan pagans. The Qur'an does not state that force was to be used against all unbelievers; only those unbelievers who demonstrate their hostility to Islam by trying to undermine the Islamic polity and by

³ Wrongly translated as holy war, the word *jihad* literally means to struggle in the path of God. Muslims see the purification of the inner self as the best form of *jihad*.

⁴ John Esposito, *Unholy War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 33.

persecuting Muslims were to be targeted. It is Meccan hostility, rather than their disbelief, that is the target of the Qur'anic verses on *jihad*.

The Qur'an does not accept the idea of unlimited or aggressive warfare. By the assiduous usage of the term *la ta'tadu* (do not transgress) in the context of warfare, it can be argued that the Qur'an qualifies *jihad* with a moral condition of restraint. It also exhorts Muslims seek avenues of peace. Thus it restricts rather than gives free license to recourse to war.⁵

The Qur'an also outlines the rules of engagement, who is to fight and who is exempted (48:17; 9:91), when hostilities should cease (2:192) and how prisoners should be treated (47:4). As there is no compulsion in religion (2:256), Muslims are not to use *jihad* as a means to impose their beliefs on others.

Other verses stipulate that the Muhammad should accept peace overtures (8:61) from the enemy. Verses 2:192-93 command the Prophet to cease hostilities if the enemy desists. In order not to transgress, Muslims are required to respond proportionally to the injury done to them. Even here, the Qur'an urges restraint by accepting blood money and forgiveness. The Qur'an suggests that *jihad* is a product of an aggression by rather than initiation of hostilities against enemies (22:39-40).

Let us end by the prayer of the Qur'an -

O Allah, make us live by the Qur'an!

O Allah, brighten our faces by the Qur'an!

⁵ There are other verses in which Muslims are seemingly encouraged to kill disbelievers wherever they are found. I shall deal with the "sword verses" later on.

O Allah, enlighten our hearts by the Qur'an!

O Allah, do not separate us from the Qur'an!

O Allah, when we die, we should die with the Qur'an in our hearts! Amen.