



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Peace and Justice in the Qur'an
(*Christianity and Islam*, pp. 36-42)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Building of Mystery
(*Christianity and Islam*, pp. 43-45)
- 📖 Shared Stories in Metal
(*Christianity and Islam*, pp. 46-48)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Peace and Justice in the Qur'an

In submitting to God, according to the Qur'an, we opt for peace over against war and heed the divine command to act with justice in conversation, in business transactions, and in treating others. How similar, then, are the Islamic notions of peace and justice to their Christian counterparts?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 34:11-22

Responsive Reading[†]

Peace be unto you. Salaam ualeikoum.

Ualeikoum salaam. And unto you, peace.

Hear the words of the Lord:

"Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?

Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it."

**"Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called the children of God."**

"If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably
with all."

"For it is to peace that God has called you."

May the God of peace be with us all.

**And may the God of peace be praised among all the children of
Abraham, and by all the nations which through Abraham
are blessed! Alleluia! Alhumdullilah!**

Reflection

"While the Qur'an attaches great value to peace, it does not privilege it absolutely," notes Mustansir Mir. "Peace at the expense of justice is not acceptable to the Qur'an. Justice is the gateway to peace. Having said that, one must emphasize that justice remains the gateway; it does not become the destination. For all its importance, justice is instrumental in character; peace is the objective. Seen in this light, peace emerges as a more fundamental value than justice." Pacifism is not an option in Islam. Neither the Qur'anic teachings nor Mohammad's practice (he organized and led military campaigns) allow it. Rather the Muslim view is similar to the just-war theory in the Christian tradition, for "the Qur'an unequivocally permits the believers to take up arms against oppression and against imposition of war."

The profound concern for social justice in the Qur'an is based on the beliefs that all human beings are the creatures of God and their wealth is a gift from God for their common welfare. Thus, the rich must share their resources with the less fortunate. Specific teachings encourage the circulation of wealth in society by forbidding hoarding, usury, and bribery; requiring that an inheritance be spread among the heirs; and collecting *zakah*, or the welfare due, to be distributed to the poor. When it comes to social justice, Mir concludes, "Many Christians and Muslims today would seem to share the confidence in the human ability to improve the world and, more than that, to feel a sense of responsibility to contribute to the world's betterment."



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One important difference between Christian and Muslim notions of peace and justice involves the need for reconciliation, for restoring humanity to fellowship with God. “Islam, which does not accept the notion of original sin and, hence, does not feel the need for a savior to deliver humankind from the bondage of sin, does not attach to reconciliation the kind of significance it has in Christianity.”

Even on this point, Mir suggests, an interpretation by Muslim mystics, or Sufis, of some verses in the Qur’an on the relationship between God and humanity might be the basis for Christian-Muslim dialogue. Sufis “speak of separation (*firaq*) and union (*wisal*), meaning that human beings, while they are in a state of separation from God in this world, wish this state to come to an end and long to unite—or rather, reunite—with God.” Yet, Mir cautions, “from an Islamic viewpoint, any attempt to make the suggested comparison must pay due regard to the claims or demands of the Law...[and] the Christian notion of the redemptive role of Jesus would be considered problematic.”

Study Questions

1. What important similarities do you see between the Muslim and Christian stances toward war and social justice?
2. Do Christians and Muslims agree about our motive for being peaceful and just in our relations toward others?
3. Discuss how the two traditions disagree about the need for reconciliation between humanity and God. Does this difference influence their respective notions of peace and justice?
4. Some people accuse Islam of being a war-mongering religion, in part because the “incendiary” verses in the Qur’an have been used to justify violence against followers of other religions. How does Mir respond?
5. What makes the Freer canteen unusual and significant in the history of Islamic art? Do you think it suggests possibilities for peaceful sharing between Christians and Muslims today?
6. Discuss the significance of the Temple Mount to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. How is the Dome of the Rock an architectural reminder of peaceful exchange and of conflict?

Departing Hymn: “O God of Earth and Altar” (verses 1 and 2)

O God of earth and altar, bow down and hear our cry,
our earthly rulers falter, our people drift and die;
the walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide,
take not thy thunder from us, but take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches, from lies of tongue and pen,
from all the easy speeches that comfort cruel men,
from sale and profanation of honor, and the sword,
from sleep and from damnation, deliver us, good Lord!

G. K. Chesterton (1906)

Suggested Tunes: LLANGLOFFAN or PASSION CHORALE

† Quoting Psalm 34:12, 14; Matthew 5:9; Romans 12:18; and 1 Corinthians 7:15b.

Peace and Justice in the Qur'an

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore the meaning of peace and justice within the Qur'an.
2. To discuss the objection that Islam is a war-mongering religion.
3. To consider how Islamic art has reflected both peaceful exchange and conflict between Christianity and Islam.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christianity and Islam (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "O God of Earth and Altar" locate a tune, LLANGLOFFAN or PASSION CHORALE, in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

Mustansir Mir concludes with this observation: "The Christian (and, of course, Jewish) concept of *imitatio Dei* finds its counterpart in the Islamic concept of *takhallaqu bi-akhlaqi llah* ("Take on the qualities of God"). Muslims, no less than Christians, believe that the relations between human beings ought to reflect, or be modeled on, the relations between God and man. Holding this view in common, the followers of the two religions have, as bearers of an ethical vision with a direct and immediate reference to society, both a similar and a joint responsibility – namely, that of translating their ethical vision into concrete social action" (*Christianity and Islam*, p. 42).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Mention the current sources of conflict between the west and the Muslim world. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that the leaders of western and Muslim nations will grow in wisdom as they seek peace and the common good.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 34:11-22 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Begin, like Mir, by reviewing the central place of peace and justice in the Qur'an before addressing these specific issues: (1) the permissibility of war, and (2) the call for social justice toward the poor. Mir's discussion is a model of how a Muslim may use the Qur'an for moral guidance.

Consider the important similarities with Christian notions of peace and justice, and discuss the significant difference between Christianity and Islam about the need for reconciliation with God. You may use questions 4, 5, or 6 to pursue the group's interests – Mir's interpretation of the "incendiary" verses of the Qur'an and reply to the objection that Islam is a war-mongering religion; or the reflection in Islamic art of peaceful exchange and conflict with Christianity.

Study Questions

1. The Muslim stance toward war is similar to the just war tradition in Christian thought, which holds that war may be morally permissible only in self-defense or in retribution for grievous wrongdoing. There is no pacifist tradition in Islam.

In the Qur'anic concern for social justice we may hear echoes of Israel's prophetic tradition and Jesus' teachings on care for the poor. The Qur'an grounds its call for social justice in God's authority as creator and sustainer of the world – all resources are gifts from God and should be used according to God's intentions. The biblical prophets make that case, but they also frequently appeal to the community's memory of God's specific historical interventions in the Exodus and the Exile.

For more information about the Christian just war and pacifist views, see the *Peace and War* issue of *Christian Reflection*. For more on social justice in the biblical prophetic tradition, see the *Prophetic Ethics* issue. These are available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

2. Both traditions call humans to imitate God by sharing the divine concern for peace and social justice. Christians hold that Jesus Christ is God, and not merely a prophet; his teachings articulate and his actions exemplify God's stance toward peace and justice in specific situations. Does the incarnation make a difference in how Christians interpret the call to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48)?
3. Islam does not accept a doctrine of the original sin of Adam and Eve, and the consequent disorder of human beings in sinful rebellion against God. Therefore, it "does not feel the need for a savior to deliver humankind from the bondage of sin, [and] does not attach to reconciliation the kind of significance it has in Christianity." Islam is much more optimistic than Christianity about humanity's own resources for submitting to God's will and exemplifying God's concerns for peace and justice.
Members might discuss whether such optimism tempts us to lower God's high standards for peace and justice in order to make them more accomplishable by human effort. Does it set us up for frustration and resignation (to the 'reality' of war and injustice) if we fail, despite our best efforts, to participate with God in achieving those divine goals?
4. Mir says the "incendiary" verses, like 2:191 and 9:5, have been interpreted without their proper contexts. The correction is to study such verses in light of (1) the surrounding verses in the Qur'an and (2) the history of the Muslim community's expulsion from Mecca and flight to Medina. Within these contexts, he sees the verses as justifying violence only against the unjust rulers of Mecca and their followers, and to limit this violence to retribution for their wrongdoing. Members may study the major English translations of the Qur'an – by Yusuf, Pickthal, and Shakir – online at www.al-islam.org/quran.
5. The Freer canteen is one of only a few metalwork pieces produced in thirteenth-century Syria that combine Islamic decorative design with depictions of Jesus' life. Not only the iconography of the images, but also the metalwork technique was borrowed from (or produced by) Christian artisans. Some of these pieces were created for Muslim rulers. The canteen might have been made for a Muslim owner, or for a Crusader who admired its artistry. On either interpretation, we can admire the sharing of technique and respect for interpretation of Scripture between Muslim and Christian artisans and patrons.
6. The Temple Mount is the location of Solomon's Temple and the Second Temple, and Muslim tradition says it is the place from which Muhammad made a miraculous night journey to heaven. The Dome of the Rock's architectural form and decorative mosaics, influenced by Christian Byzantine art, exemplify peaceful exchange. It's location on the Temple Mount may have been a sign of Muslim occupation, and remains a source of conflict.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.