

# Peace and Justice in the Qur'an

BY MUSTANSIR MIR

In submitting to God, says 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 are Islamic notions of peace and justice to their Christian counterparts?

Both "peace" and "justice" are among the key terms of the Qur'an. The Arabic word *Islam*, which occurs frequently in the Qur'an and which gives the religion its name, has two meanings, "surrender" and "peace." The two meanings are interrelated. The first represents human acknowledgment that the right attitude to adopt toward God is that of making submission to Him rather than that of waging war against Him. The second meaning represents the promise of peace made by God: those who submit to God will enjoy peace in their individual and collective lives, in this world and in the next. The Qur'an speaks of Abraham as the exemplary "submitter": "When your Lord said to him, 'Submit,' he said, 'I submit to the Lord of the universe'" (2:131; my translation, here and throughout), and the same—Abrahamic—attitude is demanded of the believers (6:71). In submitting to God, human beings consciously perform an act that the universe as a whole is unconsciously performing: "To Him submit all those who are in the heavens and the earth" (3:83). The main word in the Islamic greeting, *as-salamu 'alaykum*, "peace be upon you," is from the same root that *Islam* is from, and not only is this greeting to be given to others in this world (6:54; 24:27, 61), it also will be the greeting of the people of paradise (10:10; 16:32; 13:24); in fact, one of the names of paradise is "abode of peace" (10:25). In war, if the enemy "inclines toward peace" (*silm*), then the Muslims, too, must "incline toward it" (8:61). One of the names of God is *Salam*, "peace" (59:23). God is, that is to say, the source of all peace: He is our refuge against calamity and He shields us from danger.

Two Arabic words for justice, *'adl* and *qist*, also occur in a number of verses in the Qur'an: "God commands you to be just" (16:90) is a general command, and so are "Uphold justice" (4:135) and "Be just, for it is closer to piety" (5:8). Specific commands derive from the general one: "When you speak, be just, even in a matter involving a relative of yours" (6:152); "I have been commanded," Muhammad is made to say, "to decide matters justly between you" (42:15), and the same command is given to the believers at large (4:58). A man who has more than one wife must treat them "justly" (4:3); society must treat orphans "justly" (4:127); and, in selling something, one must give full measure—"justly" (6:152). Many verses affirm justice by negating its antithesis, *zulm* (injustice, wrongdoing); for example, "God is not unjust in the least" (3:182), "God does not like the unjust" (3:57), and "God will not guide the unjust" (2:258).

The variety of contexts of the above-cited verses indicates that both peace and justice occupy an important position in Islamic ethics. Peace is not merely the content of a conventional greeting uttered in a social setting, but also the highly desirable goal in a situation of war. In submitting to God, we opt for peace over against war and, at the same time, align our action with that of the universe, expecting to enjoy, in human life, the analogues of the peace and harmony that reign in nature because of nature's submission to God. The ultimate objective of human beings is to be in the state of peace that characterizes the blissful life of paradise. Similarly, justice is not an abstract concept but a practical desideratum: to be just in talk, in business transactions, and in treating others is required of the believers because these acts ought to flow from belief truly and sincerely held.

Without forgetting the conclusion reached thus far—namely, that both "peace" and "justice" are used in the Qur'an in fairly broad senses—I will now use these terms in more restricted senses in order to focus on three issues pertaining to our subject.

### **PEACE AND WAR**

Pre-Islamic Arabian custom held four months sacred because of their association with the institution of annual pilgrimage to the sanctuary of the Ka'bah in Mecca. During these months, all fighting was forbidden, and this enabled people to engage in vigorous economic activity in a state of peace and security. After Muhammad and his followers had emigrated from Mecca to Medina in A.D. 622 and a virtual state of war had come to exist between the Muslims of Medina and the Quraysh, who made up the idolatrous oligarchy of Mecca, the question arose as to how the Muslims should respond to any Meccan attempts to start a war during the four sacred months. Qur'an 2:217 sets forth a principled response:

They [believers] ask you about the sacred months, about fighting during them. Say, "Fighting during them is a great sin. But blocking access to the path of God—and denying Him—and blocking access

to the Sacred Mosque and expelling its residents from it is a greater sin in the eyes of God; and persecution is worse than killing.

In other words, the Meccans' acts of keeping Muslims from performing the pilgrimage and expelling them from Mecca, the house of the Ka'bah, constitutes persecution, which is a far greater sin than that of killing. So, while

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Muslims must make every attempt to avoid fighting during the sacred months, they are allowed to fight if war is imposed upon them by the enemy during those months, for, as 2:194 puts it, "Sacred months are in lieu of sacred months, and, for every breached sanctity, there shall be retaliation." Thus, while the Qur'an attaches great value

to peace, it does not privilege it absolutely. "Sacred months are in lieu of sacred months" lays down the principle of parity—or, we may say, justice—and 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.

A review of the initial period of Islamic history confirms this interpretation. The common misconception that the religion of Islam celebrates war and violence is easily corrected when it is recalled that, after the Muslims' emigration to Medina, it was the Meccans who repeatedly came all the way to Medina to attack the Muslims, and that it was only eight years later, in 630, that the Muslims went and conquered Mecca—in a bloodless overthrow of Meccan power that resulted in an eventual integration of the Arabs of various tribal origins under the banner of Islam.

Nevertheless, our discussion so far does lead us to conclude that pacifism, which signifies a philosophical opposition to war, is hardly grist to Islam's mill. In Christian history, pacifist views have been dominant in certain periods (as in the pre-Constantine era) or have represented significant strands of thought (as in the modern period). In Islam, both the pronouncements of the Qur'an and the practice of Muhammad rule out pacifism in principle. The Qur'an unequivocally permits the believers to take up arms against oppression and against imposition of war (22:39, besides the verses cited above), and Muhammad organized and led military campaigns. In the case of Christianity, too, early pacifism was, after Constan-

tine, effectively replaced by just-war theory. The Islamic view of war is not identical with Christian just-war theory, but the permissibility of war under that theory at least furnishes grounds for an interchange of ideas between Muslims and Christians.

Our treatment of the Qur'anic view of war and peace will not be complete without a comment on those verses of the Islamic scripture which have been seen as encouraging militancy against the followers of other religions and have received much publicity in recent years. But a close and contextualized study of those verses will show that none of them calls for the indiscriminate slaughter of "infidels." Consider the command given in one of the "incendiary" verses: "And kill them wherever you find them" (2:191). But this is a command not to initiate hostilities but to fight back. Reading the complete verse will make it clear that it permits Muslims to retaliate against those—the idolaters of Mecca—who had imposed fighting upon them and who had expelled them from their homes. The immediately preceding verse makes the same point. Here are the two verses (191-192) in their entirety:

And fight, in the way of God, against those who fight against you, but do not commit any excesses; God does not love those who commit excesses. And, kill them wherever you find them and expel them from where they expelled you. And persecution is worse than killing. And do not fight against them in the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque until they should fight against you. If they fight against you, then kill them; this is the punishment of the disbelievers.

And, concluding the discussion in the same passage, verse 193 says: "If they desist [from fighting], no action shall be taken except against the wrongdoers." Placed in its proper context, 2:191—or, for that matter, any other Qur'anic verse, not even 9:5—cannot be cited as evidence that Islam is an inherently warmongering religion, any more than the sword verse from the New Testament (Luke 22:36) can be cited to argue a similar conclusion about Christianity. If Muslims believe that the Qur'an wants them to kill all non-Muslims, then, historically, they have been remiss in carrying out the Qur'anic injunction, for they never undertook to exterminate the large non-Muslim populations who lived—and actually prospered—under their control for centuries.

### **SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Some of the earliest revelations of the Qur'an address issues of social justice. The Meccan society, into which Islam was born, was marked by social inequalities and economic disparities. On the one hand was the tribe of Quraysh, made affluent and powerful by a successful commercial enterprise and through the custodianship of the Ka'bah. On the other hand were the downtrodden—the slaves who were at the mercy of their masters, the

orphans and widows whose rights were trampled, not infrequently by their own rich relatives, and the poor and destitute who had no charitable institution to turn to for help or support. Keeping this background in mind gives point to verses like the following:

Nay, you do not honor the orphan. And you do not exhort one another to feed the destitute. And you avidly gobble up [others'] inheritance. And you have exceedingly great love of wealth (89:17-20).

So, he [the typical affluent, amoral, and callous Meccan] has not taken the steep incline! And how would you know what the steep incline is? It is the freeing of slaves or the feeding, on a day of hunger, of an orphan who is a relative, or of a destitute man rolling in the dust (90:11-16).

This early criticism of a wealthy but heartless minority is complemented in the Qur'an by later statements detailing negative and positive measures to bring about a more equitable distribution of wealth in society. These measures include proscription of hoarding (9:34; 104:1-2), usury (2:275-276, 277-279), and bribery (2:188); mandated distribution of bequeathed property among heirs (4:11); and institution of *zakah*, or the welfare due (2:43 *passim*)—a major objective of these and other measures being to ensure adequate circulation of wealth in society (59:7).

Notably, the Qur'an grounds its social and economic injunctions in a religious outlook. For example, the call to give financial assistance to the poor is based on the view that since both rich and poor people are creatures of God, the rich must share the bounty they have received from God with those who lack resources or are less fortunate.

The Islamic teaching about social justice has interesting parallels with Christian liberation theology. In fact, the suggestion has been made that the latter represents a direct or indirect influence of Islam. Be that as it may, 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. A melioristic platform can furnish both an intellectual basis and a spiritual motivation for joint Christian-Muslim action.

#### **HOW DIFFERENT ARE MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN VIEWS?**

So far, we have considered peace and justice in specific contexts—peace in relation to war, and justice in the sense of social justice. We will now ask whether the Islamic notions of peace and justice are fundamentally different from their Christian counterparts.

Central to Christian discussions of peace is the doctrine of reconciliation. The Latin-based word "reconciliation" signifies bringing humanity back into fellowship with God. It assumes a prior state of estrangement:

the primordial state of peace and harmony, which Adam and Eve enjoyed during their stay in the garden of Eden, was ruptured on account of their commission of sin, and the rupture can only be mended through the sacrificial death of Jesus, who, in the words of John Milton, will “restore us,” regaining for us “the blissful seat” of paradise. 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.

But if, in regard to reconciliation, the structures of Christian and Islamic religious thought differ, a similar, if not identical, dynamic underlies those structures. Developing certain Qur'anic observations on the relationship between God and human beings and exploiting the semantic potential of certain Qur'anic terms, Muslim mystics, or 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. The thirteenth-century Muslim poet Rumi uses the medium of story to get the point across. In one of his stories, the prophet Moses comes upon a peasant who addresses God in his simple, loving way, saying that if he chanced to meet God, he would serve Him nice food, put Him at His ease, and take good care of Him. On hearing this, Moses, who represents the Law, becomes furious. He upbraids the peasant, telling him that he must be an insolent fool to address God in those terms. The poor peasant is terrified and feels deeply guilty. At this, God chides Moses in these words: “I sent you to bring My people close to me; I did not send you to put distance between Me and My people.” In Sufi poetry of several Islamic languages, the human soul is compared to the wave that

has become separated from its source, the ocean (that is, God), but pines to return to that source, the urge to return being powered by love. A word of caution is necessary at this point: while the notions of separation from God and reunion with Him are part of the-stock-in-trade of

Sufism—and explain, in part, the fascination Sufism has for many Christians—the idea of a radical original break between God and human beings is not present even in Sufism.

In the Hebrew Bible, a key word for justice translates as “righteousness.” The God of Israel is just in that He is righteous. The moral connotations of “righteousness” should warn us against interpreting the Jewish

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concept of justice in purely legalistic terms. To a Jewish mind, moreover, the concept is not exclusive of the notion of divine mercy. In Christian thought, the notion of divine righteousness comes to include the crucial component of grace, or, perhaps, righteousness itself is consequent upon grace, which, then, would become the larger or higher category. If so, Qur'an 6:12, in which the divine judgment of the Last Day is spoken of as a derivative of divine mercy, would suggest intriguing possibilities of comparison between the Islamic and Christian views of the relationship between grace (or mercy) and righteousness. Once again, however, any exercise in comparison must respect and guard the integrity of the views compared. From an Islamic viewpoint, any attempt to make the suggested comparison must pay due regard to the claims or demands of the Law. Also, the Christian notion of the redemptive role of Jesus would be considered problematic in an Islamic discussion of the subject.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The Christian (and, of course, Jewish) concept of *imitatio Dei* finds its counterpart in the Islamic concept of *takhallaqu bi-akhlaqi Allah* ("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.

But the task of translating theory into practice is not to be conceived in mechanical terms. It is not simply a question of Christians studying their sources on their own and Muslims studying theirs on their own and then of both sitting down across the table as academics comparing notes over freshly brewed coffee. It is a question of reflecting, within the context of a changed and changing world and in recognition of the potential of outlooks other than one's own, on the vocation of the religious person, on the common destiny of humankind, and on the possibility of taking concerted action not only to solve present-day problems but also to bring into existence a newly configured future.

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