

Peace Education: A Muslim Perspective

The concept of peace education is new in the world. Certainly not many Muslims have heard of it or have reflected on whether human beings can, or should, be educated for peace. So far as I am aware, there is no program or project—either academic or social, past or present—in any contemporary Muslim society. The few Muslims in the world who have been willing and able to participate in such an education have done so, almost exclusively, in non-Muslim settings under the guidance or sponsorship of non-Muslims. As one of these few Muslims I consider myself privileged to have had the opportunity to be an evaluator of a pioneer education for peace project at the Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva, Israel, some years ago.

The fact that I was the only Muslim among all the evaluators and that the project, which involved Israeli Jewish and Arab Muslim students, was set in a far-from-neutral environment where an obvious inequality exists between Jews and Muslims, made my task a difficult and exacting one, not only intellectually but also emotionally and spiritually.¹ But I felt then, and feel now even more strongly, that the experience of observing and participating in the education for peace project at Ben Gurion University was one of the most worthwhile experiences of my life.

This experience, intense and bittersweet, taught me much. Most of all, it showed me that peace education was not a fantasy but an ideal that could be achieved even in conditions that appeared to be inimical to authentic dialogical interaction. More important still, it gave me a glimpse into what could be accomplished even by an experimental peace education project that was struggling continually to review its nature and goals as it moved gropingly from one phase to another in its three-year life span. I believe, both on the basis of my

theoretical study as a theologian of Islam and my observation of pragmatic reality, that educating for peace is one of the most compelling religious/ethical imperatives for all persons who believe in the “transcendent” dimension of human life.

In this paper I will endeavor to show that Muslims are called upon by the Qur’ān and the example of the Prophet of Islam to strive for peace through all available means and that, therefore, peace education must have a high priority in Muslim societies and for Muslims generally. Inasmuch as, unfortunately, I have no empirical data relating to actual peace education projects initiated and developed by Muslims, my paper will focus on sources of “normative” Islam and will identify some important theological resources that could be utilized for persuading Muslims not only to participate in peace education programs in non-Muslim societies but also, and more importantly, to establish such programs in their own societies.

As I see it, before one can argue convincingly that Muslims should be educated for peace it is necessary to demonstrate that education and peace are of pivotal significance to the Islamic worldview. This paper is, therefore, divided into two main sections, the first dealing with education and the second with peace, followed by a summation.

THE ISLAMIC VIEW OF EDUCATION

In education, attention must be drawn to an extremely important fact: the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the world are uneducated, the literacy rate of many Muslim countries being among the lowest in the world. Even among those who qualify as “literate,” many can barely read or write.² Needless to say, the lack of education has an enormous impact upon all human activities in Muslim societies. It is painful—but necessary—to imagine the gap between those who have had the opportunity to develop what the Qur’ān regards as God’s greatest gift to humanity—namely, the ability to conceptualize or to think,³ which makes possible the miracles of our age—and those who have lived in darkness through the centuries, unaware of their own rich heritage, following the way of their forebears blindly, believing it to be the path of life, whereas, in truth, it is a path of death.

I consider it important to keep the general lack of education among Muslims in mind as one begins to reflect on the feasibility of peace education in the Islamic framework, because any scheme or proposal that ignores the facts of life is doomed to failure. Furthermore, it leads to the setting up of unreal expectations and false comparisons. All too often I have seen non-Muslim dialogue partners, including some of the most dedicated ones, throw up their hands in despair and exclaim: “Why are Muslims in general so hard to engage in dialogue?” Or “Why are Muslims who participate in dialogue so ‘pre-critical’?”

What these dialogue participants need to realize is that the Muslim world has

not gone through the paradigm changes that the Western Judeo-Christian world has, and that it is, therefore, not appropriate to compare either largely uneducated Muslim societies with much better educated Western societies or Muslims who have been educated in the pre-Enlightenment, perhaps even the pre-Reformation, mode, with Westerners who have been educated in the post-Enlightenment, perhaps even the postmodern, mode. It is a sign of insensitivity if not arrogance (or what is sometimes called “cultural imperialism” by Third World persons) to expect Muslims who have not had the opportunity to go through the process of becoming “critical” thinkers to engage in a dialogue that presupposes a “critical” mind-set defined in exclusively non-Muslim (often Western Christian) terms. Such an expectation tends to alienate even those Muslims who are willing to step outside their own “pre-critical” tradition and work toward evolving concepts and categories that are meaningful and acceptable to all dialogue partners. Such alienation can and must be avoided, not only because there are so few Muslims who are dialogue-oriented (out of the almost one billion Muslims in the world), but also because there are so many resources within Islam that can be used to eradicate the ignorance of Muslims as well as to irradiate the hearts and minds and spirits of those “others” who seek to understand Islam and Muslims from within.

The Attitude of “Normative” Islam toward Knowledge

The fact that there are so many illiterate and uneducated Muslims (particularly women) in the world constitutes not only a profound tragedy but also a profound irony in view of the tremendous stress that “normative” Islam puts on the importance of acquiring knowledge. This is clear from many quranic passages and prophetic *hadith*, “tradition.” It is of interest and importance to observe, for instance, that the Qur‘ān refers 140 times to God as *alim*: one who has knowledge, and that the very first verse of the Qur‘ān revealed to the Prophet Muhammad links to divine bounty the human ability to write and to know:

Read in the name of thy Sustainer who has created—created man out of a germ-cell! Read—for thy Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One who has taught [man] the use of the pen—taught man what he did not know! [Surah 96.1].⁴

The Qur‘ān describes the Prophet of Islam as one taught by God (Surah 4.113) and as an imparter of knowledge to others (Surah 2.151) but commands him, nevertheless, to pray: “O my Sustainer, cause me to grow in knowledge” (Surah 20.114).⁵ Further, the Qur‘ān exhorts believers not to pursue that of which they have no knowledge, because God will call them to account for actions that reflect a lack of knowledge:

Pursue not that
 Of which thou hast
 No knowledge; for
 Every act of hearing,
 Or of seeing
 Or of [feeling in] the heart
 Will be enquired into
 [on the Day of Reckoning]
 [Surah 17.36].⁶

Behold, ye rejected it
 on your tongues,
 And said out of your mouths
 Things of which ye had
 No knowledge; and ye thought
 It a light matter,
 While it was most serious
 In the sight of God
 [Surah 24.15].⁷

About those who have knowledge, the Qur‘ān says:

And whoever is given knowledge is given indeed great wealth [Surah 2.269].⁸

God will exalt by [many] degrees those of you who have attained to faith and [above all] such as have been vouchsafed knowledge: for God is fully aware of all that you do [Surah 58.11].⁹

Sayings Attributed to Muhammad

Embodying the spirit of the Qur‘ān are some famous sayings attributed to the Prophet of Islam: “The seeking of knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim” (Baihaqi, *Mishkat*);¹⁰ “Search for knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim male and Muslim female” (Ibn Majah);¹¹ “He who goes forth in search of knowledge is in the way of Allah till he returns” (Tirmidhi, Darimi);¹² “Search for knowledge though it be in China” (Baihaqi);¹³ “Whoever searches after knowledge, it will be expiation for his past sins” (Tirmidhi).¹⁴

Further:

If anyone travels on a road in search of knowledge, God will cause him to travel on one of the roads of paradise, the angels will lower their wings from good pleasure with one who seeks knowledge, and the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth and the fish in the depth of the water will ask

forgiveness for him. The superiority of the learned man over the devout man is like that of the moon on the night when it is full over the rest of the stars. The learned are the heirs of the prophets who leave neither *dinar* nor *dirham* [“neither dollar nor dime”], leaving only knowledge, and he who accepts it accepts an abundant portion [Ahmad, Tirmidhi, Abu Dawud, Ibn Majah, Darimi, *Mishkat*].¹⁵

Acquire knowledge, because he who acquires it in the way of the Lord performs an act of piety; who speaks of it, praises the Lord; who seeks it, adores God; who dispenses instruction in it, bestows alms; and who imparts it to its fitting objects, performs an act of devotion to God. Knowledge enables its possessor to distinguish what is forbidden from what is not; it lights the way to Heaven; it is our friend in the desert, our society in solitude, our companion when bereft of friend; it serves as an armor against our enemies. With knowledge, the servant of God rises to the heights of goodness and to a noble position, associates with sovereigns in this world, and attains to the perfection of happiness in the next [*Bihar-ul-Anwar, Mustatraf, Kashf uz-Zaman*].¹⁶

Although it is not possible to say whether any of the above-cited *ahadith* are authentic without a detailed scrutiny of their formal aspect (i.e., the *isnād*, “chain of transmission”), the fact that all of them conform in spirit to the ethos as well as specific teachings of the Qur‘ān supports the assumption that they represent, if not the actual words of the Prophet, at least the general attitude of his companions and their successors. There is also historical evidence showing that the Prophet of Islam considered the education of his community a matter of high priority. For instance, Goldziher points out

That Muhammad himself—partly, it may be, on utilitarian grounds—attached considerable importance to the acquisition of the most indispensable elements of knowledge, may be inferred from the conditions on which he released prisoners of war after his victory at Badr. He employed several Quraish captives to teach the boys of Medina to write, and this service counted as their ransom.¹⁷

Prophet Muhammad’s attitude toward the acquisition of knowledge obviously had a strong impact upon the community in which he lived. As Seeman states: “In the realm of education, we may say, Muhammad instituted learning as an incumbent duty upon his people and this established a definite educational policy for Islam.”¹⁸ That the obligation to acquire knowledge was “a concept that possessed religious urgency and was ready to play a prominent role in a new religious movement” is testified to by Rosenthal.¹⁹ Gulick expresses the belief that the knowledge-affirming *ahadith* which “have been widely accepted as authentic and . . . have exerted a wide and salutary influ-

ence . . . must assuredly have stimulated and encouraged the great thinkers of the golden age of Islamic civilization.”²⁰

THE CONTENT AND PURPOSE OF KNOWLEDGE ACCORDING TO “NORMATIVE” ISLAM

In Islam the seeking of knowledge includes formal education, but is not confined to such education, nor are academic credentials necessarily the measure of one’s knowledge, though they may be regarded as instrumental to learning. To be educated, in Islamic terms, means to possess knowledge, which may be acquired through a variety of sources, particularly revelation, reason, empirical inquiry, history, and intuition. From the quranic perspective, knowledge is obviously not limited to what is learned through the reasoning mind or the senses. Acquisition of knowledge involves the total person in relationship with total reality. To become a “total” or “whole” person, integration of the diverse, often mutually conflicting, aspects of one’s outer and inner self is required, as sages through the centuries have taught. To acquire knowledge of total reality, or to become educated ideally in Islamic terms, also requires a process of integration. By identifying and endorsing diverse sources of knowledge often considered to be mutually opposing (as revelation and reason, or reason and intuition), the Qur’ān points toward both the possibility of, and the need for, an integration or synthesis leading to a unity of knowledge that subsumes the multiplicity of the sources of knowledge. That the quranic vision has been internalized by at least some leaders of Muslim thought is clear from the following letter in which Muhammad Iqbāl, the philosopher-poet, describes his own philosophy of education:

Modern India ought to focus on the discovery of man as a personality—as an independent “whole” in an all-embracing synthesis of life. But does our education today tend to awaken in us such a sense of inner wholeness? My answer is no. Our education does not recognise man as a problem, it impresses on us the visible fact of multiplicity without giving us an insight into the inner unity of life, and thus tends to make us more and more universal in our physical environment. The soul of man is left untouched and the result is a superficial knowledge with a mere illusion of culture and freedom. Amidst this predominantly intellectual culture which must accentuate separate centres within the “whole” the duty of higher minds in India is to reveal the inner synthesis of life.²¹

Although knowledge, defined in quranic terms, is the means “to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe”²² its ultimate purpose (as the existentialists would say) is not to see but to be. True believers in God seek to inculcate God’s attributes in themselves. God is *alim*: one who has knowledge; hence the seeking of knowledge is obligatory upon all believers. However, the all-knowing God of the Qur’ān is

not the Unmoved Mover, Logos, or Absolute of Greek thought, but the dynamic creator and commander of the universe. Hence a Muslim's "essential nature . . . consists in will, not intellect and understanding"²³ and Muslims identify with Ghazzali's statement: "I will, therefore I am," rather than with Descartes' statement: "I think, therefore I am." The will to act is an integral part of the quranic concept of knowledge.

The Qur'ān urges the seeking of knowledge so that through it both inner and outer reality may be transformed. It is of the essence of a river to flow and of the sun to give light. It is of the essence of an *alim* to translate knowledge into objective reality as did the Prophet of Islam and the Qur'ān calls those who know but do not act *jahilun* (ignorant ones) not *alimun* (knowledgeable ones). Understood in these terms, an *alim* is a *mujahid*—that is, one who engages in *jihād*, strives in the cause of God.

THE ISLAMIC VIEW OF PEACE

It is profoundly ironic that stereotypes identify Islam with war and militancy, whereas the very term *islām* is derived from a root, one of whose basic meanings is "peace." Not only is the idea of peace of pivotal significance in the theological worldview of Islam, it also permeates the daily lives of Muslims. Each time two Muslims greet each other, they say *salam alaikum*, "peace be on you," and *alaikum assalam*, "peace be on you (too)." The regularity and fervor with which this greeting is exchanged shows that it is not a mechanical reiteration of words that have little or no meaning but a religious ritual of great importance. The ideal of being at peace with oneself, one's fellow human beings, the world of nature, and God, is deeply cherished by Muslims in general. But if that is the case, why is there such manifest lack of peace, and so much talk of violence, in the present-day world of Islam? In order to answer this question it is necessary to understand what "peace" means according to the perspective of "normative" Islam.

Many, including some who are committed to the ideal of peacemaking, tend, unfortunately, to define peace negatively, as "absence of war" (just as some tend to define "health" as "absence of sickness"). But, in quranic terms, peace is much more than mere absence of war. It is a positive state of safety or security in which one is free from anxiety or fear. It is this state that characterizes both *islām*,²⁴ self-surrender to God, and *īmān*,²⁵ true faith in God, and reference is made to it, directly or indirectly, on every page of the Qur'ān through the many derivatives of the roots "s-l-m" and "a-m-n" from which *islām* and *īmān* are derived, respectively. Peace is an integral part not only of the terms used for a believer, "muslim" (i.e., one who professes *islām*) and *mo'min* (i.e., one who possesses *īmān*), but also of God's names *As-Salām* and *Al-Mo'min* mentioned in the Qur'ān:

He is Allāh, beside whom there is no God; the King, the Holy, the Author of Peace [As-Salām], the Granter of Security [Al-Mo'min], Guardian

over all, the Mighty, the Supreme, the Possessor of greatness [Surah 59.23].²⁶

As pointed out by G.A. Parwez, *As-Salām* is the Being who is the source of peace and concord and who assures peaceful existence to all beings. *Al-Mo'min* is the Being who shelters and protects all and bestows peace in every sphere of life.²⁷

That God “invites” humanity to *dār as-salām* (i.e., the abode of peace) is stated by the Qur‘ān (Surah 10.25), which also promises the reward of peace to those who live in accordance with God’s will:

God guides such as follow His pleasure into the ways of peace, and brings them out of darkness into light by His will, and guides them to the right path [Surah 5.16].²⁸

And this is the path of thy Lord, straight. Indeed we have made the message clear for a people who mind. Theirs is the abode of peace with their Lord, and He is their Friend because of what they do [Surah 6.127–128].²⁹

Can, then, he who knows that whatever has been bestowed from on high upon thee by thy Sustainer is the truth be deemed equal to one who is blind? Only they who are endowed with insight keep this in mind: they who are true to their bond with God and never break their covenant; and who keep together what God has bidden to be joined, and stand in awe of their Sustainer and fear the most evil reckoning (which awaits such as do not respond to Him); and who are patient in adversity out of a longing for their Sustainer’s countenance, and are constantly in prayer, and spend on others, secretly and openly, out of what we provide for them as sustenance, and repel evil with good. It is these that shall find their fulfillment in the hereafter: gardens of perpetual bliss which they shall enter together with the righteous from among their parents, their spouses, and their offspring: and the angels will come unto them from every gate (and will say): “Peace be upon you, because you have persevered!” [Surah 13.19–24].³⁰

The verses cited above point the way a believer must follow in order to attain peace in the hereafter. But this way (i.e., of *islām*) is also the way of obtaining peace here and now. In other words, peace on earth (which is a precondition of peace in heaven) is the result of living in accordance with God’s will and pleasure. Here it is important to note that Islam conceives of God as *Rabb Al-‘Alamīn*: Creator and Sustainer of all the peoples and universes, whose purpose in creating (as stated in Surah 51.56) is that all creatures should engage in God’s *‘ibādat*. This term, which is commonly understood as “worship,” in fact has a much broader meaning and refers to “doing what God approves.”³¹ In

Islam “doing what God approves” is not conceived in terms of seeking salvation from the burden of original sin through belief in redemption or a redeemer (none of these ideas/concepts being present in the Qur’ān) or through renunciation of the world (monasticism not being required by God, according to the Qur’ān).³² Rather, it is conceived in terms of the fulfillment of *Haquq Allāh* (rights of God) and *Haquq al-‘ibād* (rights of God’s servants—namely, human beings). The Qur’ān considers the two kinds of “rights” to be inseparable as indicated by the constant conjunction of *salāt* (signifying remembrance of, and devotion to, God) and *zakāt* (signifying the sharing of one’s possessions with those in need). In fact, as Surah 107 shows, the Qur’ān is severe in its criticism of those who offer their prayers to God but are deficient in performing acts of kindness to those in need:

Hast thou ever considered [the kind of person] who gives the
lie to all moral law?
Behold, it is this [kind of person] who thrusts the orphan
away,
and feels no urge to feed the needy.
Woe, then, unto those praying ones whose hearts from their
prayers are remote—
those who want only to be seen and praised,
and, withal, deny all assistance [to their fellows].³³

In quranic terms, then, peace is obtained in any human society when human beings, conscious of their duty to God, fulfill their duty to other human beings. In fulfilling this duty they honor what I call the “human rights” of others. These rights are those that all human beings *ought* to possess because they are rooted so deeply in our humanness that their denial or violation is tantamount to negation or degradation of that which makes us human. These rights came into existence when we did; they were created, as we were, by God in order that our human potential could be actualized. These rights not only provide us with an opportunity to develop all our inner resources, but they also hold before us a vision of what God would like us to be: what God wants us to strive for and live for and die for. Rights given by God are rights that ought to be exercised, because everything that God does is for “a just purpose” (Surah 15.85; 16.3; 44.39; 45.22; 46.3). Among these rights, there are some that have an important, perhaps even a crucial, bearing on whether or not a society can realize the ideal of peace; hence a brief account of them follows.

Right to Life

The sanctity and absolute value of human life is upheld by the Qur’ān, which states:

And do not take any human being's life—which God has declared to be sacred—otherwise than in [the pursuit of] justice: this He has enjoined upon you so that you might use your reason [Surah 6.151].³⁴

The Qur'ān also points out graphically in Surah 5.35 that in essence the life of each individual is comparable to the life of an entire community, and, therefore, should be treated with utmost care:

We ordained
 For the Children of Israel
 That if any one slew
 A person—unless it be
 For murder or for spreading
 Mischief in the land—
 It would be as if
 He slew the whole people:
 And if anyone saved a life,
 It would be as if he saved
 The life of the whole people.³⁵

Right to Respect

In Surah 17.70, the Qur'ān says: “Verily, we have honored every human being.” Human beings are worthy of respect because they have been made “in the best of molds” (Surah 95.4), and possess the faculty of reason, which distinguishes them from all other creatures (Surah 2.30–34) and enables them to accept the “trust” of freedom of will, which no other creature is willing to accept (Surah 33.72). Human beings can acquire knowledge of good and evil, and strive to do the good and avoid the evil. Thus, they have the potential to be God's viceregents on earth. On account of the promise that is contained in being human, the humanness of all human beings is to be respected and regarded as an end in itself.

Right to Justice

In the Qur'ān, tremendous emphasis is put on the duty to do justice:

O ye who believe, be maintainers of justice, bearers of witness for Allah, even though it be against your own selves or [your] parents or near relatives—whether he be rich or poor, Allah has the better right over them both. So follow not low desires, lest you deviate. And if you distort or turn away from [truth], surely Allah is ever aware of what you do [Surah 4.135].³⁶

O ye who believe, be upright for Allah, bearers of witness with justice; and let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably. Be just; that is nearer to observance of duty. And keep your duty to Allah. Surely Allah is aware of what you do [Surah 5.8].³⁷

In the context of justice, the Qur'ān uses two concepts: *adl* and *ihsan*. Both are enjoined (Surah 16.91) and both are related to the idea of balance, but they are not identical in meaning. A.A.A. Fyzee, a well-known scholar of Islamic law, defined *adl* as “to be equal, neither more nor less,” and stated: “in a court of justice the claims of the two parties must be considered evenly, without undue stress being laid upon one side or the other. Justice introduces balance in the form of scales that are evenly balanced.”³⁸ Abu'l Kalam Azad, a noted Muslim scholar, described *adl* in similar terms: “What is justice but the avoiding of excess. There should be neither too much nor too little; hence the use of scales as the emblems of justice.”³⁹ Lest anyone try to do too much or too little, the Qur'ān states that no human being can carry another's burden (Surah 53.38) or have anything without striving for it (*ibid.*, 39).

It is important to note here that, according to the quranic perspective, justice is not to be interpreted as absolute equality of treatment, because human beings are not equal so far as their human potential or their human situation is concerned. Thus, though upholding the principle that the humanness of all human beings is to be respected, the Qur'ān maintains that the recognition of individual “merit” is also a fundamental human right. The Qur'ān teaches that merit is not determined by lineage, sex, wealth, success, or religion—but by righteousness. Righteousness consists not only of *īmān* (just belief) but also of *amal* (just action) as pointed out in the following passage:

True piety does not consist in turning your faces towards the east or the west—but truly pious is he who believes in God, and the Last Day, and the angels, and revelation, and the prophets; and spends his substance—however much he himself may cherish it—upon his near of kin, and the orphans, and the needy, and the wayfarer, and the beggars, and for the freeing of human beings from bondage; and is constant in prayer, and renders the purifying dues; and [truly pious are] they who keep their promises whenever they promise, and are patient in misfortune and hardship and in time of peril: it is they who have proved themselves true, and it is they, they who are conscious of God.⁴⁰

Surah 19.95 testifies to the higher merit of one who strives harder for the cause of God:

Such of the believers as remain passive—other than the disabled—cannot be deemed equal to those who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives: God has exalted those who strive hard with their possessions and their lives far above those who remain passive.

Although God has promised the ultimate good unto all [believers], yet has God exalted those who strive hard above those who remain passive by [promising them] a mighty reward—[many] degrees thereof—and forgiveness of sins, and His grace; for God is indeed much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace.⁴¹

Surah 49.13 affirms that “the most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you.”

Just as it is in the spirit of *adl* that special merit be considered in the matter of rewards, so also special circumstances must be considered in the matter of punishments. In the case of punishment for crimes of “unchastity,” for instance, the Qur‘ān, being nonsexist, prescribes identical punishments for a man or a woman who is proved guilty (Surah 2.2), but it differentiates between different classes of women; for the same crime, a slave woman would receive half, and the Prophet’s consort double, the punishment given to a “free” Muslim woman (Surah 4.25; 33.30). Making such a distinction shows compassion for the morally “disadvantaged,” while upholding high moral standards for others, particularly those whose actions have a normative significance.

While constantly enjoining *adl*, the Qur‘ān goes beyond this concept to *ihsan*, literally “restoring the balance by making up a loss or deficiency.”⁴² In order to understand this concept, it is necessary to understand the nature of the ideal community or society (*ummah*) envisaged by the Qur‘ān. The word *ummah* comes from the term *umm* meaning “mother.” The symbols of a mother and motherly love and compassion are also linked with the two attributes most characteristic of God, *Rahmān* and *Rahīm*, both of which are derived from the root r-h-m, meaning “womb.” The ideal *ummah* cares about all its members as an ideal mother cares about all her children, knowing that all are not equal and that each has different needs. Although encouraging any one of her children to be parasitical would be injurious and unjust not only to her other children but also to the one who does not fulfill its human potential, she can, with justice, make up the deficiency of any child who, despite its best efforts, still cannot meet the requirements of life. *Ihsan* thus secures what even *adl* cannot; it shows the Qur‘ān’s sympathy for the downtrodden, oppressed, or weak classes of human beings (such as women, slaves, orphans, the poor, the infirm, minorities, etc.).

Right to Freedom

There is much in the Qur‘ān that endorses J.J. Rousseau’s famous statement: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” A large part of the Qur‘ān’s concern is to free human beings from the chains that bind them: traditionalism, authoritarianism (religious, political, economic), tribalism, racism, sexism, and slavery.

It is obvious that God alone is completely free and not subject to any constraints. The human condition necessitates that limits be set to what human

beings may or may not do, so that liberty does not degenerate into license. Recognizing the human propensity toward dictatorship and despotism, the Qur‘ān says with startling clarity and emphasis:

It is not meet for a mortal that Allah should give him the Book and the judgment and the prophethood, then he should say to men: Be my servants besides Allah’s; but [he would say]: Be worshippers of the Lord because you teach the Book and because you study [it] [Surah 3.78].⁴³

The greatest guarantee of personal freedom for a Muslim lies in the quranic decree that no one other than God can limit human freedom (Surah 42.21) and in the statement that “judgment is only Allah’s” (Surah 12.40).

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to cite quranic pronouncements relating to human freedom in the diverse realms of life, it is important to mention that the Qur‘ān abolished slavery (Surah 47.4); that it established the principle of *shura* or government by mutual consultation (Surah 3.159)⁴⁴ in order to eliminate the possibility of political authoritarianism; and that it prohibited coercion in matters of religious belief as is clearly stated in Surah 2.256:

Let there be no compulsion
In religion: truth stands out
Clear from error: whoever
Rejects evil and believes
In God hath grasped
The most trustworthy
Hand-hold, that never breaks.⁴⁵

The same is implied in Surah 18.29:

The Truth is
From your Lord:
Let him who will
Believe, and let him
Who will, reject [it].⁴⁶

It is noteworthy that in the matter of religious freedom, the Qur‘ān is “liberal” to an amazing degree. Not only does it state quite clearly that the mission of the Prophet (and Muslims) to non-Muslims consists only of a faithful transmission of the message of God and that the Prophet (and Muslims) ought not to feel responsible for the religious and moral choices made by other Muslims or by non-Muslims after they have received the message of God.⁴⁷ The Qur‘ān also makes it clear that plurality of religions is part of God’s plan for humanity:

If it had been God's plan
 They would not have taken
 False gods: but we
 Made thee not one
 To watch over their doings,
 Nor art thou set
 Over them to dispose
 Of their affairs
 [Surah 6.107].⁴⁸

If it had been thy Lord's will
 They would have all believed,
 All who are on earth!
 Will thou then compel mankind,
 Against their will, to believe!
 [Surah 10.99].⁴⁹

Going still further, the Qur'ān states:

Those who believe [in the Qur'ān],
 And those who follow the Jewish [scriptures],
 And the Christians and the Sabians,
 Any who believe in God
 And the Last Day,
 And work righteousness,
 Shall have their reward
 With their Lord,
 Nor shall they grieve
 [Surah 2.62].⁵⁰

In other words, not only does the Qur'ān uphold the right of human beings in general to religious freedom, it also recognizes the religious equality of all those who have "iman" and act righteously. Even to those beyond the pale of "right belief," the attitude of the Qur'ān is open-minded and more than merely tolerant, as may be seen from the following verses:

But do not revile those whom they invoke instead of God, lest they revile God out of spite, and in ignorance: for, goodly indeed have we made their own doings appear unto every community. In time, however unto their Sustainer they must return: and then He will make them [truly] understand all that they were doing [Surah 6.108].⁵¹

And if any of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God seeks thy protection, grant him protection, so that he might [be able to] hear the word of God [from thee]; and thereupon convey him to a place where he

can feel secure: this, because they [may be] people who [sin only because they] do not know [the truth] [Surah 9.6].⁵²

In the context of the human right to religious freedom, it is necessary to mention that, according to traditional Islam, the punishment for apostasy is death. There is, however, nothing in the Qur'ān that suggests any punishment at all, let alone the punishment of death. There is absolutely no reason why the quranic imperative that there must be no compulsion in religion should not apply also to the Muslims who wish to renounce Islam. (I believe that the death penalty was not originally for apostasy but for apostasy accompanied by "acts of war" against Muslims. Later, however, this distinction was obliterated by Muslim jurists in order to compel "wavering" Muslims to remain within the fold of Islam.)

Other Rights

Some other rights that may be mentioned in passing are: the right to be protected from defamation, sarcasm, offensive nicknames, and backbiting (Surah 49.11–12) as well as from being maligned on grounds of assumed guilt by scandal-mongers (Surah 24.16–19); the right to a secure place of residence (Surah 2.85); the right to a means of living (Surah 6.156; 11.6); the right to protection of one's personal property or possessions (Surah 2.29); the right to protection of one's covenants/contracts (Surah 3.177; 5.1; 17.34); the right to move freely (Surah 67.15); the right to seek asylum if one is living under oppression (Surah 4.97–100); the right to social and judicial autonomy for minorities (Surah 5.42–48); the right to protection of one's holy places (Surah 9.17); and the right to protection of one's home life from undue intrusion (Surah 24.27–28, 58; 33.53; 49.12).

It is essential in the context of human rights in Islam to mention that there is more quranic legislation pertaining to the regulation of man-woman relationships than on any other subject. The Qur'ān is fully cognizant of the fact that women have been among the most exploited and oppressed groups in the world, and aims, in multifarious ways, to establish their equality with men in terms of their humanness and to secure justice for them in domestic and public matters. An idea of tremendous importance implicit in many teachings of the Qur'ān is that if human beings can learn to order their homes justly so that the rights of all within its jurisdiction are safeguarded, then they can also order their society and the world at large justly. In other words, the Qur'ān regards the home as a microcosm of the *ummah* and the world community, and emphasizes the importance of making it "the abode of peace" through just living.

Even a brief reflection on the "human rights"⁵³ mentioned above gives one a good idea of the quranic concept of "the good life." This good life, which is made up of many elements and is characterized by peace, is possible only within a just environment. In other words, justice is a prerequisite for peace according to the Qur'ān, which does not understand peace to be a passive state

of affairs, a mere absence of war. A peace generated by a thing such as the cold war would, in quranic terms, not only be “unholy” but also unreal because it does not guarantee the existence of the conditions that are required for the actualization of human potentialities or the fulfillment of the total human being who alone is capable of attaining the ideal of peace as the Qur’ān understands it. Without the elimination of the inequities, inequalities, and injustices that pervade the personal and collective lives of human beings, it is not possible to talk of peace in Islamic terms. Such talk makes sense only in a society in which ignorance and oppression have been eliminated, in which the means of sustaining and developing human life and capabilities are accessible to all, in which there is freedom from fear, uncertainty, and anxiety—in short, in a society where justice prevails in every way.

SUMMATION

The central significance of both education and peace in “normative” Islam is clear from the foregoing discussion. There is no question at all that the Qur’ān would wholeheartedly support the idea of educating for peace provided its concepts of “education” and “peace” are properly understood. It is obvious that the quranic ideal is not easy to achieve in a world such as the one in which we live, because it entails not simply the desire to abolish violence and war as means of conflict-resolution but the commitment to “doing what God approves.” However, from the quranic perspective, the securing of peace either here and now or in the hereafter is not meant to be easy, as the Qur’ān states in Surah 3.141:

Did you think that ye
Would enter *al-jannah*
[i.e., “the garden”]: the abode of peace]
Without God testing
Those of you who fought hard
(in His cause) and
Remained steadfast?⁵⁴

Peace is dependent upon justice and justice is dependent upon *jihād fi sabil Allāh*: striving in the cause of God. It is most unfortunate that *jihād*, which is the means whereby God’s vision of a peaceful world can come to be, has become identified in the minds of many non-Muslims and—what is much worse—in the minds of many present-day Muslims, with mere destruction. According to the Qur’ān, Muslims have the right to defend themselves against injustice and the duty to protect the weak from injustice.⁵⁵ But they are reminded, over and over, that the “limits set by God” (*hudud Allāh*) are not to be transgressed at any time, and that justice must be done even to an enemy.⁵⁶ Furthermore, any initiative toward peace taken by an enemy must be accepted and responded to in good faith and with good will.⁵⁷

The thought with which I should like to conclude this paper is that, in my judgment, the greatest *jihād* for Muslims today lies in the making of war not upon real or assumed enemies of Islam but upon the ignorance and narrowness of heart, mind, and spirit that prevent Muslims from becoming *mo'minum*: those who have attained peace through right knowledge leading to right action. The duty to seek learning even in the midst of war is where the quranic emphasis lies, as pointed out in Surah 9.122:

With all this, it is not desirable that all of the believers take the field [in time of war]. From within every group in their midst, some shall refrain from going forth to war, and shall devote themselves [instead] to acquiring a deeper knowledge of the faith, and [thus be able to] teach their home-coming brethren, so that these [too] might guard themselves against evil.⁵⁸

NOTES

1. Some of my reactions to the Education for Peace Project at the Ben Gurion University were recorded in "Response to 'Buberian Learning Groups: the Quest for Responsibility in Education for Peace,' by Haim Gordon and Jan Demarest," published in *Teachers College Record*, 84.2 (Fall 1982) 226-31, and in *Education for Peace and Disarmament: Toward a Living World*, Douglas Sloan, ed. (New York, Teachers College Press, 1983).

2. Pakistan is one of the most educated of Muslim countries in the world. The following citations from a government document entitled *Action Plan for Educational Development 1983-88*, published by the Ministry of Education, Islamabad (1984), give an indication of what this means—for it and for the other Muslim nations: "Literacy was estimated at 26.2% in 1981. Behind this unflattering figure, there are large disparities—in terms of rural/urban (17.3% against 47.1%) and male/female (35.1% against 16.0%). Rural female literacy is only 7.3%, the worst case being female literacy in Baluchistan, only 1.8%" (p. 43). "In 1981 the criterion [of literacy] became . . . 'the ability to read a newspaper and write a simple letter in any language' " (p. 43). "The inadequacy of our educational system leaves little scope for debate. . . . Yet, what is heartening is the widespread realization that today we stand at the edge of a precipice, and that our fall is being delayed only because of our tenuous links with the mere semblance of a system, which if precluded of its weaknesses might still prove to be viable. Pakistan as a nation is at the brink of complete educational chaos and disaster" (p. 13). "Today we stand at the crossroads of planning informed by the realization that no meaningful progress can be achieved in Pakistan without a breakthrough in the field of education. The task has forbidding magnitudes. . . . With a literacy rate of 26.2% we mark the borders of the bottom category of countries like Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad, Laos, and Zaire. . . . Of the microscopic minority that manage to get education, the quality is nowhere near the international standards. More and more young men are emerging from the high schools ready neither for college nor for work. The state of higher education is no different. The predicament becomes more

acute as knowledge expands to new frontiers. Obviously, 'all is not well in the state of Denmark' " (p. 32).

3. See Surah 2.30-33.

4. Translation by Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Gibraltar, Dar-Al-Andalus, 1980).

5. Ibid.

6. Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'ān* (Lahore, 1937-38).

7. Ibid.

8. Translation by Muhammad Ali, *A Manual of Hadith* (Lahore, Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat-i-Islam, n.d.), p. 31.

9. Asad, *Message of the Qur'ān*.

10. Ali, *Manual of Hadith*, p. 39.

11. Nisar Ahmed, *The Fundamental Teachings of Qur'ān and Hadith* (Karachi, Jamiyatul Falah Publications, 1973), vol. 3, p. 111.

12. Abdallah al-Khatib at-Tabrizi, *Mishkat al-Masabih*, translated by James Robson (Lahore, Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1975), vol. 1, p. 55.

13. Ahmed, *Fundamental Teachings*, vol. 3, p. 117.

14. Ibid., p. 111.

15. at-Tabrizi, *Mishkat al-Masabih*, vol. 1, p. 53.

16. Cited in *The Spirit of Islam* by Syed Ameer Ali (Karachi, Pakistan Publishing House, 1976), pp. 360-61.

17. I. Goldziher, "Education (Muslim)," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, J. Hastings, ed. (Edinburgh, 1967), vol. 5, p. 198, quoted in *Religious Education in Islam* by J.D. Kraan (Rawalpindi, Christian Study Centre, 1984), p. 14.

18. Seeman K., "Education in Islam, From the Jahiliyyah to Ibn Khaidun," *Muslim World*, 56/3 (1966) 188, quoted in Kraan, *Religious Education*, p. 15.

19. F. Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden, Brill, 1970), p. 23, quoted in Kraan, *Religious Education*, p. 13.

20. R.L. Gulick, *Muhammad the Educator* (Lahore, Institute of Islamic Culture, 1969), p. 45.

21. Letter dated Dec. 5, 1925, published in *The Indian Review*, Madras, 27/1 (Jan. 1926) 2.

22. Muhammad Iqbāl, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore, 1944), pp. 8-9.

23. Vahid, S.A., ed., *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal* (Lahore, Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1964), p. 35.

24. G.A. Parwez, *Lughat ul-Qur'ān* (Lahore, Idaru Tulu'-e-Islam, 1960), vol. 2, p. 894.

25. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 263.

26. Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur'ān* (Chicago, Specialty Promotions, 1973).

27. G.A. Parwez, *Islam: A Challenge to Religion* (Lahore, Idara Tulu'-e-Islam, 1968), p. 285.

28. M. Ali, *Holy Qur'ān*.

29. Ibid.

30. Asad, *Message of the Qur'ān*.

31. *Arabic-English Lexicon*, book 1, part 5, p. 1936.

32. See Surah 57.27.

33. Asad, *Message of the Qur'ān*.

34. Ibid.
35. A.Y. Ali, *Holy Qur'ān*.
36. M. Ali, *Holy Qur'ān*.
37. Ibid.
38. A.A.A. Fyzee, *A Modern Approach to Islam* (Lahore, Universal Books, 1978), p. 17.
39. Ibid.
40. Asad, *Message of the Qur'ān*.
41. Ibid.
42. G.A. Parwez, *Tabweeb ul-Qur'ān* (Lahore, Idara Tulu'-e-Islam, 1977), vol. 1, p. 78.
43. M. Ali, *Holy Qur'ān*.
44. Of relevance here is the following passage: "The Qur'ān gives to responsible dissent the status of a fundamental right. In exercise of their powers, therefore, neither the legislature nor the executive can demand unquestioning obedience. . . . The Prophet, even though he was the recipient of Divine revelation, was required to consult the Muslims in public affairs. Allah addressing the Prophet says: '. . . consult with them upon the conduct of affairs. And . . . when thou art resolved, then put thy trust in Allah (Surah 3.159)' (K. Ishaque, "Islamic Law—Its Ideals and Principles," in *The Challenge of Islam*, A. Gauher, ed. [London, The Islamic Council of Europe, 1980], pp. 167–69).
45. A.Y. Ali, *Holy Qur'ān*.
46. Ibid.
47. See, e.g., Surah 6.107; 16.82; 42.48.
48. A.Y. Ali, *Holy Qur'ān*.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Asad, *Message of the Qur'ān*.
52. Ibid.
53. For a more detailed discussion of human rights in Islam, see my article, "On Human Rights and the Qur'anic Perspective," in *Human Rights in Religious Traditions*, A. Swidler, ed. (New York, Pilgrim Press, 1982), pp. 51–65; also in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 19/3 (Summer 1982) 51–65.
54. A.Y. Ali, *Holy Qur'ān*.
55. See, e.g., Surah 2.190–93, 217; 4.75–78; 22.39–40, 60; 57.25.
56. See, e.g., Surah 5.8.
57. See, e.g., Surah 8.61.
58. Asad, *Message of the Qur'ān*.

<p>"Peace Education: A Muslim Perspective," in <i>Education for Peace: Testimonies from World Religions</i>, edited by Haim Gordon and Leonard Grob, Orbis Books, New York, 1987, pp. 90-108</p>
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