

REDISCOVERING QUR'ANIC PREMISES FOR RELATIONSHIPS WITH NON-MUSLIMS

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In the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks (by a group of men who claimed to be Muslims) on American soil which had claimed the lives of thousands of innocent people, Islam and the roles of Muslims have been hurled into the forefront of the global media. In the aftermath, numerous talk shows were hosted, columns written, and speeches delivered in attempts to fathom the Muslim mind and the Muslim world. Many pressing issues were discussed ranging from the maltreatment of women under the hands of the ultraconservative Taliban governments in Afghanistan to whether or not Islam is compatible with the democratic principles of equality, justice and freedom. Copies of the Qur'an (the holy book of the Muslims) also sold fast and some of the darkest questions that loomed large in people's minds were "Does the Qur'an teach violence?" (The Larry King show, which was aired on television in December 2001, addressed this question.)

"Does it condone the killings of innocent people?" "Does it preach intolerance toward non-Muslims"?

It is precisely in this context of seeking such answers, particularly the Quranic view about Muslim and non-Muslim relationships that the journey began. It is a journey with you, my dear reader, to dive in, explore, and glean from the Qur'an and share our findings.

The fundamental principle on which Islam rests is the Unity of God (Allah in Arabic) who alone is worthy to be worshiped. We worship Him by recognizing His essence manifested through His divine qualities namely (1) the All-knowing, (2) the Compassionate, (3) the Merciful, (4) the Just, (5), the Patient, (6) the Protector, (8) the Powerful, and so on. Although He has many more attributes worthy of our exploration we shall seek our answers based on the first four qualities only.

The All Knowing: The very first word revealed in the Qur'an was 'Read'!

The verses read:

"Read in the name of your
Lord and Cherisher
Who created,
Created man from a clinging substance
Read, and your Lord is the most generous
Who taught by the pen
Taught man that which he knew not.

(Chapter 96: Verses 1-5)

The emphasis of the Qur'an is on the acquisition of knowledge. Hence, the pen in its symbolic expression is the means by which humanity should acquire knowledge.

The most compassionate, the most merciful.

Every chapter of the Qur'an begins by invoking these two qualities of Allah.¹

The root words for these two qualities are womb, or *Rahm* in Arabic, guiding us toward the feminine principle of nurturing. They are the constant reminders of how our behavior toward one another should be. We must live our lives with compassion, love, and mercy. According to the Qur'an the righteous people are those "...who feed for the love of God the indigent, the orphan, and the captive." (Chapter 76: Verse 8)

The Just.

Justice occupies the central position in the Qur'an. The message of justice is scattered throughout the Qur'an.

"O You who believe,
stand out firmly for Justice, as witnesses to Allah, even against yourselves, on your
parents or your kin." (Chapter 4: Verse 135)

"O you who believe
Stand out firmly for Allah as witnesses
to fair dealing and let not the hatred of others
to you make you swerve
To wrong and depart from justice. (Chapter 5: Verse 8)

Allah commands justice, the doing good,
And He forbids all shameful deeds
And injustice and transgression." (Chapter 16: Verse 90)

Knowledge, compassion, mercy, and justice are the balancing forces aimed to create and foster harmony, peace and prosperity in all aspects of our lives. The harmonious relationships between Muslims and members of other faiths and denominations are also determined by the proper applications of these qualities through our words and deeds.

¹ Among the thirty chapters only Chapter Nine does not begin with the usual invocations since it's considered not a separate chapter but a continuation of the previous chapter. See the translation and commentary of a A. Yousuf Ali *The Holy Quran*. (Maryland: Amana Corp., 1983), p. 436.

Relationships with Non-Muslims at Personal Level

The Qur'an states "We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam." (Chapter 17: Verse 70)

As such our interactions with our human families, irrespective of faith, color or nationality should also be of dignity and proper conduct. The prophet Muhammad's (the last messenger of Islam) (Peace Be Upon Him) relationship with his uncle Abu Talib, who had chosen to remain a pagan, was that of love, companion, trust, and fairness. Abu Talib extended just protection to Mohammed in times of trouble.² The prophet also asked his followers to treat their non-Muslim parents kindly.³

He warned his followers of grave consequences if they oppress the non-Muslims. He said, I will be the opponent of one who harms a non-Muslim and I will speak against these whom I oppose on the Day of Judgement.⁴

One's faith is merely a label and rituals meaningless without one's responsibility toward Society. Every Muslim is called upon to give charity and help people in need. The pagan people in Mecca, who had tortured and driven out the prophet from his home, received financial support from him, when they suffered from drought.⁵

The Qur'an exhorts to decent manner of conversation with people of other faiths. "And do not dispute with the people of the book, except with means better, unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong. But say: "We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you. Our God and your God is one." (Chapter 29: Verse 46).

Relationships with Non-Muslims at Religious Level

The power to judge a person's faith rests solely with God. Whosoever takes charge of what has not been given to him/her, assumes the "position" of God, and thereby commits a sin. The Qur'an affirms: "Those who believe, those who follow the Jewish (Scripture), the Sabians,

²Muhammed Husayn Haykal. The Life of Muhammad (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1976), pp. 88-90.

³Yasuf Al-Qaradawi. Non-Muslim in the Islamic Society (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1985), p. 29.

⁴Ibid, p. 4

⁵Ibid., p. 28.

the Christians, Magians, and polythesists, God will judge between them on Day of Judgments. For God is witness of all things.” (Chapter 22: Verse 17)

The Qur’an also states: “Let there be no compulsion in religion.” (Chapter 2: Verse 256)

A Muslim can bear arms only in self-defense. He must never fight anyone to compel him to his religion.

“God forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for faith, nor drive you out of your home from dealing kindly and justly with them. For God loves those who are just.” (Chapter 60: Verse 8)

The Qur’an also assures rewards for people of other faiths.

“Those who believe (in The Qur’an) and those who follow the Jewish (Scripture), The Sabians, and the Christians, any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. On them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Chapter 5: Verse 69)

It does not befit a Muslim in God’s service to use retaliatory response.

“And the servants of the Most Gracious are these
Who:
Walk on the earth in humility;
And if the ignorant ones speak to them
they say ‘peace.’” (Chapter 25: Verse 63)

A true devotee of God admires and reveres the diversity in which God has created the world and people according to His Grand plan. “Had Allah willed, he would have made you one Nation (United in Religion) but (he intended) to test you in what He had given you; so compete to do good. To God is your return all together and he will (then) inform you concerning that over which you used to differ.” (Chapter 5: Verse 48)

The messages of diversity, tolerance, and pluralism were instilled in the prophet’s heart. He worked diligently to create a model community respectful of each other’s religion. Complete religious freedom was granted to the non-Muslim population living in Arabia during the prophet’s time, and continued till the decline of Islamic civilization in the Arab peninsula.⁶

⁶Rashid Al Ghannouchi. The Right to Nationality Status of non-Muslim Citizens in a Muslim Nation. (USA: Islamic Foundation of America, 1990), p. 43.

Relationships with Non-Muslims at Political and Global Level.

The first ambassador of Islam, Amr Ibn Umayyah Al Damri, was a non-Muslim at the time when he was sent by the prophet (PBUH) to the King of Abyssinia.⁷

The Muslims persecuted in their homeland for their faith received protection from the Abyssian Christian King at his kingdom. A new relationship, between the Muslims and Christians had blossomed on a broader sphere, based on compassion and fairness. The Prophet remembered the generosity of the Abyssinian King and his people. Later, when a delegation of Abyssinian people came to visit the prophet, he took the responsibility of personally “taking care of them.” He said “These are my special guests...These people have taken good care of the Muslims. I have an obligation to them. I want to return their kindness with an act of kindness.”⁸

Relationship with Non-Muslims at Sociocultural Level

God’s first commandment “Iqra” or “Read” had transformed the early Muslim societies. They sought knowledge from every source, interchanged ideas and information from everyone irrespective of faith, color, or nationality or gender. The Qur’an exhorts: “O mankind, we created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and Tribes, that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah in the most righteous.” (Chapter 49: Verse 13)

Humankind was created to know one another, not to despise one another. They were to recognize each other’s qualities, learn from one another and gain a holistic perspective of life, people, and the universe, so justice can be upheld and peace nurtured. Since they were created from the same source, there is no superiority of one over the other. According to God, a person’s nobility is dependent not upon one’s birth, race, or gender but righteous conduct. The early Muslims imbibed the spirit of knowing, came into close contact with the Greek and Indian civilizations. They studied the Greek and translated volumes of Greek philosophy and science into Arabic.

(Important philosophical discourse, including the Republic of Plato, were, in fact, translated for the first time from Arabic into English.) They studied the Indian mathematics and made universal the Indian revolutionary invention of zero. Knowledge was simultaneously gathered, and shared for the common good of humanity. Likewise, people of different faiths, cultures, and civilizations came to learn from the Muslims. Together, they created a higher

⁷Ibid. p. 17.

⁸Abid’ullah Ghazi and Tasneema K. Ghazi. Brotherhood of Faith, part 9 (Pakistan: Da’wah Academy, 1989), p. 14.

civilization.

Our brief journey through the revelation of the Qur'an, the words and actions of the prophet (PBUH), and glimpses at the early civilization affirm that knowledge, understanding, love, compassion and justice are the essential values to be nurtured and promoted for the development of a healthy society and wholesome relationships between diverse groups of people.

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