

Islam and Non-Violence

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Islam has been integrally associated with 'sword' that one can hardly associate it with non-violence. "Quran in one hand and sword in the other" is the popular stereotype and this stereotype is very widely disseminated indeed. This stereotype arose during the crusades in 12th and 13th century. Thereafter whenever any conflicting and confrontational situation arose between Muslims in the east and Christians in the west, this stereotype was popularised. It should be remembered that those prejudices, which arise during a particular conflict between two persons or communities, get further hardened during further conflicts. And during course of time these prejudices acquire facticity of its own and no amount of argument would diminish their intensity.

During the nineteenth century the colonial west sought to establish its complete hegemony over the Islamic countries and thus came in intense conflict with them during that period. The Islamic countries came under western subjugation to varying degrees. This situation lasted, in certain cases, for over a century. The Islamic world was in turmoil all through the period and conflict between these Islamic nations and the west remained intense. Islam and Islamic nations were consequently projected as violent, fanatical and barbaric, refusing to accept domination by 'civilized' west.

In Indian situation too, the Quran and sword stereotype found ready acceptance for obvious reasons. Muslims were seen as invaders and aggressors. They came in hordes and conquered India and subjugated it with the power of their sword. They not only conquered India with sword but also held it under their sway for several centuries. During nineteenth century when the British rule was established in India and Indians, particularly the Hindus, acquired western secular education and imbibed modern liberal ideas, they felt ashamed that they had to remain under the sway of outsiders for centuries. This sense of hurt was further aggravated when they discovered their own glorious past. They felt though they had great achievements to their credit in pre-Islamic Past, they got subjugated and they had to live under Muslims' subjugation for several centuries. Naturally, they found it soothing and violent nature for their subjugation rather than themselves.

Thus it will be seen that there were many takers for the stereotype "Quran in one hand and sword in the other". Even today many non-Muslims continue to argue vehemently that Islam preaches conversion through sword, if other methods fail. Some Quranic verses are also adduced in corroboration of their argument. Those who are not well versed in the Quranic text and context, history and causes of revelation (asbab al-nuzul), easily get convinced about the 'violent and war-mongering' nature of Islam. The concept of Jihad has also created serious misunderstanding in the minds of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Jihad is often understood as a war of aggression, subjugation of non-Muslims and imposing Jizya over them. It is no wonder than if Islam and violence have become an integral whole.

Islam and Peace

Islam is not a religion of violence; neither violence is integral to it. The very word 'Islam' is very negation of the concept of violence. Islam means, surrender to the will of God on one hand, and establishing peace, on the other. The word for peace in Arabic is 'salam'. When Muslims greet each other they invoke peace – salam 'alaykum' (peace be on you). Not only Muslims, all human beings could be greeted with these words. Thus it is religious duty of a Muslim to strive for establishment of peace in society. Muslim is one who surrenders to the will of Allah and is establisher of peace (while Islam means establishment of peace, Muslim means one who establishes peace through his action and conduct).

Surrender to the will of Allah also compels him to strive for establishment of peace. Allah is merciful and compassionate – *al-Rehman, al-Rahim*. Violence and mercy and violence and compassion cannot go together. One, who is merciful and compassionate, cannot issue any commandment for needless violence. Violence at best could be permitted by a compassionate. Being only to remove sufferings and injustices. It is this aspect of *jihad*, which is necessary to understand. We will come to this point little later. Also, Allah is Just-*Adil* and He commands others to do justice. He commands in the holy Quran, "Be just; that is nearer to observance of duty". (5:8). He also requires that hatred of other should not motivate you to do injustice to them. It would be unjust. Thus in the same verse it is said, "O you who believe, be upright for Allah, bearers of witness with justice; and let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably".

Thus it is the will of Allah that justice should prevail and even hatred of a people should not motivate a believer to commit an act of injustice. And justice demands that needless and uncalled for violence should not be perpetrated. That itself would be a great injustice. A Muslim, who surrenders himself/herself to the will of Allah, cannot shed a drop of blood without very compelling reason for the same.

A Muslim is not permitted to use coercion, let alone violence, in preaching his religion. "There is no compulsion in religion", declares the Quran in clear words and continues, "the right way is indeed clearly distinct from error. So whoever disbelieves in the devil and believes in Allah, he indeed lays hold on the firmest handle which shall never break". (2:256). Thus it is clear from this verse that you can lay hand on 'the firmest handle' only if '*din*' is accepted through inner conviction, not through coercion. If compulsion or coercion in any form is used, the handle would break. One can have grip over 'firmest of handle' ('*urwah al-wuthqa*') only through inner conviction.

Maulana Muhammad Ali, a noted commentator on the Quran, says, commenting on the above verse, "To all the nonsense which is being talked about the Prophet offering Islam or the sword as alternatives to the pagan Arabs, this verse is a sufficient answer. Being assured of success, the Muslims are told that when they hold power in their hand their guiding principle should be that there should be no compulsion in the matter of religion". (*Holy Quran*, Lahore, 1973), p-111, f.n.342). The Maulana also tells us that, "The presumption that this passage was directed to the early converts and that it was abrogated later is utterly baseless." (*Holy Quran*. Ibid.)

Not only that the Quran clearly declares there is no compulsion in religion, it also lays down, in no uncertain words, the methodology of preaching. The Quran declares, “*Call to the way of the Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the best manner*”. (Quran, 16:125) (emphasis added). Thus there should be no doubt left in any ones mind about methodology of preaching advocated by the Quran. It has to be done with wisdom and a Muslim has to argue the case with convincing and appealing arguments and that too in the best possible manner. Even the good arguments, if made rudely and with an element of anger, loses its appeal. The Quran takes care of this aspect too. Thus its methodology of preaching cannot be faulted.

Not only this Quran specifically prohibits Muslims from abusing those who believes in gods other than Allah. It says, “And abuse not those whom they (i.e. non-believers) call upon besides Allah, lest, exceeding the limits, they abuse Allah through ignorance”. (6:109). Not only that the Quran prohibits believers from abusing others gods, it also makes it clear to them that “to every people have we made their deeds fair-seeming; then to their Lord is their return so He will inform them of what they did.” (6:109).

It is important to note here that according to the Quran abusing others’ gods is counter-productive; not only that to every people their deeds (ways of worshipping included) seem quite fair to them and it is this sense of fairness which is important, not the way of worshipping. In other words, if one has particular way of worshipping, it not only seems fair to him but it is also based on his inner conviction. Muslims may not accept that way of worshipping but they must learn to co-exist in harmony with them. The Quran also throws a challenge to the believers in this respect (i.e. harmonious co-existence with others ways of beliefs). This challenge is thrown in these words, “If Allah had desired He would have made you a single community, but that He might try you in what He gave you (diversity of beliefs). So vie one with another in virtuous deeds”. (5:48)

Allah has appointed a law and a way for every community and they must co-exist in harmony and excel each other in good deeds. If the Quran advocates this philosophy, how can it advocate use of violence in compelling others to embrace Islam. Had it advocated violence the above verses would have made no sense whatever at all. The myth of the Quran and sword arose much later and, as pointed out before, its causes should be seen in history, not in the Quran. Also, the Quran makes distinction between faith (which includes ways of worshipping and associated rituals) and ones overall situation, social as well as political. It is certainly not faith, which calls for violence, it is ones own socio-political situation, which might demand it. Violence used under certain social circumstances cannot be blamed on one din (faith). The Quran adopts a radically different position as far as faith is concerned. It is most tolerant and liberal.

Islam believes all those who believe in God. Day of Judgment (that every one will have to account for ones deeds) and performs good deeds, will be equally rewarded, irrespective of ones religion. Be he a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian or a Sabian, if he has faith in God and Day of Judgment and does good will have his reward (2:62). It is most tolerant position one can think of. It is wrong to think that Islam condemns all other religions. To the contrary, it repeatedly says that the Prophet has come to confirm the truth, which already exists (*mus.. addigan li ma bayna yadayn*). He is no bringer of new truth and hence there is no question of condemning truth revealed to other Prophets.

Struggle Against Injustice

What is the place of violence in Islam? Is Islam a non-violent religion then? The answer, to be honest and to be truthful to life, is both yes and no. Islam does not advocate violence but does not shun it altogether. Life is full of contradictions and these contradictions do reflect themselves in what we can call a contextual theology, if it wishes to be true to life. The Quran does not advocate mere abstract theological and metaphysical doctrines. The Quranic theology does not neglect the concrete socio-political context. All scriptures, on close scrutiny, would be found to contain contextual contradictions. And the Quran is no exception to that. In fact the scriptures provide both normative as well as contextual answers. Normatively speaking the Quran opposes violence but permits it contextually.

When it comes to context we must take socio-political and socio-economic conditions of the society in which a particular religion originates. Hinduism is a non-violent religion in the ideal sense. However, in the midst of war, the conditions were different and even Lord Krishna had to urge Arjuna to fight even if it meant shedding the blood of near and dear ones, in fact his own cousins. War has justification in certain circumstances, especially if inflicted by exploitative and oppressive forces. But war can have no justification for spread of religion. Even the concept of Jihad in Islam has to be seen in this light. Jihad has nothing to do with spread of religion; it is only a war against oppression and exploitation.

Thus Quran sanctions war if the weaker sections of the society are being persecuted and there is no way left out to rescue them. Thus the Quran says: “And what reason have you not to fight in the way of Allah, and of the weak among the men and the women and children, who say our Lord, takes us out of this town, whose people are oppressors, and grant us from Thou a friend, and grant us from Thou a helper.”(4:75)

It can thus be clearly seen that the Quran urges upon believers to fight against oppression being perpetrated against men, women and children, who are weak (mustad ifin). Commenting on this verse, Maulana Muhammad Ali says, “This verse explains what is meant by fighting in the way of Allah. While most of the believers who had the means had escaped from Makkah, which is here spoken of as the city whose people are oppressors, there remained those who were weak and unable to undertake a journey. These still persecuted and oppressed by the Makkah’s, as is clearly shown by the words of the verse, and not only men, but even women and young children, were persecuted. Fighting to deliver them from the persecution of the oppressors was really fighting in the way of Allah”. (Holy Quran, Ibid.)

Thus to fight against persecution is fight in the way of Allah. The next verse also makes it clear when it say, those who believe fight in the way of Allah, and those who disbelieve fight in the way of the devil (t..aghut). T..aghut it must be remembered represents the forces of oppression and exploitation. Also, it is necessary to wipe out those who in no other way can be persuaded to give up persecution. The Quranic doctrine in this respect is that “persecution is worse than slaughter” (2”191). Uninterrupted persecution therefore, should in no way go unchallenged. If allowed to persist, it may lead to much greater slaughter in future. The Quran does not want exploitation and persecution to go on in the society. It must be nibbed in the bud.

Islam and Non-Muslims

Also, there are several verses in the Quran, which talk of fighting and killing unbelievers. For example the Quran says, “Fight those who believe not in Allah, nor in the last day” or forbid that which Allah and His Messenger have forbidden, nor follow the Religion of Truth, out those who have been given the Book, until they pay the tax in acknowledgement of their defeat (wahum s..aghirun).”

Here it appears as if the Quran is declaring general war against all unbelievers until they accept superiority of Islam and agree to pay Jizyah. However, it would be gross simplification. It is far from the Quran’s intention. One has to go into the background of this revelation. Firstly, these verses relate not to idolaters but to what the Quran refers to as Ahl al-Kitab (people of the book) i.e. Jews and Christians. There was understanding between the Muslims and Jews that when attacked by idolaters of Mecca, Jews will fight on the side of Muslims. However, the Jews had never reconciled themselves with the rising power of Muslims in Medina and assisted the idolaters of Mecca. They were conspiring to uproot Islam from Arabia.

The Roman Empire, the great Christian Power at the time, was, on the other hand, trying to mobilising its forces against Islam, which it sought to subjugate. It was obvious from the Tabuk expedition. It was far from Quran’s intention to either compel the idolaters to accept Islam or the Jews and Christians to be subjugated. The Prophet otherwise would not have drawn up a pact on reaching Medina with the Jews, Christians and pagans giving them right to follow their religions. It was idolaters of Mecca and Jews who repeatedly sought to vanquish Islam with the power of sword. The Quran sanctions violence to counter violence. If one study the history of Arab tribes before Islam and fierce fighting they indulged in would be convinced that the philosophy of passive resistance would not have worked in that environment. A concept emerges in a particular context and works only in that context. Non-violence, a concept of great value undoubtedly, and also upheld by Islam as an ultimate norm could not have worked in the conditions prevailing in Arabia then. Moreover, in the verse quoted above, the idea is not to kill unbelievers if they do not accept Islam but to bring them under control by making them accept defeat and pay Jizyah.

Also, Islam does not permit Muslims to take up sword against those unarmed. It permits to fight against aggressors. It is obvious from the Quranic verse, “Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but be not aggressive. Surely Allah loves not aggressors.” (2:190). Thus it is absolutely clear from this verse that the Quran does not approve of war of aggression and Allah loves not aggressors. The following verse also makes this point when it says, “And kill them wherever you find them, and drive them out from where they drove you out, and persecution is worse than slaughter. And fight not with them at the Sacred Mosque until they fight with you in it, so if they fight you (in it), slay them. Such is the recompense of disbelievers.” (2:191). In this verse too fighting has been permitted in retaliation only.

Also, if the leaders of disbelievers break their pledge, Quran permits Muslims to fight them. “And if they break their oaths”? The Quran declares, after their agreement and revile your religion, then fight the leaders of disbelief – surely their oaths are unreliable – so that they may desist.” (9:12) Here permission is given to fight the leaders of disbelief if they break oath and if they revile Islam. Muslims have already been told by the Quran not to revile others religion. Thus Muslims also do

not accept their religion to be reviled. Also permission is given to fight if Muslims are oppressed. "Permission is (to fight) given to those on whom war is made, because they are oppressed. And surely Allah is able to assist them."(22:39).

If we scan through the *hadith* literature it would be seen that this is the earliest permission given to the Muslims to fight. The words in which permission is granted clearly show that war was made against Muslims and that the Muslims were greatly oppressed in Mecca. The verse that follows the above verse, "Those who were driven from their homes without a just cause except that they say: Our Lord is Allah..." (22:40) also clearly indicates that permission to fight was given on account of such persecution of Muslims. It was far from being general license to fight. It is also interesting to note that in the same verse it is made clear that it is not Allah's desire that any house of worship, whatever religious denomination it belong be demolished. Allah replaces those who demolish any house of worship by others who would protect them.

The Quran says, "And if Allah did not repel some people by others, cloisters, and churches, and synagogues, and mosques in which Allah's name is much remembered, would have been pulled down.." (22:40). Thus from this verse it is clear that all places of worship, churches, synagogues, mosques are to be protected by Muslims as in all these places Allah's name is remembered. In India the great Sufi saints extended this to Hindu temples also. Thus it would be against the will of Allah to demolish any such places of worship too.

There are some more verses, which are often quoted to prove that the Quran requires either Islam be accepted or they be put to the sword. The verse often quoted is as follows: "So when the sacred months have passed, and lie in wait for them in every ambush. But if they repeat and keep up prayer and pay the poor-tax, leave their way free. Surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful." (9:5). This verse does not refer to any unbeliever but those who had missed no opportunity to harass and persecute Muslims, not only that they had broken their agreement with Muslims. This verse does not refer to killing individual disbelievers as it refers to ambush, taking captive, besieging and lying in wait which clearly indicates state of war. And war is permitted, as pointed out above, only if disbelievers persecute, commit aggression or break their agreement, not otherwise. Such disbelievers, if caught in the war, must be made to pray and pay the poor-tax with sincere change of heart.

That the intention of the verse is not to kill for refusal to accept Islam is clear from the verse next to above verse. It says, "And if anyone of the idolaters seek the protection, protect him till he hears the word of Allah, then convey him to his place of safety. This is because they are a people who know not."(9:6). This verse hardly needs any comment. Any disbeliever who seeks refuge, give him refuge and take him to the place of safety. There is no injunction to compel him to embrace Islam. Only he may hear word of Allah. If he decides to accept the word fine but that cannot be a condition to give him refuge and take him to the place of safety.

The Quran also requires that those disbelievers and polytheists who fulfil their part of agreement, Muslims should also honour theirs and should not treat them as enemies. Thus the Quran declares, "Except those of the idolaters with whom you made an agreement, then they have not failed you in anything and have not backed up any one against you; so fulfil their agreement to the end of their term. Surely Allah loves those who keep their duty."(9:4). This verse is also a clear proof, if any

proof is needed, that the Quran does not require every idolater to be killed if they do not embrace Islam. If they fulfil their part of agreement it is duty of Muslims to fulfil their part of agreement till the end of the term.

The jurists and the ‘ulama have divided, in view of such Quranic verse, the idolaters in two categories: *h..arbi* and *ghavr-h..arbi* i.e. war mongering and non-war mongering idolaters. While the former should be treated as enemies and fought, the latter should be treated as allies and friends and Muslims should live in peace with them. During the freedom struggle the leaders of *Jami’at al-‘ulama* (organisation of Muslim theologians) decided to treat the Indian National Congress as their ally in view of such verses of the holy Quran. They opined that the Indian National Congress had given them assurance that the Muslims will be free to follow their religion in India and would be fully protected and hence Hindus are our allies as long as they fulfil their part of agreement. India would remain for Muslims *dar al-aman* (abode of peace). These Ulama enjoined upon Muslims to wage struggle against the Britishers alongwith their Hindu brethren to make India free and *dar al-aman*.

The concept of *jihad* in Islam has been generally misunderstood. Muslims too are responsible for this misunderstanding. They often justified wars of aggression by Muslim rulers – often power seekers-as-constituting *jihad*. Nothing could be farther from Islamic teachings. The Quran permits war against oppression, to defend the oppressed and the exploited. Only such wars could constitute *jihad*. It should also be remembered that Islam, besides being religion, was also a revolutionary movement of its time. It sought to change not only religious beliefs but also social structure aspiring to build up a just society favouring the oppressed and weaker sections. Allah Himself declares in the Quran, “We desired to bestow favour upon those oppressed in the land, and to make them the leaders, and to make them the inheritors.”(28:5).

Conclusions

The Quran initiated what can be termed as the biggest project for social justice ever attempted until then. Since such attempt would harm the vested interests, violence was unavoidable. No society can ever be restructured in favour of the oppressed without shedding a drop of blood. Vested interests would never allow it to happen, whatever the intentions of revolutionaries. The Prophet entered into agreements with idolaters too, to avoid bloodshed but the vested interests, fearing the consequences, did not allow the process to be complete and hence conflict could not be avoided. Peace is very central to Islam but peace is not possible without justice and justice cannot be established peacefully even in a modern democratic society. All attempts for justice with peace are derailed by vested interests that can easily manipulate democracy.

Four key concepts advocated by the Quran are ‘*adl, ih..an, rah..mah and h..ikmah* i.e. justice benevolence, compassion and wisdom. None of these concepts by itself would promote violence. The very spirit of these key concepts would be injured by violence. Yet the vested interests would see to it that none of these concepts is established in the society. Islam in fact did not seek to fight peaceful idolaters, much less seeking their forceful conversion; it in fact sought to fight the idols of greed, desire and interests to establish a society based on unity and equality of all human beings. Could violence be avoided?

