

Growing Ecologies of Peace and Forgiveness

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A Contribution to the Panel II on “From Conflict to Compassionate Justice” at the International Christian-Muslim Consultation: Transforming Communities: Christians and Muslims Building a Common Future, Geneva, 1-4 November 2010



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Your Royal Highness,
Your Eminences,
Your Excellencies,
Sisters and brothers,

I greet you with Islam’s greeting: God’s peace, grace, and blessings be upon all of you.

God is the source of all compassion and is most compassionate (*al-rahman al-rahim*). He has sent to humanity a sequence of compassionate Prophets, in loving manifestation of His own compassion.

Some of these Prophets came to humanity with heavenly books of guidance and compassion (*hudan wa rahma*). The ultimate of these heavenly books is the Qur’an, the book of light, guidance, and compassion.

These Prophets (peace be upon them all) preached total love and devotion to the One True God, and love and compassion towards His creatures—our neighbors. Islam teaches that our neighbors are entitled to a ‘right’ (*haq*). Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) teaches thus:

“Do you know what the right of the neighbor is?

- If he seeks your help, help him.
- If he asks you for a loan, loan him.
- If he becomes poor, support him.
- If he falls ill, visit him.
- If he dies, participate in his funeral.
- If a calamity befalls him, comfort him.
- Do not build higher than his house, in a manner that blocks the fresh air, except with his permission.
- When you buy fruits, gift some to him. If you can’t, then take them into your home quietly, and do not let your child take [the fruits] out [of the house] so as to make his child envious.
- Do not bother him with the aroma of your cooking pot, unless you share some of it with him.

Do you really know the right of the neighbor? I swear by Him who possesses my soul; only a person blessed with God’s compassion can truly realize the right of the neighbor!”¹

The First Prophetic Teaching

In our Muslim tradition, there is a revered tradition of transmitting Prophetic utterances from one teacher to another in a chain that authentically links us with the Muhammad, the Prophet of Compassion (peace be upon him).

There is also a tradition of transmitting and receiving the very first hadith one learns from one's teacher. This is called the 'chain of first-ness' (*al-musalsal bil-awaliyah*).

The first hadith I learned from my Sheikh al-Sayyid Muhammd al-Alawi al-Maliki (mercy be upon him), with a continuous chain all the way back to the Prophet (peace be upon him) is amazingly foundational in Islam:

*The compassionate shall be shown compassion by The Compassionate (blessed and exalted is He). Have compassion upon those on earth, and the One in heaven shall have compassion upon you.*²

Compassionate Youth

For generations the compassionate teachings of Muhammad (peace be upon him) were successfully transmitted in Muslim communities through a revered and balanced tradition that combined doctrine (*'aqida* covering *iman*), jurisprudence (*fiqh* covering *islam*), and spirituality (*taswuuf* covering *ihsan*).

The institutions of transmission, that traditionally safeguarded the compassionate and true teaching of Islam, unfortunately suffered multiple attacks first by the forces of inner decay and stagnation, then by colonial powers and then by secularizing nationalist ideologues and rulers.

The confiscation of religious foundations (*awqaf*) also led to the loss of the independent economic base for these institutions. The advent of legalistic, overly politicized, and spiritually-poor distortions of Islam have all further weakened the traditional institutions of compassion and wisdom transmission.

Today, there is an urgent need to repair, rehabilitate, and maintain the scholarly and spiritual institutions that preserve and grow compassion in the hearts of youth. This is a challenge that is faced by all traditional communities striving to preserve their wisdom in the midst of an increasingly, and viciously, cruel and materialistic world. Dialogue with other religions and philosophies is key in keeping open enough to grow and flourish healthy institutions, and thriving ecologies of peace.

Malignant Mutations of Tradition

As in the case with all religions, the wholesome and compassionate teachings of the true Islamic tradition were sometimes distorted, and warped. In some cases malignant theological mutations resulted in grotesque actions.

Just as the peace-loving teaching of Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) was sometimes warped and invoked to unleash cruel actions, the peace-loving teaching of Muhammad (peace be upon him) was sometimes also warped and invoked to unleash cruel attacks on fellow human beings, such as in the grotesque terrorist attacks of recent times, including the very fresh criminal attacks on Churches in Iraq and Palestine, and on Shrines and Mosques in Pakistan.

When it comes to crazed cruelty against God's beloved creatures, no tradition is immune from distortion. We must all be on vigilant guard against abusive and distorting mutilations of our traditions.

We must all unite in condemning all cruelty against even a single soul of God's creatures, for that is equivalent to attacking all of humanity. We must unite in compassion against all cruelty, wherever it comes from, and whoever happens to practice it.

However, each one of us is especially, theologically and morally, responsible to condemn and repudiate all cruelty perpetrated in the name of his or her own religious tradition.³

When it comes to theological mutilations and distortions, we humans tend to be very good at detecting them in others. It is very easy for all of us to fall into self-righteous and judgmental modes. Here it is important to point out that, as a Muslim, I do take to heart, with utter respect, the following passages from Christian Scriptures, of which we should all be constantly reminded (Matthew 7:1–5):

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?

One of the key gifts of dialogue is that it can help us keep each other honest. The Prophet (peace be upon him) says that “*the believer is the mirror of his fellow believer*”. By being mirrors for each other, we keep each other focused on the true and sincere service to the One God, and help each other cure the eye-troubles that impair our spiritual sight.

Religious Freedom

As a Muslim, I readily share with our esteemed speakers, from yesterday's opening session, the insistence on the importance of respecting religious freedom and freedom of conscience. Such freedom is divinely ordained into the very personhood of human beings through the original divine breath, and primordial covenant. This doctrine is rooted in the Qur'an itself.

Here are some key Qur'anic verses:

If it had been Thy Lord's will, They would all have believed—all who are on earth! Will you then compel mankind, against their will, to believe! (10:99)

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. and God hears and knows all things. (2:256)

It is true that you will not be able to guide every one, whom you love; but God guides those whom He will and He knows best those who receive guidance. (28:56)

Now, that being said, of course, Muslim communities everywhere do face the challenge of living up to the Qur'anic imperative, just as other religious communities face their own challenges. The complex issues of balancing human rights, human duties, and communal integrity and well-being are in need of urgent studies and discussions. Accumulated and normative juridical rulings, from different ages and different circumstances must be addressed, engaged, and updated. Such a task demands tremendous work and fresh juridical striving by all concerned. Dialogue is key to this important work as well.

However, these issues are faced by all religious traditions, and there is an urgent need, for all of us, to reconcile revelation-based affirmations of rights and duties with the more recent, but popular, affirmation that come from the notions and vocabularies of the French Revolution and British Liberal teachings, and that are now enshrined in such international documents as the UN Declaration on Human Rights.

Indeed, we are all called upon to retrieve, rehabilitate, and rearticulate the true compassionate teachings of our traditions regarding the divinely ordained value of human personhood and its associated rights, duties, and freedoms. We need to work on these issues with not only religious colleagues, but also with philosophers and jurists who invoke ‘natural’ grounds for personhood and rights. Islam does have notions of a primordial covenant and an original make-up (*fitra*) that can engage such discourses as those of natural law and liberalism.

However, in cultivating renewed and updated teachings regarding human rights, we must never forget that God too has rights, and that His Prophets (peace be upon them) too have rights. These divine and prophetic rights are also of vital importance. As a matter of fact, theologically and juridically, they may well be the very foundations of human rights, as Islam teaches them. Humanity must not be too obsessed with itself, and must not neglect the imperative of respecting God, His Revelation, and the Prophets (peace be upon them) who brought us His revelation.

As a matter of facts there are human rights that are directly dependant on respecting the rights of God and His Prophets (peace be upon them). It is of no use to a Muslim to assure her that you respect her, when you, at the same time, insult her God, Her Prophet of God, and threaten to burn her Book of God! The relationship between Human Rights and Divine and Prophetic Rights must be urgently studied by theologians, philosophers, jurists, and other scholars.

Ending the Spiral of Conflict Through Forgiveness

The insights, shared yesterday by our esteemed colleagues, regarding the importance of education for peace and compassion, and its potential role in ending the spiral of conflict are very much appreciated.

One of the important elements of such a wholesome education is the teaching of forgiveness. Most cruelty today is practiced in the name of justice based on grievances, often real, sometimes only perceived, and conveniently supported by false logics of “reciprocity”, that often drag us down into endless spirals of vengeful tit-for-tat. It is significant that the endless bloodshed, mutilation, torture, and destruction brought to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan was, and is, the result of a vast military campaign initially named “Infinite Justice”.

Our two traditions both clearly value forgiveness. Alas, we humans are often not very good practitioners of it. Sadly, our two communities often fail in this important regard. Here is what the Qur’an tells a Muslim to do:

Repel evil with that which is best: we are well acquainted with the things they say.
(23:96)

Nor can goodness and evil be equal. Repel (evil) with what is better: then the one who hates you becomes as a friend and intimate! (41:34)

Let them forgive and overlook, do you not wish that God should forgive you? For God is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. (24:22)

Here is what the Bible tells the Christian to do (Matthew 5:43–47):

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Compassion and forgiveness are key to the breaking the stranglehold of cruelty in our world today. Our mutual accusations and self-righteous demands just make things worse. The stereotyping of the other, and the non-hearing, or hearing-but-ignoring of good gestures coming from the other are all ways in which we humans often serve our own arrogant egos, but definitely not our beloved and compassionate Creator (Exalted is He).

Let us grow ecologies of peace and forgiveness and expand our ‘Common Word’ of the two imperatives of loving God and Neighbor into common ‘Deeds’ of compassion and forgiveness. Let us cherish and celebrate the fresh and important UN Declaration on “World Interfaith Harmony Week”, and make that week, each year, an incubator for seeds from which whole gardens of mutual compassion, love, and respect can grow for years to come, God willing!^{iv}

Prayer

Let me conclude these remarks with a prayer. I pray as:

Moses prayed: “O My Lord! forgive me and My brother! admit us to your mercy! for you are the Most Merciful of those who Show mercy!” (Qur’an 7:151)

Then will He be of those who believe, and enjoin patience, (constancy, and self-restraint), and enjoin deeds of kindness and compassion. (Qur’an 90:17)

May God (exalted is He) encompass all of us within His infinite compassion.

God knows best! ❁

NOTES

¹ From *Jami’ al-Masanid wa al-Marasil*, Number 398. For more on the theology of Neighborliness in Islam, see the author’s *Duties of Proximity: Towards a Theology of Neighborliness*. Paper Presented at the ‘Mardin: The Abode of Peace’ Conference 27–28 March 2010. Published by the Global Centre for Renewal and Guidance, London, and Kalam Research & Media, Dubai, 2010. Available for download from www.kalamresearch.com, publications section.

² For an outline of a Theology of Compassion based on this and other Hadiths, see the author’s *Growing Ecologies of Peace, Compassion and Blessing: A Muslim Response to “A Muscat Manifesto”*. Published by The Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, Cambridge, and Kalam Research & Media, Dubai, 2010. Available for download from www.kalamresearch.com, publications section.

³ For an interesting and productive example of a Muslim theologian/jurist’s attempt to both condemn cruelty and uphold the sanctity of human life, in concrete situations such Somalia, see the author’s *Building Peace: The Approach of Sheikh*

Abdullah bin Bayyah. Kalam Resarch & Media, Dubai, 2010. Available for download from www.kalamresearch.com, publications.

⁴ See HRH Prince Ghazi Bin Muahmmad's "A Common Word in Deed" read in yesterday's opening of this Consultation. For an insightful analysis of the background and importance of this UN Declaration, and its connection to the "A Common Word" initiative see Tom Heneghan's "Why did the U.N. proclaim World Interfaith Harmony Week?", published at: <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2010/10/22/why-did-the-u-n-proclaim-world-interfaith-harmony-week/eneghan's>. For more the "A Common Word" initiative, including an entire Archive of related documentation, see www.acommonword.com.