

ABRAHAMIC FAITHS PEACEMAKING INITIATIVE

American Clergy And Religious Activists Who Advocate Peacemaking

Peacemaking from the Heart of Islam

In the Name of God Who is Compassionate and Merciful

Peace in Islam does not mean the absence of war, but the absence of oppression, corruption, injustice and tyranny. Islam considers that real peace can only be attained when justice prevails.

The Arabic word “Islam” is derived from the same root as the word “salaam” and has the same connotation as the Hebrew word “shalom.” The best definition of the word “Islam” is to establish or promote inner and outer peace, in harmony with the will of God. The primary duty of a Muslim is to establish peace so that justice prevails and humanity prospers. A true Muslim does not commit acts of violence, either for the spread of Islam or for the purpose of achieving power in the name of Islam.

Too often, non-Muslims treat the terms “Islam” and “Muslim” as synonymous, mutually interchangeable terms. The word “Islam” should be used exclusively to refer to the religion that is based upon two sources -- the Qur'an, the divinely revealed word of God, and the *Sunnah*, the proven practices of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing of God be upon him). “Muslims” are followers of the religion of Islam.

Islam never claimed to be a new faith. It is the same faith that God ordained with the creation of the first humans. Islam affirms the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as prophets of Islam and their messages as the messages of Islam. But it is the Qur'an and the *Seerah*, the Prophet Muhammad's example, which form the basis of the theological, moral and social behaviors and attitudes of a Muslim. The ethical code of Islam is similar to those of Judaism and Christianity; Islam differentiates itself in its theology and in its methods of worship of the One God. Islam also

strongly emphasizes that the morality and ethics underlying the theology and practice of Islam should govern all spheres and aspects of human life.

The *ibadat*, Islam's mandated acts of worship, include praying, fasting, giving alms and performing *hajj* pilgrimage; these are central to Islam. These *ibadat*, according to the Qur'an, lead to inner peace, *sakinat al-qalb*; inner peace and spiritual solace, in turn, are the very foundation stones of ethical conduct. Thus the Qur'an says of God, "He it is who sent down inner peace into the hearts of the believers that they might add faith to their faith" (48:4).

The Sanctity of Life

The fundamental premise of the Qur'an is *tawheed*, the oneness of God from which follows the unity of all humans with one another and with nature. The *Shahadah*, the central creed of Islam, testifies that "there is no god but God." The Qur'an asserts that God breathed His Spirit in every human being; this makes every human life sacred. Hence any wanton act of destruction of human life, whether self-inflicted or perpetuated on others, is strictly prohibited. We cannot love and revere all-merciful God by destroying His creation.

A person who does kill another will be lost to God's guidance in this life and denied entry to Paradise in the Afterlife. As the Quranic story of Cain and Abel states, "Because of this did We ordain unto the children of Israel that if anyone slays a human being – unless it be [in punishment] for murder or for spreading corruption on earth – it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; whereas, if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind" (5:32). The value of one life is equivalent to an entire world; to kill another person is to kill one's own brother or sister because all human beings are the progeny of Adam.

“And do not destroy one another: for, behold, God is indeed a dispenser of grace unto you” (4:29). This can be interpreted as a prohibition against suicide as well as murder; do not kill yourself because you are God’s creation, and do not kill other humans who, like yourself, are God’s creations. Life is a divinely granted trust, and humans are charged as *khalifas*, caretakers, and trustees of *tawheed*, God’s oneness, so that we are obligated to treat all life with the utmost sanctity. Humans are given the gift of life with the admonition that they live it as moral beings. With free will and the independence to make choices, humans are given responsibility and are accountable for the consequences of our actions.

Suicide is a state of disbelief and loss of faith that is condemned by God in the Qur'an. God commands believers never to despair or lose hope but instead to work for a brighter future. “O you who believe do not consume each other's properties illicitly - only mutually acceptable transactions are permitted. You shall not kill yourselves. God is Merciful towards you” (Qur'an 2:195). “Anyone who commits these transgressions, maliciously and deliberately, we will condemn him to Hell. This is easy for God to do” (Qur'an 4:29). “...None despairs of God’s grace except the disbelieving people” (Qur'an 4:30). Some are under the misconception that by killing oneself for an Islamic cause, one commits an act which deserves Paradise, but the Prophet Muhammad said, “He who kills himself, God will torment him with that in the fire of Hell” (Qur'an 12:87).

The Necessity of Reason and Knowledge

“The worst creatures in God’s eye are those who are (willfully) deaf and dumb, who do not use reason” (8:22). There is no priesthood or religious hierarchy in Islam; there are only scholars and community leaders, and the Qur’an is a living document that speaks to all people at all times. It lays

out in broad strokes moral and ethical guidelines for human beings; it is not a legal document or a book of law. Contemporary Muslims must understand the teachings of the Qur'an and the *Seerah* in the context of the Prophet Mohammad's time, while we simultaneously study and interpret those teachings in relevant ways to authentically and practically guide our lives today. For this reason, Muslims are required to pursue reason, inquiry, and knowledge – a process known in Islam as *ijtehad* – so that we are able to understand and promote justice, equality and peace.

The Qur'an positively invites interpretation and contextualizing. "We have sent down unto You the Message; that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them, and that they may think and reflect" (16:44). Unfortunately, Muslims have ceased to adequately realize the responsibility of *ijtehad* as many socio-political factors around the world have allowed the domination of literalistic and sectarian readings and interpretations. Islam in the 21st century must cease to be willfully deaf and dumb to contemporary context; we must be willing and eager to apply the reason and knowledge of our age to help best understand the will of God as revealed in the Qur'an.

Diversity & Relationships with Others

In pointing to diversity as the will and manifestation of God, the Qur'an states: "O mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other" (49:13). The universality of God's message is such that it is not the exclusive spiritual domain of any one religious community or any one nation. The Qur'an emphasizes that "unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has bestowed unto you. Vie, then, with one

another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ” (5:48). Differences are a part of God’s plan for humanity, whereby all people are equally enjoined to turn towards virtuous action, regardless of the “law” or the “way” that they follow. Islam affirms the universality of God’s overpowering attribute of mercy; God’s message of peace and the sanctity of all life is not the exclusive spiritual domain of any one religious community.

Furthermore, human beings are free to abide by or deviate from Divine guidance as they see fit according to their own conscience. This freedom to follow (or not to follow) the teachings of Islam and the ways of God is articulated in the Qur’an: “The truth is from your lord. Whoever wants to believe should believe, and whoever wants to reject should reject.... and the consequences will come on the day of judgement” (7:29). And: “There shall be no coercion in matters of faith” (2:256).

The Qur’an, however, has an overtly social agenda, and it aims to reform not only the individual, but also society. It points out that the roots of exploitation and oppression often lay in social structures, not only in individual avarice. The Qur’an rejects accumulation of wealth and exhorts believers to spend their wealth on those who are poor, needy, orphans or widows, thus emphasizing socio-economic justice. Chapter 104 stresses this:

- 1 Woe to every slanderer, defamer!
- 2 Who amasses wealth and counts it –
- 3 He thinks that his wealth will make him abide.
- 4 No, he will certainly be hurled into the crushing disaster;
- 5 And what will make you realize what the crushing disaster is?
- 6 It is the Fire kindled by God,
- 7 Which rises over the hearts.
- 8 Surely it is closed on them,
- 9 In extended columns.

“None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself” (Sahih Al-Bukhari, al-Iman, Hadith no. 13). Love of the neighbor is an essential and integral part of faith in God because, in Islam, without love of the neighbor there is not love of God and therefore no righteousness. The Qur’an says that God has bestowed dignity upon the children of Adam, the freedom of migration, the right to sustenance and good things in life, and has elevated us high in creation. “We have honored the progeny of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favors about a great part of our creation” (17:70). There are numerous references in Islam to the necessity and vital importance of love for everyone because all are creations of God; and love, in this context, encompasses not simply good feelings but acts of mercy and pursuit of justice for the neighbor.

Justice

The essential call of the Qur’an is justice, which requires equal legal rights for all without qualifications. The Qur’an does not distinguish between rich and poor, as can be seen in a tradition where the Prophet pronounced, “The people before you were destroyed because they used to inflict the legal punishments on the poor and forgive the rich.” The emphasis of Islamic teachings is not personal salvation but the establishment of a society that is just and free of *zulm*, oppression. The Qur’an puts great emphasis on ‘*adl*, justice, a central value in the Islamic ethic. The Qur’an says, “O you who believe! Stand out firmly for God as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you, or you to them, make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety. And fear God: for God is well acquainted with all that you do” (5:8). In Islam, there is no concept of piety or peace without justice.

What Islam Says About War and Violence

Fighting or war is only sanctioned in order to uphold justice and protect the rights of the weak and oppressed when they are desperately seeking protection and when there are no other means to deter oppression. In the Qur'an, there is no concept of a war of aggression and no permissiveness toward violence. Where permission for war has been given in the Qur'an, it has been given to defend and protect the rights of the oppressed and exploited, and there is no verse in the Qur'an which permits violence for conquering territory or for achieving personal or communal power. Furthermore, permitted wars in the Qur'an have been qualified by the words "*fi' sabilillah*," in the way of God. God's way is one of protecting the rights of the poor and exploited. The very first verse in the Qur'an that references permission to use violence illustrates this point: "And what reason have you not to fight in the way of God, and of the weak among the men and the women and the children, who say: Our Lord, take us out of this town, whose people are oppressors, and grant us from You a friend, and grant us from You a helper" (4:75).

Thus, a Muslim cannot commit an act of aggression; killing the innocent, the sick, the elderly, monks, priests, or non-combatants is forbidden, *haram*. Also, wanton destruction of land, forests, trees and animals is specifically forbidden. The Qur'an clearly spells out God's distaste for destruction in verse 2:205: "But whenever he prevails, he goes about the earth spreading corruption and destroying [man's] tilth and progeny: and God does not love corruption." It is therefore impossible to justify modern warfare, which cannot be waged without "collateral damage" to innocents and which utilizes weaponry that cannot distinguish between willing fighters and everyone else. Needless to say, nuclear weaponry's unmitigated slaughter of all forms of life, the destruction of

present and future means of sustenance, and the devastating effects on future generations are clearly incongruent with Islamic principles. “Fight in the cause of God against those who fight you, but do not transgress limits. God does not love transgressors” (2:190).

War is the last resort, and is subject to the rigorous conditions laid down by the sacred law of *Shariah*. “If they seek peace, then you seek peace. And trust in God for He is the One that hears and knows all things” (2:193). In brief, war is permitted only under limited conditions: in self defense or to defend and protect the rights of the oppressed. Quranic verses that appear to condone war in an aggressive, uncompromising and murderous tone were largely revealed in the context of specific threats leveled at the early Muslim community. The two following verses, in particular, are typically taken out of context and distorted by contemporary religious literalists and extremists:

And kill them wherever you find them and drive them out of the places where they drove you out, for igniting the fire of persecution is worse than killing. And fight them not by the sacred mosque unless they fight against you there, but if they attack you there, then slay them. Such is the recompense of those who deny the truth. But if they desist, surely God is forgiving, merciful. And fight them until persecution is no more and the religion is for God, but if they desist, then let there be no hostility except against the wrongdoers. (2:190-193)

O you who have attained to faith: when you meet in battle those who are bent on denying the truth advancing in great force, do not turn your backs on them. For whoever on that day turns his back to them on such a day – unless it be in battle maneuver, or in an endeavor to gain another group -- shall indeed have earned the burden of God’s condemnation, and his goal shall be hell: and how vile a journey’s end. (8:15-16)

By reading these verses in the context of the time in which they were revealed and in relation to other verses which repeat the central mandate of the interdependence of justice and mercy, it becomes clear how discordant expressions condoning violence are with the Prophet’s overarching message of mercy, compassion and tolerance.

Jihad

Jihad is one of the most misunderstood of Islamic terms used today, and many Muslims are as confused by it as non-Muslims. Few words carry as much power to install fear or hatred because the news media has widely interpreted *jihad* to mean “holy war,” linking it with extremism and terrorism in the public consciousness.

The concept of *jihad* has nothing to do with aggressive warfare or “holy war.” The word “*jihad*” finds its origin in the verb “*jahada*,” which means to struggle with one’s utmost effort to remain Muslim and to exert oneself to establish peace and justice. The word *jihad* has several connotations, since struggle can occur on several levels. As such, *jihad* refers to any effort made – mental, moral or physical – to make God’s Word supreme. It covers a wide range of activities, from fighting inside one’s self against one’s own evil promptings to being engaged in war for the righteous cause of Islam against injustice.

Jihad is an all-round struggle, and the concept makes it obligatory for a Muslim to exercise all capabilities, be these in the form of intellectual and physical capacities, or worldly riches, or one’s gift of speech, or one’s moral strength, courage and steadfastness in the face of hardship. “The believers are only those who have believed in God and His Apostle and thereafter doubted not, and struggled hard with their riches and their persons in the cause of God. Those! They are the truthful” (49:15). “And strive hard for God, as is due unto Him hard striving. He has chosen you, and has imposed no hardship on you in the (matter of) religion, the faith of your father Abraham” (22:78).

In contrast to the depiction in the public sphere, *jihad* has nothing to do with terrorism. Any attempts to justify the targeting of innocent civilians in the name of *jihad* is clearly contrary to the true

meaning of *jihad* and to the spirit of Islam. The primary differences between external *jihad* and terrorism are:

- *Jihad* is to be launched by a recognized and established Muslim authority as a policy of the collectivity of Muslims to deter aggression. Terrorism, on the other hand, is committed by individuals or clandestine groups that do not represent the majority of Muslims nor did they receive any authorization from them.
- *Jihad* is to be declared, while acts of terrorism are born in secrecy and executed as a deadly surprise.
- *Jihad* is limited to combatants who represent a real danger to a Muslim military, while terrorism is usually directed at the soft spots of society or targets innocent civilians.
- *Jihad* is aimed at the conclusion of hostility and the acceptance of peace if the combating enemy inclines to peace, while terrorism is launched against people who are at a state of peace to start with.

Mercy, Forgiveness and Peaceful Reconciliation

There are certain key words in the Qur'an which are greatly stressed, and four of these are very often repeated: *rahmah* - compassion, *ihsan* - benevolence, *'adl* - justice, and *hikmah* - wisdom. *Rahmah*, compassion and mercy, has abundant roots in the Holy Qur'an; even among God's own names are *Rahman* and *Rahim* (Compassionate and Merciful). A Muslim begins everything by reciting *Bi Ism-i-Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim* – In the Name of God Who is Compassionate and Merciful. The second verse of the first chapter of the Qur'an is “*Al-Rahman al-Rahim* – The Compassionate, the Merciful.” The first verse, too, carries this sense of compassion when it describes God as *Rabb al-*

'Alamin, the Sustainer of the Whole World. The concept of sustenance of the whole world is based on God's mercy and compassion for everyone and everything He has created. In fact, *rahmah* is so central to God's existence that it embraces all that exists in the universe (*wasi'at kulla shayin* -- see verse 40:7).

Rahmah, mercy, is also the primary mission of Mohammad (PBUH). "We sent you [Mohammad] not, but as a Mercy for all creatures" (21:107). *Rahmah* is also the word most frequently uttered by Muslims in the liturgy of daily life. The saturation of the *Seerah*, of the Qur'an, and of the liturgical verses with the word "*rahmah*" indicates how deeply and completely the life of a Muslim should be informed with the quality of compassionate mercy.

Furthermore, God is the Forgiver. As the Qur'an teaches in verse 24:22, "Hence, [even if they have been wronged by slander,] let not those of you who have been graced with [God's] favor and ease of life ever become remiss in helping [the erring ones] among their near of kin, and the needy, and those who have forsaken the domain of evil of the sake of God, but let them pardon and forbear, [for] do you not desire that God should forgive you *your* sins, seeing that God is much forgiving, a dispenser of Grace?" Retaliation may be human, but forgiving is divine. Retaliation results in giving release to one's anger, but forgiving results in mastering one's rage, and such self-mastery is described as a great virtue by the Qur'an: "Those who spend in ease as well as in adversity and those who restrain (their) anger and pardon men. And God loves those who are merciful and do good to others" (3:133).

The concept of mercy is tightly bound with that of forgiveness as we see in the Qur'an and the *Seerah*. Mohammad's example of forgiving his Meccan enemies after the lifelong enmity and abuse he suffered at their hands remains a guiding light for the Muslims. Thus a true follower of the Prophet

(PBUH) has to be merciful and compassionate to the extent humanly possible. Anyone who is cruel and has no sensitivity towards the suffering of others cannot be following the true teachings of Islam. Islamic ethics demands that Muslims be just and merciful with all, even the enemy.

Because of this demand for justice and mercy, the Qur'an mandates peaceful resolution of conflicts: "...but since good and evil cannot be equal, repel evil with [the best conduct]: and notice how someone who is separated from you because of enmity will become like your close friend. Yet only those who have self-control will attain it; only the very luckiest will achieve it" (41:34-35).

An example is the Medina Charter, which was established by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in Medina soon after the early Muslims' migration from Mecca to Medina. The Charter was negotiated between the Muslims, led by the Prophet, and the Jewish communities and non-Muslim Arab tribes who already resided in Medina; the purpose of the pact was to maintain peace and security by protecting the life and property of all inhabitants and by guarding against injustice and aggression regardless of tribal or religious affiliations. The Charter is notable in that it does not declare the state religion to be Islam; it protects freedom for the whole community, regardless of religious or tribal identity. "But if the enemy inclines toward peace, you also incline towards peace, and trust in God: for he is the one that hears and knows" (8:61).

According to the Qur'an, relations among all human groups should be based on mutual acknowledgment and peaceful coexistence regardless of any similarities or differences which might exist among them. The basic dignity of all people must be equally guarded regardless of race, faith, nationality or ideology.

War is not an option whenever an inclination to peace is communicated; war is only allowed when a peaceful resolution is impossible. In a situation where Muslims are converted by force out of their religion or kicked out of their land, then war becomes the exceptional, un-welcome and painful option. If this lamentable situation is imposed, non-combatants, livestock and infrastructures must be safeguarded. Based on this premise, modern war – waged with weapons of mass destruction and causing inevitable and severe harm to civilians – is basically rejected because it is impossible to meet the necessary standards of conduct stipulated by the Qur’an. This must be the collective challenge to all people of faith and to all decent human beings in modern civilization – to form a coalition and create a movement that can handle problems without falling into war, that calamitous pit of un-Godly destruction.