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Peace: Islamic Perspectives

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Abstract: Peace stands for a state of mind in tranquillity where one is free from all sorts of worry. We say a man is at peace when a kind of satisfaction exists in his mind, body and soul. An element of joy, happiness and fulfilment thrills his life. Peace is needed for his creative work. Peace is the purpose for which he exists. Peace is the law of nature where everything functions smoothly. Peace is a concept peculiar to man, for it is taken for granted elsewhere in the creation. Man is the only entity that disturbs peace, but man alone is the entity that is conscious of peace. Peace is an abstract subjective experience so far as individuals are concerned. It becomes an objective condition of life when collectively it is applied to society. If family members quarrel, peace is gone, creating a scene. If groups clash, peace is gone, causing social tension. If nations fight, peace is gone, resulting in destruction. Peace is central to all, a condition for any social good, whether it be for individuals, societies, states, nations or the world. When the question of peace is discussed in a Journal of Religious Studies, it is an inquiry into how peace is viewed in different religions; how is it attained; what has been the contribution of each religion to the establishment of peace, either at the individual, social, regional, national or global level; and where does Islam stand in respect of these queries. An answer to these questions would form the substance of this essay.

Keywords: Religious peace, Peace in Islam, Peace in different religions, Salam

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Peace: Islamic Perspectives

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Peace stands for a state of mind in tranquillity where one is free from all sorts of worry. We say a man is at peace when a kind of satisfaction exists in his mind, body and soul. An element of joy, happiness and fulfilment thrills his life. Peace is needed for his creative work. Peace is the purpose for which he exists. Peace is the law of nature where everything functions smoothly. Peace is a concept peculiar to man, for it is taken for granted elsewhere in the creation. Man is the only entity that disturbs peace, but man alone is the entity that is conscious of peace. Peace is an abstract subjective experience so far as individuals are concerned. It becomes an objective condition of life when collectively it is applied to society. If family members quarrel, peace is gone, creating a scene. If groups clash, peace is gone, causing social tension. If nations fight, peace is gone, resulting in destruction. Peace is central to all, a condition for any social good, whether it be for individuals, societies, states, nations or the world. When the question of peace is discussed in a Journal of Religious Studies, it is an inquiry into how peace is viewed in different religions; how is it attained; what has been the contribution of each

religion to the establishment of peace, either at the individual, social, regional, national or global level; and where does Islam stand in respect of these queries. An answer to these questions would form the substance of this essay.

What is Islam?

It is good to know what Islam is for it may carry answers to most of our questions. Its very meaning is to be at perfect peace, to have done one's duty to the Master, to strive after righteousness, and to gain safety and salvation. The word is derived from the word *aslama* indicating the submission of Abraham and his son Isaac to the supreme test of the sacrifice of the son by his father. A Muslim is one who gives himself up entirely to God and believes that in obedience to God alone lies the way to peace, prosperity, happiness and salvation. Adam disobeyed, lost his peace, reverted to obedience, got peace. Islam is the youngest, simplest and most clear-cut of all great religions of the world. Its two revolutionary principles are the unity of God and the unity of man. Faith in the oneness of God would confer on believers equality, solidarity, brotherhood, freedom and peace. Islam

says the ONE remains, the many change and pass; so get attached to the eternal. Here in the unity of God there is a change from heterogeneity to homogeneity, from diversity to unity, and from confusion to order. Islam demands loyalty only to God, and not to any intermediary. Since God is the ultimate basis of all spiritual life, loyalty to God virtually amounts to man's loyalty to his own ideal nature. In such a situation one is bound to be at peace with oneself.

Islam says that God dwells in man. It is his conscience. When conscience is kindled with the torch of learning, he realises that he owes something to society. What he owes is indicated in the code of conduct prescribed in Islam. When he discharges this duty well, he is at peace with himself. From unity of God he moves to unity of man. The striking feature of Islam is equality and brotherhood. It attempts to level down the barriers of caste, colour and class, and takes a stand on the bedrock of humanity. This concept of the unity of man is of great social value that helps peace at all levels, from the individual to the global. It removes all distinctions in human society which disturb peace. History shows that humankind has suffered because of social discrimination, racial discrimination, the divine right of kings to do as they pleased, disregard of individual rights, economic exploitation, caste confrontations, wealth disparities and so on. Islam put an end to all such differences. There was to be no aristocracy, no oligarchy, no usury and no priesthood. The humblest of the humble and the lowest of the low could rise to the highest position. In Islamic history even slaves have become kings

and queens, as is evident from the slave dynasty of the Delhi Sultanate. Bilal, the Abyssinian black, was the favourite companion of the Prophet. Even an emperor has to stand shoulder to shoulder with the commoner in a mosque. The Islamic concept of equality has surely contributed much to peace.

We are discussing here what every faith or religion possesses as that intrinsic worth which would be helpful to peace, and not whether votaries of that faith actually conform to their teachings or not. Followers of all religions have departed from their principles at some time or other, yet they stand for certain values and ideals. Buddhism stands for patience and righteousness, Jainism for truth and non-violence, Hinduism for humanism and tolerance, Christianity for love and service, and Islam for equality and brotherhood. There are basic, absolute values present in each of them which are more prominent than other moral values. Each religion has something special about it, for which it is well-known, besides a bundle of other values which become its moral code.

Judged from this standpoint, the Islamic creed, rooted in the unity of God and unity of man, sprouted into a robust tree of wide dimensions that was helpful for peace. In its doctrine regarding what should be the attitude of man towards the affairs of this world, it differed a little from other religions. To a Hindu this world is not significant at all, as man is tied up in a chain of births and deaths, and in every birth he has to improve until he attains salvation. To a Christian this world is significant but not

decisive, because his hope is on Jesus Christ to plead for his forgiveness. To a Muslim this world is both significant and decisive, but not final, for he believes in life after death where his salvation would depend entirely on his good deeds done in this life. The mediation between man and God is his righteousness. It is in moral behaviour that the human and the divine meet. If he is a sinner, Prophet Muhammad cannot plead for him. Every iota of good or bad that a man does here would be taken into account. Good deeds alone would help him to gain timeless salvation in the next world. In contrast to religious beliefs, to a Marxist this world is significant, decisive, final and all in all. Thus, to a Hindu this world is Maya, “a veil that religious insight pierces to the motionless truth beyond”, but a Muslim is more pragmatic to say that this world is a reality, where what you sow you would reap in the next world. He is unlike a Christian who has implicit faith in Christ for redemption. He is totally against the Marxist who regards this world as the be-all and end-all. This approach of Islam is conducive to peace.

Again, in Christianity man's will is corrupted. Man is born in sin. In Islam intelligence comes before “will”, and the will is not corrupted. In Christianity love is taken to the extreme. One has to offer the other cheek, if a blow is given on one cheek. Islam believes in justice and permits retaliation. It is noble to forgive but human to respond. Since justice is an attribute of God who has ordained accountability in the next world, man is permitted to so behave in this world, for without justice it is difficult to establish peace. Justice is to give

every one what is due to him. Islam is the religion of the Absolute, as Christianity is the religion of love and miracles. Contemplation is basic to Christianity, whereas guidance of God is basic to Islam. The “will” to do good in Islam would depend on guidance from God. A Muslim surrenders totally to God and seeks equilibrium. In Christianity “will” controls man; a Christian need not wait for guidance from above to do his penance. If he is inclined to do it, he does it. In Islam “will” is subordinate to Supreme Guidance. The intellect in a Muslim is a gift of God. Not only life is a gift of God, wisdom too is a gift of God given to those whomsoever God likes. There is something higher than man's knowledge, skill, wisdom and understanding, and that is God's will. Muslim prayer to God is not to seek what man wants but to say His will may be accomplished in him, and that in His will is his peace.

In Christianity the fall of Adam and the incarnation of Jesus are events, but in Islam the fall of Adam is a necessary manifestation of evil, but evil cannot determine the true nature of man. Islam is not founded on miracles. Prophet Muhammad was just a man, as any one else. He did not bring any dead man to life or cure any leper to health. He had to run away to escape persecution, and had to fight wars when they attacked him even in a distant place. To a Muslim not sacrifices and sufferings and renunciations are helpful for salvation, which is possible only through righteousness. In Islam there are two types of actions; we must do certain things which are ordained by God, and we must not do certain other things

which are prohibited. We must not do wrong, for God never does wrong. We must act like Him, for He always does good, and we too must do good. This is because on the one hand we are like God, for He breathed in our soul and we exist, and on the other, we are very much opposed to or unlike Him, for we are tempted to do wrong. We disturb the peace He created in the universe. Man, therefore, is both Divine and devilish, saint and Satan. If he is good, he is better than an angel; if he is bad, he is worse than a devil.

World Scene To-day

This brings us to the question what is the position of peace to-day at the global level. Thank God the cold war has ended. We just missed the catastrophe of blowing up mother earth by the atom-bomb. Had the cold war gone to its logical limits, we would have witnessed a terrible bonfire. Nations talk of peace but prepare for war. The end of cold war was followed by the blood-bath in several places, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Chechenya and elsewhere. The Super Power which proudly declared its intention to set up a new world order is itself busily engaged in imposing its hegemony over others. The total budget of UNO which stands for world peace is not more than what the world spends in 40 minutes of a day on the production of lethal weapons. While discussing non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, big powers defy international opinion and conduct nuclear tests causing health hazards. On every issue there is a double standard. Nations would not wait for a day if Saddam invades Kuwait. They

ignore Israel when it refuses to vacate the occupied land for decades. The UNO is merely a debating forum which comes to life only when a Super Power desires to impose its will on others. Cut-throat economic competition, utter poverty in less developed countries, excess of wealth in developed countries, the desire to exploit the weak, population pressure, ignorance, inertia and superstition have caused great concern to world peace. Wherever we look we find that man is money-mad, power-mad, pleasure-mad and status-mad. He is sitting on the tip of a volcano which may burst at any time.

Home Front

If this is the international scenario, so far as peace is concerned, the home front is also not rosy. India, that was known for the gentleness of a mature mind and a unifying and pacifying love towards all to build up a peaceful and prosperous society, is not what it was before. Destructive forces are eating into her vitals, endangering peace. Acquisitiveness, fanaticism, hatred, jealousy, exploitation, corruption and intolerance are causing social tensions, economic imbalances, intellectual disparities and political unrest. Communal frenzy, caste confrontations, linguistic barriers and regional disputes are shattering the national fabric of solidarity making peace a victim. The system of values such as humanism, liberalism, secularism so assiduously built up over the ages are under attack for narrow considerations.

Islamic World

The Islamic world is all torn up into vast areas of confusion. Next only

to Christianity Islam is the largest religion in the world having more than a billion votaries in nearly 55 countries. The situation in most of these is far from peaceful. Daily blood-letting is done in Palestine. Iran and Iraq fought a war for a decade. The woes of Afghanistan are not yet over. The children of Iraq are still suffering owing to sanctions imposed in the wake of Saddam's folly. Democracy is a casualty in Pakistan where corruption, nepotism and inefficiency reached a level for the military to intervene. Bosnia and Chechnya witnessed immense loss of life owing to racial and political prejudices. Political unrest in Indonesia and Malaysia has hampered development activities. Muslims are characterized as terrorists owing to underground activities of a few like Isama Bin Laden. Communal tension and riots and issues like the Babari mosque demolition have made Indian Muslims restless. Their ignorance, inertia, poverty and superstition cause concern in the way of national integration. Muslims all over the world are at the receiving end of destiny's misfortunes, holding out a threat to peace.

Islamic Response

Does Islam has any answer to these challenges? Surely it has. It has faced such situations in the past. It can revive its experiences and offer solutions to the problems, if one is willing to learn what they are, and sincere enough to put them into practice. Islamic philosophy, Islamic mysticism, called Sufism, Islamic ethics, and Islamic political thought do contain remedies to the maladies.

Philosophy

Islamic philosophy recognizes three kinds of attempts to reconcile differences among mankind. One is by the scientist, the second by the humanist and the third by the intuitionist. The scientist helps through his practical experience in observing, experimenting, and generalizing phenomena; the humanist through his reason, logic, hypothesis and intellect advances theories in quest of truth and peace; and the intuitionists, who are sages, savants, saints and prophets, help humanity through their spiritual power. Islam in its heyday benefited mankind by the work of all these three groups. Islam gave first priority to learning. An inscription in Cordova reads, "the world is supported by four things only: the learning of the wise, the justice of the great, the prayer of the righteous, and the valour of the brave." To the Muslim thinkers, Aristotle was truth, Plato was truth, and the Quran was truth, but the truth must be one. Hence arose the necessity of harmonizing the three. When things are harmonized, friction disappears and peace reigns supreme. When desires, emotions and ideas are harmonised, cosmos results; when they are in disharmony, chaos is the result. Islamic philosophers laid great stress on harmony, which they held to be the key to peace.

Islam believes the first principle of human life is the unity of the person, just as the first principle of knowledge is the unity of truth. In Islam the individual is depersonalised, which operates in two ways. First, it reduces the people to types, to patterns and designs, which blunts interest in individual traits, and excites interest in general pattern. An

ideal Muslim was described as one who was Arab in faith, Iraqi in education, Hebrew in astuteness, Christian in conduct, Syrian in piety, Greek in sciences, Indian in intellect, and a Sufi in spiritual life. To think of an ideal, an individual was not cited, but an entire group of people, indicating the depersonization of an individual as an essential Islamic trait. It may say that individualism might lead to wisdom of the self which like a rat might undermine a house, only to leave before its fall.

The second way depersonalisation operates is in accepting the law of nature where nothing exists for its own sake, and everything is for something else. The mother is for the child, the father for the family, the leader for the nation, the teacher for the students and so on. Even a cow does not drink its own milk, but gives it for others. The candle burns itself but gives light to others. A tree does not deny shade even to a woodcutter. This principle taken to the logical limit would ensure peace in the world. Likewise everything in nature is internally designed to be something specific and not otherwise. From a mango seed, we get only a mango and not margosa; from the egg of a hen, we get only a chick, and not a duck. Man is supposed to be human, and not inhuman. Islam aims at world brotherhood through the collective good of the whole society.

In order to promote social solidarity it advocates congregational prayers, like Friday prayers, Idd prayers, and haj pilgrimage, which is compulsory to the affluent, when Muslims of both sexes

from all over the world gather at one place in Mecca. Payment of a tax called *zakat* is an obligatory duty on all people. There is a lot of social good in such rituals that relate to unity of man. Sincere implementation of these principles will help establish peace.

Sufism

The mystical side of Islam is called Sufism which is a liberal trend having universal appeal. It is the purification of heart from baser temptations. Its purpose is to make one adhere to spiritual values and to give wise counsel to people faithfully to follow the truth. Sufism is a highly complex phenomenon which demands passionate love of God. It is a system of intense devotion; love is its passion; poetry, song and dance are its forms of worship; and passing away in God is its ideal. Its original source is the Quran and the life of the Prophet. Christianity and Neo-Platonism have contributed much to it. Hinduism and Buddhism supplied it a number of ideas. Imam Ghagali gave it a peculiar turn, and made it a workable system. It has greatly influenced Islamic literature, philosophy and religion. It has great potential to bring about religious harmony.

Sufis were seekers of piety. They neglected the externals of religion and attached great emphasis to the love of God, and their only concern was to be lost in God. They say that God makes you die to yourself so that you can be alive in God. They hold that if men wish to draw near to God, they must seek Him in the hearts of men. They carried their teachings to the lowest ranks of the

people. They said that if men fly in the air, they are flies; if they walk on water, they are a straw, but if they win the heart of someone, they are something. They rendered valuable service to man when he was crestfallen. Some of the questions that agitated their mind were the nature of the soul, the nature of knowledge, the nature of the universe, and the nature of human relationship. Their reflections on the realities of life help in the establishment of peace.

Islamic Ethics

Mysticism is not an area of the common man, and in Islamic history too it was developed at a later stage. What is primary in Islam is its ethics or the code of conduct which did much to build up a culture of its own. This ethics was based on three elements: certainty, equilibrium and righteousness, which are technically called *Imam*, *Islam* and *Ihsan*. Certainty relates to God, the Absolute Truth, which is *Iman*. The equilibrium relates to law or *shariah*, which is Islam as taught by Prophet Muhammad. *Ihsan* is the code of conduct or righteousness which is the key factor for redemption. A Muslim is expected to perform certain duties to set up a social order of world brotherhood. In other words, Islam offers a creed to believe, a code to follow, and a cause to serve. Righteousness or *Ihsan* is the practised side of religion which brings Islam close to the humanism of other creeds. Three sets of relations are envisaged in Islam, man and God, man and the universe, and man and man. Morality, said Plato, is harmony; morality, said Jesus, is love; morality, said Buddha, is patience; morality, said Muhammad, is

the reflection of the Divine. In linking morality with spiritual power Islam has broadened the scope for peace. Islamic ethics fosters certain other virtues. One such is *murrawah* or hospitality, a special feature of the Arab world even prior to the rise of Islam. It became more pronounced after the rise of Islam which gave a high place to generosity and large-heartedness. Generosity was legalised as *zakat*, one of the five basic principles of Islam. Moral courage to do the right without fear or favour was yet another code of conduct. Three things were stressed in the Islamic system of education: honesty, archery and horse-riding.

Role Model

Islam was born in the full blaze of history, and Prophet Muhammad's life has become a role model. He is supposed to be a perfect man who is to be emulated by every Muslim. He presented a religion which had no theological complications, no mystical sacraments, and no hierarchy involving any apostolic succession. His aim was to bring about a world order based on love of God and love of man. He showed to humanity the potential man has to move towards his destiny, the celestial world of peace and joy beyond the flight of time and realm of death. With the aristocracy of intellect and the nobility of soul man can soar to the stage of superman.

In conclusion we may say that Islam has the potential to help establish peace in the world. Its basic principle of the unity of man is intended to create fellowship. Its stress on faith in the love of God could purify the heart of men to

live in peace. Its focus on intellect could help generate creative ideas to evolve a peaceful society. Its emphasis on righteousness and good deeds could bring about the needed ecology for peace. Its advocacy of moderation, balance, harmony and equilibrium could promote the required atmosphere for peace. Its social ethics of equality and brotherhood

could remove poverty, hunger and ignorance in society. Its practical code of hospitality, honesty, unity, trustworthiness and solidarity could awaken a new consciousness for peace. The teachings of its Sufis could yet resist the temptation to disturb peace. In short, Islam could still play an important part in the establishment of peace in the world.