



Islam, Forgiveness and Jihad

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on behalf of the American Muslim Council
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We begin this evening with “Surah Fatiha” -- from the Muslim Holy Book, the Qu’ran.

The Surah Fatiha is rightly called "the Essence of the Qu’ran.” It teaches us the perfect prayer. It has the same significance for Muslims as the Lord's Prayer for Christians, and indeed the similarities are notable. The “Surah Fatiha” is recited in all five daily prayers, and in festive as well as solemn occasions.

It sums up man 's relationship to God and His Divine Attributes. Man beseeches God’s guidance to lead him in the path of Righteousness.

Rubina Siddiqui will now present to you “Surah Fatiha” in Arabic.

*Bismillah Allah
Al Rahman al Rahim
Alham du lillah
Rab al Alamin
Al Rahman al Rahim
Maliki yawmid al Deen
Iyaka na'budu wa-iyaka nasta'een
Ihdina siratal mustaqima
Siratal Latheena an'amta alayhim
Ghayri al maghdubi Alayhim
Walad daleen
Ameen*

In the name of Allah,
Most Gracious, most Merciful
Praise be to Allah,
The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds
Most Gracious, most Merciful
Master of the Day of Judgment
Only Thee do we worship
And Thine aid we seek
Show us the straight way
The way of those on whom
Thou hast bestowed Thy grace
Those whose path is not anger,
And who go not astray...
Amen

Asalaam-alaikum: May Peace Be With You.

Brothers and Sisters, I am invited here today, through the kindness of Michael North of the Hawaii Forgiveness Project. I thank him for giving me this great opportunity.

I am more than honoured to represent the American Muslim Council of which Ehsan Reza is the President Hawaii Chapter, and Rafique Islam the Vice President; this is an organization that believes in promoting civil liberties and justice for all Muslims here in the United States. In addition it also tries to create a better understanding of Islam.

I must confess that I do not deserve such an honour to speak about Islam, Forgiveness and Jihad and what it really means. I'm not an Islamic Scholar -- theology is only a part of Islam.

Unlike Christianity, Islam is a code of life, a civilization and a myriad cultural patterns. Islamic cultures evolve from our struggle for existence in society - indeed for a moral life -- being mediated by Islamic principles and values.

Most of our social values and customs and our outlook on life are Islamic, although many of us don't take the time to trace their evolution from Islamic principle. I'm focused on the social and moral dimensions of Islam, which are most relevant to our life in the pluralizing societies of a fast globalizing world. However, I'm going to do my best to share with you today of what little I know. At the end of the presentation, you may ask me questions and I shall try and answer them to the best of my abilities; if I cannot I will be glad to look them up for you and happy to e-mail back with all the appropriate answers.

Before I begin, I would like to welcome all from the bottom of my heart.

I request Imam (the prayer leader) Ismail to present the 'Adhan' or 'call to prayer' in Arabic. Imam Ismail will also recite verses in Arabic from the Qur'an each time I mention it throughout my talk. He very graciously has taken the time to be present here today to share with you the Adhan, with his magnificent, mellifluous voice, Alhamdulillah (Praise be to God), for the purpose of calling creatures of Allah to prayer and connect with the Supreme Being.



*Allah u Akbar, Allah u Akbar
Ash-hadu al-la Ilaha ill Allah - Ash-hadu al-la Ilaha ill Allah
Ash-hadu anna Muhammadan Rasulillah
Ash-hadu anna Muhammadan Rasulillah
Hayya las-saleah - Hayya las-saleah
Hayya lal-faleah - Hayya lal-faleah
Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar
La Ilaha ill Allah*

*God is Great, God is Great
I bear witness that there is no God but Allah
I bear witness that Muhammad is His Messenger
I bear witness that Muhammad is His Messenger
Hasten to the prayer, Hasten to the prayer
Hasten to real success, Hasten to real success,
God is Great, God is Great
There is no God but Allah*

When The Prophet Muhammad (God's Mercy and Blessings be Upon him) was asked to define Islam, he said: "It is to submit your heart to Allah and to harm no one by word or deed." It signifies sincerity towards the One God and the surrender of the heart to Him. These are universal principles, independent of time and place. And since the concept of Islam is universal, its morality, its legal system, and its social order are also of world relevance.

The concept of Islam is nothing new. According to the Qur'an: Sura 12: 3 titled Joseph (Yusuf):

"It is no new tale of fiction, but a confirmation of previous scriptures, and an explanation of all things, and a guidance and mercy to those who believe."

Islam came as the first 'reformation' of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In Muhammad's time, Christians and Jews in Arabia had strayed from many Judeo-Christian principles. This is why Muhammad -- according to Islam -- was sent down by Allah: as a reformer of the Abrahamic religious tradition.

The Meaning of Forgiveness in Islam

The seminal principle of Judaism is justice; a central principle of Christianity is compassion. Islam values both justice and compassion, and considers them complementary to each other. You should strive to establish justice, but forgive those who fail to treat you justly in spite of your efforts, perhaps due to their shortcomings or plain ignorance. Islam also says:

"If any show patience and forgive, that truly would be an exercise of courageous will and resolution in the conduct of affairs." Qur'an: Sura 42:43 (Counsel)

Forgiveness plays an essential part in human relations, and magnanimity is most certainly a sign of strength. Mercy out of power rather than mercy out of weakness is recommended.

Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) granted an amnesty to the Meccans when he re-entered their city, despite all the bitterness and persecution they had inflicted on him. He asked the captured Nobles, "What am I to do with you?" Their leader Abu

Sufyan replied, "The best".

Muhammad said, "You are all free". God had given him power over his enemies, but he did not use the power to subjugate them, instead he forgave them. He turned his enemies into friends by forgiveness.

From the Muslim point of view, forgiveness comprises of 1) God's relationship to man and 2) man's relationship to his fellow men. God is all Forgiveness, the Great Forgiver. He is "ample in forgiveness". Qur'an: Sura 53: 32 The Star (Falaq)

Man can and must ask for forgiveness for his sins. Sura 38: 25-26 Saad.

According to Abdullah Yusuf Ali, an eminent scholar of Islam in his book 'The Holy Qur'an -- Text, Translation and Commentary' he points out the verses relating to receiving of forgiveness and the injunctions to forgive. He notes the three following words: 1)'Afa' 2) 'Samaha' and 3) Ghafara:

1. Afa -- means to forget, to delete, to obliterate from one's memory
2. Samaha -- means to ignore, overlook, turn away from, or treat a matter as if it did not affect one
3. Ghafara -- and the most common word. This refers to God's attribute of Ghaffar, which means to cover up something, as God does to our sins with His Grace. God forgives our sins, again and again.

The only sin He does not forgive is to put anything or anyone in the place of God or associate anything else with Him.

"God forgiveth not that partners should be set up with Him: but He forgiveth anything else, to whom He pleaseth", Qur'an: Sura 4: 48 Women (Nisa).

As per Yusuf Ali's comments, it would be 'rebellion against the essence and source of spiritual life". He compares the 'association' to committing 'treason in an earthly kingdom'. Over and over again believers are told to "Be foremost in seeking forgiveness", Qur'an: Sura 57: 21 Iron).

"Race towards forgiveness from your Lord, restrain anger and pardon men."
Qur'an: Sura 3: 133, Sura 3: 134 (Imran)

In the Qur'an: Sura 42: 37 (Counsel), it states as one of the duties of believers to "Forgive, even when angry". However, these duties include resisting wrongful oppression. The text in the Sura Counsel continues, "Let evil be rewarded with evil. But he that forgives and seeks reconciliation shall be rewarded by God. He does not wrongdoers. Qur'an: Sura 42: 40 (Counsel)

Islam does not encourage forgiveness of the willfully unjust. "If we tolerate wrong", comments Yusuf Ali, "by allowing it to run rampant when we can prevent it, we fail in our duty to God."

"Fight for the cause of God against those who fight against you: but do not attack, for God does not love the aggressors" Qur'an: Sura 2: 190 (The Cow)

Islam believes that watching a wrong being done is equivalent to committing, endorsing and participating in that wrong-doing ourselves.

Compassion in Islam has a special meaning. It includes doing good to those in need and those who have hurt you (Jesus' Sermon on the Mount), but in Islam, it also means "establishing charity" as social institutions.

The Qur'an says: "We (God) revealed to Moses the Law... We ordained therein for them life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth, and wounds equal for equal. But if anyone remits the retaliation by way of charity, it is an act of atonement for himself." Qur'an: Sura 5: 45 (The Table).

Regarding charity in Islam, I would like to add: The purpose of charity, and of compassion, is to build a just social order so those who cannot take care of themselves are taken care of, and those who are weak and cannot protect themselves against the strong and the malevolent are protected.

Islam encourages individual acts of compassion for individuals: but it mandates supporting the infrastructure of compassion (eg. zakat, waqf). For Islam views a society built on the ethos and institutions of charity and good works as more compassionate than one based on personal charity. In the Islamic scheme of things, compassion and love are part of justice, the most basic social value.

In other words, (Christian) compassion and (Judaic) justice are complementary values in Islam, the reformed version of the Abrahamic tradition.

Forgiveness is a virtue of those who are strong; forgiveness is also an old Arab tradition. Islam did not introduce something entirely new. Islam came as a reformation. There is a much prized quality, 'hilm', or magnanimity: not easily excited to wrath. Islam very much emphasizes on this quality. The ideal is to be strong but also forgiving and merciful.

In the Qur'an, what is emphasized is self-defense. "If they attack you, attack them in like manner as they attacked you." Qur'an: Sura 2: 194 (The Cow). But in another verse, it's said that it is even better that you forgive.

In other words, as Shakespeare said, 'to err is human, but to forgive divine'. One reaches another level, much closer to the Most Merciful, Most Compassionate, when one forgives and shows mercy.

Establishing a just order based on compassion is the mission with which Allah sent Adam (the first man) down to earth as His "vice-regent." The struggle in which man engages to fulfill that divine mission is called "jihad".

The Meaning of Jihad in Islam

Jihad has two dimensions: jihad within one's self and jihad in society. The Prophet recognized that the battle with oneself as the greatest struggle. As he returned from one of the expeditions he said, "We have come back from the lesser 'jihad' to the greater 'jihad'. He meant the struggle with one's passions. In other words jihad' within one's self is the best kind of jihad; it means you have to struggle against your own pernicious impulses (greed, envy, lust, etc) so you don't cause injustice to others.

This struggle is a struggle against 'potential evil' within yourself. When evil among others becomes a source of injustice to society, jihad against others becomes incumbent on you. It's important to note that when waging jihad against others, you are not struggling against them as persons, but against their potential for committing injustice. And again, jihad against others -- whether individuals or communities or nations -- does not necessarily entail violence. It is often counsel, persuasion, a campaign or a dialogue and, yes, violence as the last resort.

Again, the word 'jihad' and the verb that goes with it means 'to strive', to 'exert' to struggle within oneself or without. It is often used in the Qur'an and has been applied to many forms of action.

It may be to fight in a war for 'defense', for good against an evil cause or maybe to organize a demonstration against destruction of the environment and nature. It could be to raise one's voice and protest against child labour, women traded for the purpose of base physical desires or just a commodity, etc.

Jihad could also mean doing one's best to stop smoking or not doing alcohol or drugs. It could also mean trying one's best to fight against lying and cheating or stealing. Jihad may also be showing concern for one's neighbour who is dying of poverty. Planting a tree to give shade is also a form of jihad, while rescuing a bird with a broken wing from being trampled on is another act of jihad.

All in all, respecting all creations of God, living or dead, is also jihad. To fight and control the dangerous tendencies in man and to cultivate the spiritual potential in each one of us, to show mutual respect and co-exist in harmony, is the true and 'Greater Jihad'.

Muslims are also enjoined to engage in jihad in whatever form necessary to defend themselves, their families, communities and nations against foreign aggression and domination. Islam sanctions only defensive armed struggle. It doesn't permit aggression -- armed or unarmed.



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