

THE INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Forgiveness

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Question #1: How is forgiveness defined according to the Islamic tradition? (e.g. which words for forgiveness are used in sacred texts, what does the act of forgiveness entail?)

The Concept of Forgiveness in Islam

The concept of forgiveness in the Qur'an is expressed in three terms, (1) *'afw*, (2) *safhu*, and (3) *ghafara*

'Afw means to pardon, to excuse for a fault or an offense or a discourtesy, waiver of punishment and amnesty. Examples of usage in the Qur'an are verses 42:40, 2:187 and 5:95.

Safhu means to turn away from a sin or a misdeed, ignore, etc. Examples of usage in the Qur'an are verses 2:109, 15:85 and 43:89.

Ghafara or *maghfira* means to cover, to forgive and to remit. Examples of usage in the Qur'an are verses 2:263, 42:37 and 43:43.

For more details see Lane's Lexicon² and Hans Wehr's dictionary³, among others.

The God, Allah⁴ is the ultimate power Who can forgive. Forgiveness means closing an account of offense against God or any of His creation. However, forgiveness must meet the criteria of sincerity. God, the All-Knowing, has the knowledge of everything including whatever a person thinks but does not express in words or deeds. An offense may be against (a) a person, (b) a group of persons or society, (c) other creation of God such as animals, plants, land, atmosphere, bodies of water and the life therein, and (d) God, Allah. Muslims understand that an offense against the creation of God is an offense against God.

To receive forgiveness from God there are three requirements:

- (1) Recognizing the offense itself and its admission before God.
- (2) Making a commitment not to repeat the offense.
- (3) Asking for forgiveness from God.

If the above three conditions are met in sincerity, forgiveness from God is

assured. Sincerity protects a person from repeating the same offense. If a person is sincere he will be helped by God not to repeat; in addition, God will change his punishment for the offense into a reward.

If the offense was committed against another human being or society, a fourth condition is added and the order is changed.

- (1) Recognizing the offense before those against whom offense was committed and before God.
- (2) Committing oneself not to repeat the offense.
- (3) Doing whatever needs to be done to rectify the offense (within reason) and asking pardon of the offended party.
- (4) Asking God for forgiveness.

Sometimes there is a party against whom wrong was done but this party cannot forgive, that is the creation of God other than human beings. Examples of offenses against God's creation are torturing animals, killing them without justification (food is a justification), defoliation and burning of trees, poisoning bodies of water thus killing life therein, polluting air, destroying land without justification and so on. Some of these activities may be justified, for example, hunting for food is justifiable but hunting for fun is not.

There are no particular words to say for asking forgiveness. However, Muslims are taught many phrases and words to keep repeating daily asking God's forgiveness. For example:

- (1) *Astaghfiru-Allah*⁵ meaning, "I ask forgiveness from Allah."
- (2) *Subhanaka-Allah humma wa bi hamdika wa ash-hadu al la Ilaha illa Anta astaghfiruka wa atubu ilayk* meaning "Glory be to You, Allah, and with You Praise (thanks) and I bear witness that there is no deity but You, I ask Your forgiveness and I return to You (in obedience).

There are many other similar phrases.

Question #2: What is the theological basis for forgiveness according to the Islamic tradition?

Question #3: What are the major references pertaining to forgiveness in Islamic sacred texts? Please include both the location and quotes from the text.

Questions 2 and 3 are essentially the same. I would like to deal with the terminology used in the questions.

"Islamic tradition"

This term, "tradition", perhaps, applies best to those religions that do not have God-revealed books in their original languages and the religion is the outgrowth of teachings and writings of religious leaders who have come and gone over the centuries and new traditions developed. In case of Islam, the original revelation, the Qur'an, exists in its original language

and the second source, Hadith (defined elsewhere in this article), remains intact. Islamic teachings, methods of ritual worship and elements of legal system remain the same as given by Allah through His Messenger, Muhammad (peace and salutations of Allah be upon him, henceforth denoted by superscript (S)). However, some of the applications of Islamic systems may change with the change of technology or environment. Islam is a system of whole life, that is, there are guidelines for individuals, families, social life, economic system and political life of the people. In isolation, Islam as a system does not work too well. For example, the Islamic legal system does not work very well if its welfare system is not in place. The Islamic family and social system does not work very well if its moral system is not in place. Similarly, the Islamic economic system does not work very well if its political and legal systems are not in operation. Hence, you see the Muslim countries in a mess; they are following neither the western system nor Islamic. You cannot have legs of a deer, body of a lion and head of giraffe and expect such an animal to behave like all three or any one of the three. We cannot call such an animal a lion nor a deer nor a giraffe.

The theological basis of forgiveness

It is in the Qur'an and Hadith. Qur'an is the word of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad(S) and is in Arabic language. Translation of the Qur'an is not Qur'an because God did not reveal it in any other language but Arabic. A translation may contain the message of the Qur'an but it is the word of the translator not the word of God. Qur'an, in many places, needs explanation which is done by the Prophet Muhammad(S) and recorded in Hadith collections. Hadith contains reports of Prophet Muhammad's sayings, deeds and approvals and is the second source of Islamic knowledge and legal system.

The Qur'an is divided into Suras and Ayas, loosely translated as chapters and verses, respectively. There are 114 chapters of varying length and each is assigned a name and a number in consecutive order. Translators use either Roman or Arabic numerals for numbering Suras. Verse numbers are given in Arabic numerals and numbered within the chapter in consecutive order.

There are many Hadith collections and each primary collection goes by the collector's name. Within each collection Hadith are numbered consecutively. There are secondary collections of Hadith, meaning they are culled from primary collections and arranged according the topic; such collections go by the name given by the collector. It is much easier for untrained people to use secondary Hadith collections than the primary collections. A selection of teachings about forgiveness from the Qur'an and Hadith are given below.

Allah forgives:

"And vie with one another to attain to your Sustainer's forgiveness and to a paradise as vast as the heavens and the

earth, which has been readied for the God-conscious who spend [in His way] in time of plenty and in time of hardship, and hold in check their anger, and pardon their fellow men because God loves the doers of good; and who, when they have committed a shameful deed or have [otherwise] sinned against themselves, remember God and pray that their sins be forgiven - for who but God could forgive sins? And do not knowingly persist in doing whatever [wrong] they may have done. These it is who shall have as their reward forgiveness from their Sustainer, and gardens through which running waters flow, therein to abide: and how excellent a reward for those who labor!"

The Qur'an⁶ 3:133-136

Say: "[Thus speak God] 'O you servants of Mine who have transgressed against your own selves! Despair not of God's mercy: behold, God forgives all sins - for, verily, He Alone is Much-Forgiving, a dispenser of grace!'"

The Qur'an 39:53

"God does not like any evil to be mentioned openly, unless it be by him who has been wronged [thereby]. And God is indeed All-Hearing, All-Knowing, whether you do good openly or in secret, or pardon others for evil [done unto you]: for, behold, God is indeed an absolver of sins, infinite in His power."

The Qur'an 4:148-149

Explanation: Above verses are self-explanatory and need no explanation.

Leadership must be forgiving:

"And it was by God's grace that thou [O Muhammad] didst deal gently with thy followers: for if thou hadst been harsh and hard of heart, they would indeed have broken away from thee. Pardon them, then, and pray that they be forgiven. And take counsel with them in all matters of public concern; then, when thou hadst decided upon a course of action, place thy trust in God: for, verily God loves those who place their trust in Him."

The Qur'an 3:159

Explanation: Allah approved Prophet Muhammad(S) for his leniency with his followers and taught him to pardon. In addition, Allah instructed the Prophet to counsel with the followers and once a decision in a given matter was taken, follow through with it and trust Allah for results. Following the example of Prophet Muhammad(S), Muslim leadership is required to adopt a similar course.

General teachings of forgiveness:

"If ye do good openly or keep it secret, or forgive evil, lo! Allah is forgiving, Powerful."

The Qur'an 4:149

"Keep to forgiveness, and enjoin kindness, and turn away from the ignorant. And if it should happen that a prompting from Satan stirs thee up [to anger], seek refuge with Allah: behold, He is All-Hearing, All-Knowing."

The Qur'an 7:199-200

"And let not those who possess dignity and ease among you swear not to give to the near of kin and to the needy, and to refugees for the cause of Allah. Let them forgive and show indulgence. Yearn ye not that Allah may forgive you? Allah is Forgiving, Merciful."

The Qur'an 24:22

"And who shun the more heinous sins and abominations; and who, whenever they are moved to anger, readily forgive."

The Qur'an 42:37

"But withal, if one is patient in adversity and forgives - this, behold, is indeed something to set one's heart upon."

The Qur'an 42:43

Explanation: These teachings are about doing good to others openly or secretly and forgiveness to those who may have done wrong. Sometimes a wrong may arouse the worst impulses of anger but it is from Satan; seek refuge with Allah from Satan. There may be a case where the one wronged is someone you have been helping but his wrong may arouse your anger to stop helping him; in such a case, Allah is exhorting to continue to help and forgive his transgression.

Family situations:

"O You who believe! Behold, among your spouses and your children are enemies unto you: so beware of them! But if you pardon [their faults], and forbear, and forgive- then, behold, Allah is Forgiving, Merciful."

The Qur'an 64:14

Explanation: In a family, some members may cause a lot of pain by their wrongdoing. Sometimes, a family member may cause others to do wrong and transgress which may cause one to commit a crime but it was not intentional. Allah is exhorting to adopt a forgiving attitude within the family.

Murder:

"And slay not the life which Allah has forbidden except in [the pursuit of] justice. Whoso is slain wrongfully, We⁷ have given power unto his heir, but let him not commit excess in slaying. Lo! He will be helped."

The Qur'an 17:33

Explanation: In case of wrongful murder the court will prosecute the accused but in case of a guilty verdict, heirs of the victim(s) have the authority to decide the fate which includes pardoning and freeing him. However, they are not allowed to torture the convicted murderer. It is the duty of the state to carry out the wishes of heirs of the victim.

Teachings of the Prophet Muhammad(S) and his precedence:

Abu Kabsha 'Ameri reported that the Messenger of Allah said:
*"... and no man pardons an oppression seeking thereby the pleasure of Allah but Allah will increase his honor therewith on the Day of Resurrection .."*⁸

'Oqbah Ibn 'Amer reported that the Messenger of Allah said:
*"you shall keep relationship with one who cut it off from you, you shall give one who disappointed you, and you shall pardon on who oppressed you"*⁹

Abu Hurayrah reported that the Messenger of Allah said:
*"Moses son of 'Imran had asked: O my Lord! Who is the best honorable of Thy servants to Thee? He [the God] said: He who pardons when he is in a position of power."*¹⁰

Abu Hurayra reported that the Messenger of Allah said:
*"The strong one is not he who knocks out his adversary; the strong one is he who keeps control over his temper."*¹¹

Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud reported that the Messenger of Allah taught his followers:
"Narrating the account of one of the prophets [of Allah] whom was assaulted and wounded by his people; while wiping the blood from the face he prayed: 'O Allah! Forgive my people because they do not know.'" ¹²

Prophet Muhammad set an excellent example of a very forgiving person in his personal matters. He lived in his hometown, Makkah (erroneously spelled as Mecca) for thirteen years after his appointment as the Messenger and Prophet of Allah for mankind. During this period he was persecuted, his followers were persecuted and some were killed, and, finally, his enemies wanted to kill him. During first eight years in his adopted town, Madinah (misspelled as Medina), his enemies chased him, brought armies against him and he narrowly escaped. During twenty-some battles during eight years he lost many of his close associates and relatives by the hands of makkans and their allies. After the conquest of Makkah he declared general amnesty for those who did not take up arms against him during his entry in Makkah. Haykal wrote about a situation in which Abu Sufyan ibn Harb, head of the Makkan tribes and an archenemy of the Prophet Muhammad, finally gave in when he found no other

alternative.

*"Faced with the threat, Abu Sufyan converted and recited the confession of faith. Al 'Abbas then turned to the Prophet - God's peace be upon him - and said: 'O Prophet of God, Abu Sufyan is a proud man. Would you not grant him some privilege?' The Prophet answered: 'yes, indeed! Whoever enters the house of Abu Sufyan shall be secure, whoever remains in his house shall be secure; and whoever enters the Mosque shall be secure.'"*¹³

Haykal adds:

*"All these thousands of men, of Muslims in battle array, stood on the ready waiting for that one word to wipe out the whole Makkah and its people within minutes. Muhammad, however, was no less than Muhammad! He was no less than the Prophet of God! No alienation, antagonism, or hostility could find any permanent abode in his heart. His heart was absolutely free of injustice, of malice, of tyranny or false pride. In the most decisive moment, God gave him power over his enemy. But Muhammad chose to forgive, thereby giving to all mankind and all the generations the most perfect example of goodness, of truthfulness, of nobility and magnanimity."*¹⁴

After the conquest of Makkah, the tribes of Taif¹⁵ and its surrounding area, called Hawazen attacked the Muslim armies in dark of the early morning while they were sleeping in their tents. Muslim armies lost a large number of their comrades and they were almost routed by the enemy. However, God helped the Muslim army under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad(S) and enemy was defeated. This battle is known as the Battle of Hunayn. The Muslim armies got a large quantity of war booty, however, the Prophet delayed its distribution hoping that the leadership Hawazen would come to him to make peace. He waited for ten days then distributed the booty. He gave largest amount of booty to the leaders of defeated Makkans who had joined him in the war against Hawazen. Each one of the Makkan was responsible for causing serious troubles for Muhammad(S) and his followers for almost twenty years. The news of his magnanimity and generosity spread, and finally, leaders of enemy tribes showed up in submission. Prophet Muhammad(S) took back the booty he had given to his old faithful followers and gave it to the leaders of defeated tribes of Taif and Hawazen¹⁶.

Question #4. How important or central is forgiveness to the Islamic tradition?

Forgiveness is selfishness. If one desires to be forgiven for his offenses he must learn to forgive others. Especially, if one seeks forgiveness from God, he should learn to forgive others for their offenses. If one desires that God overlook his weaknesses, he should learn to overlook weaknesses of others.

Forgiveness is important for two reasons:

1. Very importantly, for the after-life or the life hereafter. One forgives to seek forgiveness. Seeking forgiveness is a sign of humility and forgiving others is a sign of magnanimity.
2. Seeking forgiveness and forgiving others brings happiness in the worldly life - it's a psychological thing. In addition, forgiving improves relations with people by bringing good reputation and respect.

In the ancient world tribes and families carries on blood feud for generations because they could not forgive. Islam taught a middle path between turning the other cheek and never ending blood feud, that is, revenge to the extent harm done is allowed but forgiveness is preferred. Allah said in the Qur'an:

"The recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto (in degree): but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah: for (Allah) loves not those who do wrong."

The Qur'an 42:40 (A. Yusuf Ali)

"But [remember that an attempt at] requiting evil may, too, become an evil: hence whoever pardons [his foe] and makes peace, his reward rests with God - for, verily, He does not love evildoers."

The Qur'an 42:40 (Muhammad Asad)

Both translations of the same verse are correct. One gives more literal meaning (Yusuf Ali) and the other gives more interpretive meaning (Muhammad Asad). It is allowed to take revenge of an offense only to the extent of damage done but not to be exceeded. However, there is a great probability of exceeding the damage, thereby, the victim becomes an offender. Forgiveness is a protection and brings great reward from Allah.

Question #5. According to the Islamic tradition, should forgiveness be contingent upon repentance by the offender? If so, why? If not why? Are there other conditions placed on forgiveness? (e.g., frequency and severity of offenses)

This question addresses to the definition and understanding of the concept of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not taking revenge nor desiring any harm to the offender for a particular offense. Forgiveness includes not asking God's punishment to the offender in this life or in the life hereafter. There could be a partial forgiveness, that is, one would not take any revenge in this life but reserves his rights to address to the God in the life hereafter; this is called patience. In case of repentance by the offender, it may bring complete forgiveness for him.

The question #5 implies cases of clear-cut offense by one side against the other but real life situations are not always as clear. Two parties may disagree, sincerely, about the offended and the offender. In such cases arbitration and conflict resolution may be required. Allah teaches Muslims in the Qur'an:

"Hence, if two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them; but then, if one of the two [groups] goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's command; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably [with them]: for verily, God loves those who act equitably!"

The Qur'an 49:9

If there is repentance, it will bring a better bond between the two parties. However, forgiveness does not require repentance by the offender.

Question #6. Does forgiveness necessitate reconciliation? In other words, is it possible to forgive while deciding not to reconcile with the offender?

Reconciliation is desirable but not essential to forgiveness. If the victim feels that the offender has serious character flaws and it is not in his best interest to reconcile he doesn't have to. Reconciliation is used in the sense that the offense is forgiven and forgotten as if it never happened, which could be in theory but not a practical concept. We all learn from our experiences and frequently we modify. Sometimes it is best for ones own sanity not to carry on normal relationship with certain kind of characters but one should not totally dissociate from Muslim brethren.

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 2. *Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane in 8 volumes, reprinted by Islamic Book Center, Lahore, Pakistan., 1982. Originally published by William and Norgate, London, England, 1863.
 3. *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* edited by J.M. Cowan, Spoken Language Services, Inc., Ithaca, N.Y. 14850, Third Edition, 1976.
 4. Allah, al-lah, is the name of Supreme Being in Arabic language; in English, the God or in Hebrew, Eloh or Elohim. Allah is the Creator, the Evolver, the Shaper of everything in the universe. Muslims have been taught that Allah has ninety-nine Beautiful Names or Attributes. In this article the names Allah and God have been used as synonyms.

5. In this article all Arabic words which are not used commonly in English have been italicized. Also, quotes from the Qur'an, Hadith and other Islamic books have been italicized.
6. In this article the Qur'an translation by Muhammad Asad, titled, *The Message of the Qur'an*, Dar Al-Andalus, Gibraltar, 1980. Other Qur'an translations consulted were by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, titled, *The Holy Qur'an, Text, Translation and Commentary*, Amana Corporation, Brentwood, MD 20722, 1989; and Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthal, titled *The Glorious Qur'an. Text and Explanatory Translation*, various publishers.
7. This is the plural of authority; sometimes called royal or imperial. This is not plural of number.
8. *Mishkat al-Masabih* translated by Fazle Karim under the title, *AL-HADIS*, Vol. 1, #339, P548, The Book House, Lahore, Pakistan.
9. *AL-HADIS*, op.cit. #192w, p548
10. *AL-HADIS*, op.cit., #193w, p.548.
11. *RIYADH-US-SALEHEEN* by Imam Al-Nawawi, translated by S.M. Madni-Abbasi, Vol.1, #45, P.43, International Islamic Publishers (Pvt.) Ltd., Karachi, Pakistan, 1990.
12. *RIYADH-US-SALEHEEN*, op.cit., #646, p.359.
13. Muhammad Husayn Haykal in *The Life of Muhammad*, translated by Isma'il Ragi A. al-Faruqi, North American Trust Publications, 1976, p.403. (Italics added)
14. Muhammad Husayn Haykal, op.cit., p. 408. (Italics added)
15. The town of Taif is on a plateau, some 3500 feet above sea level and is well known for its riches, beauty and moderate climate. Taif is located fifty-four miles east of Makkah.
16. Safi-ur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri in *Ar-Raheeq Al-Makhtum* (The Sealed Nectar), translated and published by Dar-us-Salam Publications, Houston, TX 77043, 1996, pp. 411-416

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