Solving the Qur’anic Paradox

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i. The Warrior and the Pacifist

Every major religious tradition has two contradictory themes regarding the use of violence, leading to a good deal of confusion and contradictions. Most sacred texts and faith communities have a warrior motif, on the one hand; it is a sacred duty to stand up and fight against evil. On the other hand, the scriptures and teachings of the world’s religions also prohibit harming others and prescribe a love for enemies that seems to challenge the very foundations of the warrior motif.

Islam is no exception. It, too, contains both the warrior and the pacifist motif, although the Western media portray it as having only the former and serving as the major purveyor of violence in the world today. The purpose of this paper is to provide a more balanced view of Islam by presenting the suppressed aspects. We do not wish to argue that Islam is a religious tradition without violence any more than one could argue that Christianity promotes only pacifism.

Comparative religions guru Ninian Smart once suggested that we should speak of the world’s religions in the plural, of Hinduisms and Buddhisms, Christianities and Isams, since there is so much variation within each tradition (perhaps more than between them). That is certainly the case with morality of force and violence, as one cannot characterize either one religion or all of them as either warrior-like or pacifist. We can easily identify warrior and pacifist individuals, sectors, and teachings in each of the world’s predominant traditions.

It is helpful in this regard to make a distinction among the imperial, institutional, and spiritual aspects or versions of any tradition. The imperial involves linkages between religious and political elites and the use of a tradition for political aggrandizement. It is more likely, of course, to promote the warrior motif than the pacifist, although liberation movements as well as political establishments may employ a warrior motif as well. Institutional religion is the crystallization of a faith tradition in an institutional form and serving the interests of the institutional elites and their status groups, political allies, and so forth.

Finally, the spiritual aspects are the less material and often the more original elements of a tradition. Although they may certainly be carried by institutional and imperial structures, they are often apolitical and sometimes in direct conflict with institutional and imperial interests.

Despite the warrior motif’s widespread existence and frequent dominance, most of the world’s scriptures and prophets promote a loving of one’s enemies that would seem to contradict the warrior approach of controlling or destroying them. This advice is not only a moral admonition but also as strategic wisdom. As the Buddha put it, “Hatreds never cease through hatred in this world; through love alone they cease. This is an eternal law” (Dhammapada 3-5). Thus Jesus’ admonition to turn the other cheek when struck is an ethical standard but also a strategy in the face of violent attack. It demonstrates the victim’s courage and control of the situation even when facing physical abuse or danger.

Again, Islam is no exception. Not only does the Qur’an (60:7) assume that God is ultimately in control of any situation, it also suggests “It may be that God will ordain love between you and those whom you hold as enemies. For God has power over all things; and God is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.” Strategically, the Qur’an concurs with the Buddha and Jesus that one should return evil with good: “The good deed and the evil deed are not alike. Repel the evil deed with one which is better, then lo!, he between whom and you there was enmity shall become as though he were a bosom friend” (Qur’an 41.34-35).

Why, then, do we find so much religiously ordained violence? It may well be that the faith traditions have been hijacked by people with political agendas. The metaphor is apt because it involves capturing a vehicle and using it to take a course contrary to its original destination. The pacifist Christianity of the early church was hijacked by the so-called Holy Roman Empire after the conversion of Emperor Constantine, on through the medieval Crusades, to 19th and 20th century European colonialism. Some argue that Islam was hijacked to serve as a vehicle for the wars of conquest in the 7th century CE stretching from Spain to Central Asia (see Freedman and McClymond 1999: 230).
The terrorist attacks of recent years are neither supported by the Qur'an, from many informed perspectives, nor by the mainstream of Islamic leadership. In a statement issued 28 July 2005,1

The Fiqh Council of North America wishes to reaffirm Islam’s absolute condemnation of terrorism and religious extremism. Islam strictly condemns religious extremism and the use of violence against innocent lives. There is no justification in Islam for extremism or terrorism. Targeting civilians’ life and property through suicide bombings or any other method of attack is haram – or forbidden - and those who commit these barbaric acts are criminals, not “martyrs.”

The Council goes on to prescribe the proper role of Muslims with regard to terrorism:
1. All acts of terrorism targeting civilians are haram (forbidden) in Islam.
2. It is haram for a Muslim to cooperate with any individual or group that is involved in any act of terrorism or violence.
3. It is the civic and religious duty of Muslims to cooperate with law enforcement authorities to protect the lives of all civilians.

The terrorism of the twentieth-first century is no more representative of contemporary Islam than the Crusades or colonialism of Christianity. The emergence of waves of terrorism in the previous century is paralleled by waves of nonviolence that provide an alternative means for people wishing to bring about social change.

ii. The Two Hands of Nonviolence
Nonviolence is ancient and complex, but has been more fully developed in the last century, in large part as a response to the burgeoning violence precipitated by revolutions in the means of destruction. It is often thought of as having two hands, that is principled or lifestyle nonviolence, on the one hand, and strategic nonviolence on the other.

The most dramatic development in the field of nonviolence was the emergence of Gandhian nonviolence and the elaboration of strategic nonviolence worldwide in the twentieth century. Gandhi’s formulations were nothing less than the creation of a new paradigm of conflict, drawing upon both religious motifs and secular strategies from various traditions.

Of particular relevance to our discussion here, Gandhi synthesized the warrior and pacifist motifs, creating the central notion of the nonviolent activist, or Satyagrahi, one who “holds fast to the Truth.” From the warrior motif comes the idea of fighting as a sacred duty, and from the pacifist the prohibition against harming. The nonviolent activist fights like the warrior but does so without harming his or her adversary.

Modern nonviolence was born on September 11th 1906 when Gandhi gathered people at the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg to launch the first nonviolent campaign against racial injustice the world had ever seen. In the century that followed Gandhi’s refinements of nonviolent strategies and tactics were multiplied and diffused, even to some extent institutionalized. Strategic genius Gene Sharp systematized and secularized nonviolence and Martin Luther King, Jr. baptized it. A myriad of groups, movements, individuals, and institutions promoted and actualized nonviolent struggle so profoundly that it shaped much of the geopolitics of the twentieth century from the Independence Movement in India, Ghana, Tanzania and elsewhere, to the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and pro-democracy movements in every corner of the globe.

Strategies such as direct action, civil disobedience, and nonviolent resistance and insurrection are now as much parts of the political landscape as the more visible and destructive military infrastructure. An explosion of research, writing, and nonviolent movements (if you will pardon the metaphor) marked the advent of the 21st century just as much as the new terrorism and war on terrorism. Gene Sharp’s 2005 Waging Nonviolent Struggle summarizes the strategies, tactics, and history of modern nonviolence, providing an indispensable introduction.

The other hand of nonviolent is what is sometimes called

1 A fatwa is a legal decision made by an established religious authority in Islam. The text of this fatwa and a list of endorsing organizations were available 6 August 2005 at http://www.cair-net.org/
2 If interested, please see my review in March-April 2005 issue of Ahimsa Nonviolence.
“principled nonviolence,” although it should be seen quite broadly in terms of nonviolent lifestyle and social organization. As such, it includes efforts to reduce violence in all spheres of one’s life, to treat the others with respect and civility and to live a lifestyle that reduces violence to humanity and the natural environment. It also involves the creation of social structures that promote justice and human rights, minimize violence in all spheres of life, and facilitate the actualization of every person’s potential by providing them with an opportunity structure for the basic necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter, medical care) as well as the fundamental liberties and foundations for self-actualization (education, freedom of speech and expression, life style, and so forth).

Given this context, we now turn our attention to the relationship between Islam and nonviolence.

iii. The Qur’anic Paradox

A number of scholars have written about the tension noted above that we find in the Qur’an and the Hadith of Islam (authoritative stories about the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad). On the one hand, people of faith are to fight and on the other to protect life, a dilemma i.e., the warrior-pacifist motifs outlined earlier.

The context of the founding of Islam is a desert culture of the seventh century CE that is full of violence. The new movement itself is constantly under attack and the Qur’an and Hadith are filled with stories of struggle and advice about it. The warrior motif appears frequently in the sacred text and the stories of the prophet and his followers. To struggle, both with one’s own life discipline (the Greater Jihad) and with others who are unjust (the Lesser Jihad) is part of the faithful life:

> And fight for the sake of God
> those who fight you; but do not be brutal
> or commit aggression,
> for God does not love
> brutal aggressors.
>
> And you kill them wherever you catch them,
> And drive them from where they drove you;
> For civil war is more violent than execution.
> ...

> But if they stop, God is most forgiving, most merciful.
> And fight them until there is no more strife,
> and there is the religion of God.

Qur’an 2:190-193

This short passage itself moves back and forth between the warrior and pacifist motifs, advocating now fighting, but then mercy and forgiveness. Even the call to fight is full of ambivalence about doing so and places limits on the motives and means with which one should struggle. It is to be for the self-defense of the community – fight those who fight you – and if the attack ceases, remember that God is forgiving and merciful. The execution of aggressors is allowed but in order to prevent civil war, which is even more violent. The troubling “kill them wherever you catch them” – perhaps the most difficult in the Qur’an – is not a general command to hunt down enemies and slay them but a strategy of limiting the spread of violence in an historic context on the verge of civil war, advocating the execution of those threatening the peace and wellbeing of the entire community.

The entire Qur’an is something of a manual on the importance of justice and how to achieve it – it is for justice that one fights:

> Why would you not fight
> in the name of God,
> and oppressed men, women, and children,
> who say “Our Lord, get us out of this town,
> whose people are oppressors.
> And provide us a protector from You,
> and provide us a helper from You.”

Qur’an 4:75

Moreover, the talk about fighting is also interspersed with an emphasis on mercy and the protection of life. The injunction against killing is not absolute in Islam, although it is quite strong. As the Fiqh Council of North America (2005) puts it, “The Qur’an, Islam’s revealed text, states: ‘Whoever kills a person [unjustly]...it is as though he has killed all mankind.’ (Qur’an, 5:32).” Moreover, the Qur’an also places a high premium on the sanctity of life. Following the Hebrew Scriptures, it declares

> And if anyone saved a life,
> it would be as if he saved the lives
> of all the people

Qur’an 5:32
So what are we to make of this puzzle? Are those who wage terrorist campaigns justified in acting in the name of Islam if they can provide an account for their killing on behalf of justice? And if so, what is one to do with the emphasis on the sanctity of life? One of the most helpful explanations of this dilemma is that provided by Thai scholar Chaiwat Satha-Anand (Qader Muheideen) (1993), who concludes

Yet there is a paradox: if Islam values the sanctity of life, how can Muslims fight “tumult and oppression” to the end? Unless Muslims forsake the methods of violence, they cannot follow the seemingly contradictory injunctions. It is evident that fighting against injustice cannot be avoided. But the use of violence in such fighting can be eschewed.

The solution to the paradox in the Qur’an may be the same that Gandhi found in his quest to reconcile the need to struggle for justice and Indian independence with the moral teachings against harmfulness he had received as a child. The Gandhian solution of fighting without harming would also appear to resolve the apparent dilemma posed by the Qur’an. It is precisely that conclusion that came to Abdul Ghaffar Khan – also known as Badshah Khan and the “Frontier Gandhi” as he studied the Qur’an in prison during the Indian Freedom struggle:

As a young boy, I had had violence tendencies; the hot blood of the Pathans was in my veins. But in jail I had nothing to do except read the Qur’an. I read about the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, about his patience, his suffering, his dedication. I had read it all before, as a child, but now I read it in the light of what I was hearing around me about Gandhiji’s struggle against the British Raj. (in Harris 1998: 102)

Indeed, the relationship between Islam and Gandhian nonviolence is much closer than most would think and it is to that we now turn our attention

### iii. Nonviolent Struggle in the Islamic Tradition

What kind of jihad is better? [The Prophet Muhammed replied] “A word of truth in front of an oppressive ruler!”

— Surah Al-Nasa’ I #4862

The very birth of modern nonviolence took place when Gandhi was working as a lawyer for Muslim Indian traders in South Africa (Gandhi 1928). Subjected to the grave indignities of the racist social order there, Gandhi insisted that the system be challenged and his Muslim companions and employers encouraged, supported, and in some ways guided him.

When the South African government passed a law requiring all Indians to register and carry a pass, the groundwork was laid for the birth of Satyagraha. On the 9th of September 2006, Gandhi addressed the Hamadiya Islamic Society denouncing the act, urging those present not to register, and pledging to court prison before doing so himself. Two days later, on the 11th of September, at a mass meeting the campaign was launched and later Gandhi and his followers burned their registration certificates on the grounds of the Hamidia Mosque in Johannesburg (Mehta 1993: 121).

Two key figures in the Indian Independence Movement were Muslims, Maulana Azad, who was part of the inner circle of the Congress Party, and Badshah Khan, the inspiration of a recently founded Badshah Khan Peace Initiative.3

3 The Initiative aims to promote knowledge about Badshah Khan at many levels; for more in formation, contact RaniRosser@gmail.com

Although the project is in its formative stages, the goals are

1. To collect the scattered materials about the person and teachings of Baacha Khan and the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement; compile, document and disseminate this valuable information in different languages throughout the world. These assets belong to the entire humanity and should not be allowed to remain in the dustbin of history.
2. To run an advocacy campaign for making the message of Baacha Khan a part of the curricula and educational systems in various parts of the world, particularly Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.
3. To present the life and struggle of Baacha Khan as one of the best models of achieving political freedom and democratic liberties and mobilizing people for socio-economic development and positive change.
4. To provide impetus for multiple programs that will offer effective platforms to promote the forces of peace, moderation, and non-violence, which will empower the people to raise their voices against religious extremism and political violence.
5. Highlighting Baacha Khan’s cosmopolitan outlook, based on the fundamentals of his Islamic faith, will help to reduce and eliminate religious, cultural, and ethnic conflicts among different groups in South Asia and promote in international, inter-cultural harmony.
Although he was not always an advocate of nonviolence, Khan became convinced that it was the imperative of the Qur'an and he mobilized a nonviolent army of 100,000 Pathans to challenge the British with nonviolent resolve. According to Eknath Easwaran (1983: 84), he was among a group of Pathans—known for their fierce, violence culture—who met Gandhi when he arrived in the Northwest Provinces as the champion of the Indian Freedom Movement.

A skeptical crowd of ... Pathans with their guns slung over their shoulders gathered to watch the little figure in his loincloth get up before them. “Are you afraid?” he asked them gently. “Why else would you be carrying guns?” They just stared at him, stunned. No one had ever dared to speak to them like this before. “I have no fear,” Gandhi went on; “that is why I am unarmed. This is what ahimsa means.” Abdul Ghaffar Khan threw away his gun, and the Pathans, following his leadership, became some of the most courageous followers of Gandhi’s way of love.

Badshah Khan’s “red shirts,” the Khudai Khidmatgars (Servants of God) were legendary their religious and social commitment, taking a holistic approach to the effort to obtain an independent society free of colonialism. They took a vow as they joined:

- I am a Khudai Khidmatgar; and as God needs no service, but serving his creation is serving him, I promise to serve humanity in the name of God.
- I promise to refrain from violence and from taking revenge.
- I promise to forgive those who oppress me or treat me with cruelty.
- I promise to refrain from taking part in feuds and quarrels and from creating enmity.
- I promise to treat every Pathan as my brother and friend.
- I promise to refrain from antisocial customs and practices.
- I promise to live a simple life, to practice virtue and to refrain from evil.
- I promise to practice good manners and good behavior and not to lead a life of idleness. I promise to devote at least two hours a day to social work.

Khan and his nonviolent activists believed that the ultimate model for nonviolence was not Gandhi, but the Prophet Muhammad himself. As Haji Sarfaraz Nazim put it, “it is wrong to assume that Gandhi was the first to set foot on a non-violence campaign in order to attain swaraj [self rule]. About 1,300 years ago, the Prophet of Arabia had recourse to non-violence” (Banerjee 2000:149).

Muslim involvement in the development of modern nonviolence did not end with the Indian Freedom Movement. A number of significant movements of nonviolence had key Muslim involvement, from the pro-democracy in Thailand (Satha-Anand 1993) to the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa (Zunes 1999a) and the largely nonviolent Palestinian Intifada of the late 1980s (Zunes 1999b).

Satha-Anand’s (1993: 21-22) analysis of nonviolent action in Pattani, Thailand, concludes with “eight theses on Muslim nonviolent action” that he presents as “a challenge for Muslims and others who seek to reaffirm the original vision of Islam…”

1. For Islam, the problem of violence is an integral part of the Islamic moral sphere.
2. Violence, if any, used by Muslims must be governed by rules prescribed in the Qur’an and Hadith.
3. If violence used cannot discriminate between the combatants and noncombatants, then it is unacceptable in Islam.
4. Modern technology of destruction renders discrimination virtually impossible at present.
5. In the modern world, Muslims cannot use violence.
6. Islam teaches Muslims to fight for justice with the understanding that human lives — as all parts of God’s creation — are purposive and sacred.
7. In order to be true to Islam, Muslims must utilize nonviolent action as a new mode of struggle.
8. Islam itself is a fertile soil for nonviolence
because of its potential for disobedience, strong discipline, sharing and social responsibility, perseverance and self-sacrifice, and the belief in the unity of the Muslim community and the oneness of... [humanity].

Perhaps one consequence of the new challenges presented by the need to condemn terrorism but still fight against injustices against the Muslim community and others, will be a Renaissance of Islamic thought about violence along the lines of Professor Satha-Anand’s.

iii. Nonviolent Lifestyle and Social Organization

*Be they Muslims, Jews, Christians, or Sabis,
Those who believe in God and the Last Day
And who do good
Have their reward with their Lord.
They have nothing to fear, and they will not sorrow.*

Worship nothing but God;
Be good to your parents and relatives
And to the orphan and the poor
Speak nicely to people;
Be in constant prayer
And give charity.

Qur’an 2:62, 83

Finally, we will explore the other side of nonviolence and its relationship to Islam, that is, the cultivation of a culture of peace and a just social organization that is nonviolent. Although the Islamic tradition, like all the others, is sometimes used to promote repressive political and social structures and legitimate all kinds of despicable behavior, the overall teachings of the Qur’an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad’s life, promote mercy, justice, egalitarianism, nonviolent economics, and civility and trustworthiness in daily interactions.

*Mercy as the Stamp of Creation*

Umar Faruq Abd-Allah (2005) says it is accurate to describe Islam as a religion of mercy. He observes that

Islamic revelation designates the Prophet Muhammad as “the prophet of mercy,” and Islam’s scriptural sources stress that mercy—above other divine attributions—is God’s hallmark in creation and constitutes his primary relation to the world from its inception through eternity, in this world and the next. Islam enjoins its followers to be merciful to themselves, to others, and the whole of creation, teaching a karmalike law of universal reciprocity by which God shows mercy to the merciful and withholds it from those who hold it back from others.

The most important name of God after Allah (which he notes is similar to the Aramaic word for God, Alaha) is “the All-Merciful, the Mercy-Giving” (r-Rahman i’r-Rahim), which is at the beginning of all but one chapter of the Qur’an and is central to Islamic ritual.

Although like many prophets, Muhammad engaged in much conflict and even warfare, he was remarkably quick to seek peace and refused to be vengeful when victorious. After the Muslims conquered the city of Mecca— with very little bloodshed—the Prophet refused to punish his conquered enemies who had sought to kill him. He told the city’s residents “Go to your houses. You have been set free.”

Muslims are thus expected to follow the Prophet’s example in promoting a “doctrine of universal, all-embracing mercy” that is to be applied not only to other Muslims, but to believers and unbelievers and even “the animate and inanimate: birds and animals, even plants and trees (ibid.: 4-5). In the end, Abd-Allah (ibid.: 6), “The imperative to be merciful—to bring benefit to the world and avert harm—must underlie a Muslim’s understanding of reality and attitude toward society.

As Mukulika Banerjee (2000:147) notes, the passages in the Qur’an sometimes used to justify revenge (“an eye for an eye”) are followed by verses often omitted:

But if anyone
Remits the retaliation
By way of charity, it is
An act of atonement for himself.

Qur’an 5:45

Thus, although revenge may be honorable, if kept within bounds (“equal for equal”), “forgiveness is still more worthy in the eyes of Allah” (Banerjee 2000: 147).

*Islam and Justice*

Another concept at the core of Islamic teachings is the idea of justice, which becomes immediately apparent
when one does even the most superficial reading of the Qur'an. Violence and conflict are primarily a result of the lack of justice. Islamic teachings give a priority to a notion of justice that one should apply to one's daily life in order to maintain peace among people. Humans have a responsibility to respect and care for one another, from the family to neighbors, to the entire human community.

The promotion of justice and an ethical lifestyle is far more important in Islam and particular doomatic positions. As the Qur'an puts it,

So race to virtues
God is your destination, all
And God will inform you
On all that wherein you have differed.

Islamic egalitarianism is also a Qur'anic principle that is widely manifest in Islam ritual and even architecture. The most striking example is the way in which prayers are carried out in the mosque, where all participants stand shoulder to shoulder regardless of class, race, or social status. There is no elevated pulpit from which the imam delivers the word of God down to the people.

One issue of justice rightly raised by many concerns gender inequality. It is necessary, first, to acknowledge the context within which Islamic norms were developed — not only was there apparently female infanticide but also little attention to legal rights for women. The Prophet not only insisted on a number of rights that were somewhat revolutionary for the culture of his time, but he also involved women in his movement. Indeed, if it had not been for the encouragement of his wife Khadija when he first claimed to have heard the voice of God in a cave where he was meditating, he might not have had the courage to speak and to lead.

In one Hadith we learn that when Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, came to a meeting where he was, he would make room for her to sit beside him. Some even suggest that before he died, the Prophet passed the light of his prophecy to Fatima. This is hardly the practice of purdah or second-class citizenship for women, which are no doubt cultural interpretations that challenge many aspects of early Islam.

Similarly, the Qur'an prohibits racism (30: 20-27). Indeed, it states, “The diversity of human languages and complexions is a sign that God exists.” Moreover,

To God belongs everyone
In the heavens and the earth
All are obedient to God.

The classic example of this recognition of racial equality in Islam is in the story of Malcolm X. He is originally drawn to the racial teachings of Elijah Muhammad in the Nation of Islam, but is transformed when he goes on a pilgrimage to Mecca and sees people of all colors and nationalities standing equally before God in that Holy City (Haley and Malcolm X 1996).

The Islamic emphasis on justice is also reflected in the nonviolent economics of Islam, beginning with the idea of the zakat, the annual donations to the poor that all Muslims are supposed to make. The sharing of resources is a religious obligation and the fourth of the traditional Five Pillars of Islam. Indeed, the crucial ritual of fasting during the Holy Month of Ramadan is not only a way of advancing oneself spiritually but also of reminding participants of the plight of the poor and the need to establish justice. The purpose of zakat is to reduce the gap between those who have and those who do not, to promote equality among people in human societies. If you have food to eat, you should first look at your neighbor and see if they have something to eat as well. If they do not, you have to provide it.

Finally, Islam traditionally prohibits the charging of interest, which can lead to exploitation and the concentration of wealth. Material wealth is for the benefit of the welfare of humanity and charging of interest leads to the formation of classes and class conflicts.

Civility and Respect
The model for all Islamic behavior is the Prophet Muhammad, who was reportedly gentle and good-natured, and who was called Amin (trustworthy) even by his enemies. As Abd-Allah (2005: 3) notes, according to the tradition,

Muhammad jested with children, showed a kindly humor toward adults, and even gave his followers friendly nicknames. He visited the sick, inquired after the welfare of neighbors, friends, followers, and even those who disbelieved in him. He was a warm egalitarian and shared everything with those
around him, including their poverty. He was always willing to forgive, rarely chastising those who disobeyed him. ... The Prophet accepted people at their word and forgave them easily. He harbored no desire for vengeance and rejected the pagan custom of blood feuds and revenge. There was nothing mindless or fanatic about his piety. He was never intransigent or bent on war.

Indeed, the personal character of the Prophet and the way he treated people is not only legendary, it is a major part of the explanation for the phenomenal success of the early Islamic movement. As Razi Ahmad (1993: 36) observes, not only was he “respected by the Meccans for his compassion, honesty, purity of character, gentleness, and truthfulness,” but he “neither cursed anyone nor said ill words about anyone” despite the ruthless attacks on him, his followers, and his family over the years.

In his speeches at the training camp for his nonviolent army, Badshah Khan emphasized patience as a basis for nonviolence, even patience for one’s adversaries. When the Muslims in Mecca “were oppressed and helpless and poor like us,” Khan exhorted,

The infidels of Mecca were resorting to various sorts of tyrannies over them. The Musalmans came to the Holy Prophet and asked him how would they be able to combat with infidels. The Holy Prophet told them that he would show them such a thing that no power on earth would be able to stand against it. The thing is patience and righteousness! (Rama 1992: 102)

Harris (1993: 111) suggests that the principle of no-compulsion is what “the rest of the world calls non-violence” – it is “old territory in spiritual terms, but an intellectual frontier.” The spiritual nonviolence found in the teachings of the Sufis and other Muslims stands in sharp contrast to the Islam of Fox and CNN. It is a position of power, but not domination, of strength but not of violence. It is a territory conquered by loving action rather than non-responsiveness, which the great 13th-century Sufi poet Rumi identifies as the great problem:

The son of Mary, Jesus, huzzies up a slope
As though a wild animal were chasing him.
Someone following him asks, “Where are you going?
No one is after you.” Jesus keeps on,
Saying nothing, across two more fields. “Are you
The one who says words over a dead person,
So that he wakes up? I am. ‘Did you not make
The clay birds fly? Yes. Who then
Could possibly cause you to run like this?”
Jesus slows his pace.

I say the Great Name over the deaf and the blind,
They are healed. Over a stony mountainside,
And it tears its mantle down to the navel.
Over non-existence, it comes into existence.
But when I speak livingly for hours, for days,
With those who take human warmth
And mock it, when I say the Name to them, nothing
Happens. They remain rock, or turn to sand,
Where no plants can grow. Other diseases are ways
For Mercy to enter, but this non-responding
Breeds violence and coldness toward God.
I am fleeing from that.

According to Rumi’s Jesus, we must act. However, we must also avoid harmfulness. That is the nonviolence of Islam.

The Qur’an prohibits backbiting and gossip – says that we are to “speak nicely to people” (Qur’an 2:83) and to show self-restraint (Qur’an 48:26). They are to provide others with a sense of security and wellbeing, in other words, to create a nonviolent environment for humanity, beginning with the people around them.

When you encounter people, you should say Assalamu Alaikum, peace be upon you, to which the other responds, Waalaikum Salaam. A wide range of ethical teachings within Islam promotes respect for others.
References


