

Islam, Nonviolence, and Women

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The word “nonviolence” appears foreign when I think of Islam. It is the term *salam* or peace that I often associate with it. However, the lack of the use of the term “nonviolence” can be seen as partially reflecting the current state of affairs in several countries throughout the world. Violence is common and the situation is worsening. There is no need to produce statistics here because it is happening right in front of our eyes. For those who are worried about the chaotic and destructive consequences that violence brings, it is fitting to talk about “nonviolence.”

Violence is said to take place when an individual acts in an outrageous manner and applies unlawful and injurious physical force either to himself, to others, or to the surroundings. An act of violence is consequential. It is a manifestation of a troubled, tumultuous spirit and heart. The disturbance in the spirit and heart is so strong that it offsets the sanity of the mind. Under such influences the individual is strongly influenced by his *nafs* (carnal desires) and he focuses his thought just on himself. He does not care about others, about their safety or welfare. Justice to him then is simply getting whatever he desires, even if it means chaos or destruction to either property or life. To be thoughtful, considerate, and patient are remote behaviors for him at that time. Any social, moral and religious values that he upholds when he is stable no longer count. Thus a person exhibiting violence is one who has lost control and is unable to balance an otherwise sound mind, desires, and feelings for others. It is his inability to manage the pressures within him that makes him explode and harm those around him.

A person may feel justified committing violence. However, due to the annihilating consequences of violence, Islam strongly objects to it. It is mentioned in the Qur’an:

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But let there be amongst you
Traffic and trade
By mutual good will:
Nor kill (or destroy)
Yourselves: for verily
Allah hath been to you most merciful!
If any do that
In rancor and injustice—
Soon shall We cast them
Into the Fire: and easy
It is easy for Allah. (4:29-30)

ISLAM AND NONVIOLENCE

Individual or societal nonviolence is dependent upon the individual's or society's ability to live in harmony with their surroundings. Such individuals do not feel threatened. They are confident; hence they feel secure, calm, and sound.

Man* is able to achieve such a state. Islam provides him with the formula that he needs. Individuals do not have to spend time making experiments or observations in order to arrive at the empirical laws of human behavior. Such man-made empirical laws would not be universal and complete; hence there would be doubt about their validity and application. This is so because man the observer cannot divorce himself from the human system that he studies. His presence affects the system and therefore alters the state of the system. Thus the exactness of his observations and the resulting conclusions would be at variance with the actual state exhibited before the study is made. The limits of man-made laws are clearly evident in the breakdown of the Communist based social systems in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

* In this chapter the term man and the use of masculine pronouns, unless specifically stated otherwise, refer to both men and women.

The laws for human life laid down in Islam are believed by Muslims to be revealed by Allah, the Creator of all that exists. Thus these laws come from outside the human system.. Through them man knows his origin, his makeup, his shortcomings, and

weaknesses. He knows his potentials and his destiny. Through the Qur'an and Sunnah he learns a great deal about himself, his needs, and the principles of living. He therefore learns how to lead his life in the most pleasant, efficient, and effective manner.

Life on this earth has definite goals and man is required to work towards them. Thus with the guidance that has been given, man can get started early in his mission without having to discover by experimentation what the goals are. How can one ascertain that he receives guidance? Actually it is the person who asks the question who finally has to make the choice to believe or not. An element of faith is a prerequisite, which can be strengthened through further thinking and reflection upon all kinds of personal, social, and physical phenomena.

From the definition of violence and the standards set by Islam, immediately it can be said that violence is sinful and forbidden. It is possible for a Muslim to restrain acts of violence if his behavior follows the principles of Islam. In this chapter I shall touch on three practical principles of restraint: the principle of submission to one and only one supreme being, the principle of causality, and the principle of resurrection and judgment.

THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBMISSION

By the very definition of Islam, which is complete submission to Allah, a Muslim is expected to believe in the oneness of the Creator, Allah, and to obey all His commands with respect to God, to himself, to society, and to the environment. A Muslim is advised to remember Allah all the time. It is the very act of remembering Allah that will guide him to what is good and deter him from what is bad.

There are various ways of remembering Allah through *salat* (prayers), *zika*, good deeds, and the exercise of righteousness. The main mode of remembering Allah, however, is through the daily *salat*, to be performed five times a day at certain prescribed times and in a specific manner. For one who understands the meanings of the prayers, each act of praying helps him continuously to check himself and to remind himself of his duties and responsibilities. Not only does he remind himself that his prayers, services, life, and

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death are for Allah alone, but he also seeks Allah's guidance to the straight and blessed path. Such a Muslim is convinced that by remembering and obeying Allah, he will be saved from committing grievous sins. Also he will free himself from fear and worry.

THE PRINCIPLE OF CAUSALITY

There is no action without a reaction and there is always a cause for every action. Without this principle it is impossible to determine the relationship between two events and hence to anticipate to what results an action can lead. For example, one can be loved, respected, and well treated by others if he himself gives love, shows respect, and treats others well. It is because of this principle that a Muslim has to develop a good pleasant character and personality, with a high standard of moral values. Such qualities are not simply attained. They are acquired either through parental guidance or religious education, which can be either formal or informal, as will be elaborated upon later.

When a Muslim understands the principle of causality he will be motivated to try his best to do anything that brings good to himself and his surroundings. This is not just for the reward that goodness will bring to him but to gain the Pleasure of Allah. The Qur'an states that this is the best of all rewards that any believer and God-fearing person can attain. Thus a conscientious, righteous Muslim will automatically be prevented from doing wrongful and sinful actions, especially those that are as destructive and annihilating as violent acts.

THE PRINCIPLE OF RESURRECTION AND JUDGMENT

The principle that there is going to be resurrection and judgment is yet another internal guide for a Muslim. This principle informs the Muslim that life on this earth is temporary (**56:60-61**), and that there will be another life after this one. That life is eternal and of a different dimension (**23:15-16**). The character of that life will depend on what a person does in this world. This belief has a profound influence upon the manner in which a Muslim conducts

his affairs. Those with power, wealth, and fame will not be oppressive and unjust opportunists or exploiters. They will be true in their words and deeds. Those who are weak and poor will not act barbarically and violently just to get a handful of rice and water. Without this principle a man feels free to do just as he likes. He will not care for the consequences of his acts. This principle is necessary if man is expected to be responsible and cautious. There need not be pressure nor threats of punishment by the laws of the state.

The inner motivation to act responsibly and sensibly comes about because man is concerned about the decision regarding his destiny to be made on judgment day. At that time he will be questioned about how he has utilized his time, energy, and wealth during his life on earth. Thus his desire to have the balance in his favour makes him constantly check his activities so that they conform to the standards already set by Islam.

Such an argument makes sense. It gives meaning to one's life and existence on this earth. The consequences of living up to such teachings are as promised in the Qur'an and Hadith: peace without fear and worry. Observation of the practices of philosophies other than Islam show that material success and achievements can be great, but they cause people to live in corruption, misery, and at war with one another. They lead the human race to disaster. However, if a man knows that he will be accountable for any act, be it as small as an atom, he will be careful about what he does.

THE MUSLIMAT, HER ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION

A *muslimat* contributes towards the promotion of nonviolence through her positions as individual, wife, mother, and member of society.

Woman as Individual

As an individual a woman learns that the creation of sex is not purely for sexual purposes. Sex draws men and women together for more than just the fulfillment of physical and carnal desires. It is for companionship and procreation. As such, sexual relations must be treated with reverence and are to be performed only by married couples. On reflection, is it not because of society's failure to observe this principle that the current global problem of AIDS is something to be expected? Further it has been statistically shown that a majority of those who suffered from AIDS had been rather free with their sex life. Hence it is necessary for a man or a woman to guard themselves against possible acts and circumstances that arouse their sexual desires when in the company of others than their spouses.

In Islam a woman is advised to cover all but her face and hands when in public. Her beauty and ornaments are meant only for her husband and for members of her immediate family (24:31). She should lower her gaze and guard her modesty when walking in public (24:31). She should avoid being alone, especially at lonely spots. The purpose of these prescriptions for women is to avoid acts and circumstances that are conducive to unlawful sexual assaults, which bring about undesirable consequences. Through them the woman's safety is ensured.

In Islam the way a woman should dress and the way she should appear in public are not just for the purpose of creating an identity of her own. It is for her own modesty, safety, and protection. One can hardly deny that finally it is one's safety that matters most, compared to the attention and admiration that a woman can get by her display of beauty and alluring manners. It also helps a man not to be a victim of his own weaknesses. It can be said that Islamic teaching guides a woman to take preventive measures against sexual attack, thus safeguarding her life, purity, and modesty.

Woman as Wife

A *muslimat* learns from the Qur'an (30:21) that man and woman as husband and wife are meant to be helpmates to one

another, and that they can find tranquility in each other. It is actually Allah who instills in the heart of man the feeling of love and mercy. This therefore gives us cause to come together. It is obvious that some of our needs cannot be fulfilled by ourselves alone, but through our mates. The importance of fulfilling each other's needs is indirectly expressed through a hadith: when a man calls upon his wife to fulfill the sexual urge and she declines and for this reason the husband remains angry with her all night, the angels send curses upon the wife until dawn. At first glance this hadith seems to portray the wife as completely subservient to the husband's sexual impulse. However, an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the Qur'an shows that both men and women have needs and the responsibility of fulfilling each other's needs when the occasion arises. Further bear in mind that men were more often outside their homes. Hence they were the ones who frequently came into contact with the Prophet. Thus it appears that it would always be the men's problems that He would address. To overcome misunderstandings, the interpretations of Qur'anic teachings cannot be made in isolation from the sociocultural milieu of the Arabic society at the time they were being revealed.

The immediate reaction to this hadith by a simple-minded person is that one would not want to be cursed, but on reflection there is wisdom behind the hadith. As we have seen, both men and women have needs and weaknesses. Unfulfilled needs affect a person's mood and if they become too much to bear they may trigger subsequent acts of aggression and violence. The hadith, coupled with some understanding of man's psychological makeup, thus help both men and women to appreciate each other's needs and thereby allow both to play their roles dutifully. This way the spirit and the heart will not be troubled and both the husband and wife can be tranquil. Such mutual support prevents those who want to live in piety from being emotionally and psychologically disturbed. It also prevents men and women from engaging in extramarital relations, which would only create emotional and psychological problems within themselves and others as well.

Woman as Mother

Let us now discuss the promotion of nonviolence through a woman's role as a mother. Basically it is the role of both mother and father to mould a child's character. This can be concluded from the hadith that a child is born pure. It is the parents who turn him into a Jew, Christian, or a Muslim.

A disturbed, insecure child of bad character is so because of an unhappy childhood. Such a child is often not well attended by his parents during his early days. The child has been deprived of love, care, and the necessary stimulation for healthy growth and development, either mentally, physically, or spiritually. Such children will not grow up to have a pleasant personality. What were acts for the sake of drawing attention will in later life become part of the child's character. For example, a child demanding his parent's attention will throw fits, start screaming and shouting, and even throw and break things. When such behavior remains unchecked and uncorrected, the child will ultimately grow up to be a temperamental, incorrigible, and unmanageable individual. It will not be too surprising later to learn about his involvement with drugs, crime, and violence.

Islam has definite principles on how to raise children. These principles do not change with time. One principle is that at the time of ejaculation both husband and wife should pray for a good offspring. In effect, this is praying for the best possible combination of qualities for the offspring. Then during the pregnancy, the woman has been advised to exercise good behavior and to be calm and serene. To achieve that teachers advise us to recite certain surah of the Qur'an such as "Maryam" (19), because such chapters describe the good qualities exhibited by various prophets. The mother then prays for the well-being of the foetus. All these point to the influence the mother has on the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects of the foetus.

Once the child is born, breast feeding is encouraged. It is indicated in the Qur'an that a Muslim mother should spend two years breast feeding her child. It is not just the mother's milk that is important for the baby, but also the contact and interaction between the mother and child during breast-feeding. The warmth and closeness that the mother gives during this period provides

emotional nourishment to the child. A child that is loved and well taken care of will grow up to love and care for others.

Once a strong maternal bond is established it would be hard for a mother to be unconcerned for the child. In fact she tends to be protective of her child. It should therefore be reasonable to expect that such a mother would not have a strong inclination to abuse and ill-treat her child. The child may be naughty when he is bigger. Then the mother needs to discipline him. She will cane him if necessary, but not to the extent of hurting the child. Ill-treating children is forbidden, but reasonable punishment for the purpose of education is not. With parents who are aware of such principles, a child is likely to be safe.

Islam insists on the development of a good and fine character. That is a lifelong process, but a good foundation for such growth and development is essential. It is for this reason that a child has to be trained from early childhood to exhibit good character. The parents are duty bound to be good models for the children. Since it is natural for mothers to play a more dominant role in the development of the child's character, a Muslim mother has to give priority to child care and upbringing. A mother who understands her role well and can actually perceive the great importance that she has in her child's life will struggle to meet the needs of her child. She renders her service by giving her time, energy, and feelings.

One of the primary conditions for proper upbringing is the household atmosphere. It must be Islamic. This allows the inculcation of Islamic values to begin early. To start with, the mother can insist that the family observe daily prayers regularly and that the children develop good personal habits and good relationships with other members of the family. The mother together with the father can exercise control over the kinds of influences to which the children are exposed.

This is not to say that caring for and bringing up children is an easy task. It is not. It requires time, energy and thought. The only way to go about this is to somehow win the children's respect and allegiance. This can be achieved while also maintaining strictness if the children know that they can trust their parents' words and deeds, and that they will benefit mentally, physically, and spiritually if they obey their parents.

Parents who replace good spiritual values with material ones, thinking that there is no place for the spirit in human life, are just paving the way for an unhappy life in old age for both themselves and their children. There is a hadith which states that parents will spend their old age in tears if they do not train their children to be good Muslims. There have been examples of how miserable the lives of aged parents turn out to be when their children just ignore them once they are old and feeble and can no longer be of much help to the children. However, if the child turns out to be a good Muslim adult, then he will not give such treatment to his parents, since the Qur'an has reminded him not to say a word of contempt to parents nor to rebel against them (17:23, 24). Next to God and the Prophet, man is to respect and obey his parents, except when their words or deeds are contradictory to Islam (29:8; 31:14). Knowing this, parents will be motivated to carry out their tasks and responsibilities in a sure manner, feeling confident that things will turn out right.

The basis for child development in Islam is not material. The child needs not only nourishment for the body but also for the intellect as well as for the spirit. The child as a whole does not remain oblivious to what is happening around him. His growth and development respond to the kind of care, attention, and education that he receives. Early experiences provide the foundation for every aspect of growth and development that takes place in his later years. These statements are supported by studies of child development. It is very important for society to emphasize proper care for pregnant mothers and children, and the quality of family life. Society must make sure that parents are well aware of their tasks and responsibilities in nurturing individuals to become worthy members of the community. It is meaningless to say that what happens at home is a private matter and should not be infringed upon. Whatever happens in the home and to the individual must be of concern to society. If a unit of society, the individual, is weak and not well, how can the society be expected to be strong and healthy? After all, the well-being of any given structure or system depends very much on the well-being of the components that make it up and the bonds between them. The structure or system is sturdy only if the components are strong and well bonded. It will just collapse if

the components are fragile and weakly bonded. It is for just this reason that in Islam marriage and family institutions are not personal and private. They cannot be left to the whim and fancy of the couples concerned, but must be established according to laws laid down by Allah.

Woman as Member of Society

Given the right education, training, and suitable working conditions, a woman can contribute to her society. In relation to the promotion of nonviolence there are several areas of human endeavor in which women can engage. These are areas that have direct bearing on matters related to the state of human beings, their growth, and development, including education, social work, and health. Those who are qualified can become professionals, researchers, or policy makers.

Professionals would include educators or teachers at all levels of human learning—early childhood, preschool, school, university, and adult. Professionals do not function just as transmitters of knowledge and culture, but actually complement the role of parents as moulders of personality. Once children grow up and interact more with others, their personality and character development are influenced by their environment—the sociocultural values that are upheld by the society, and in Islamic society an individual is expected to complement individual activities and practices with service to others.

Nothing contributes more towards improving a person's well-being than such an education. Unfortunately the kind of education and training that professionals usually get these days does not include matters pertaining to human relations and interactions. Training concentrates on the technical skills needed to qualify them to become professionals. They are not trained to become humane professionals. Such an orientation makes such persons oblivious to the human factors that influence the success of their undertakings. For them it is dollars and cents that matter, rather than human welfare. The consequences of this kind of management approach may be insignificant if the workers are "dumb." However, most workers today have some basic education and know their rights. They are able to evaluate whether or not they are justly treated. If

their rights are respected then they will support their organizations. Otherwise they will be disenchanted and resentful. Ignoring this human problem may aggravate the relationships between employers and workers and between the state and the people. Workers in the end may resort to harsh methods to solve their problems.

Professionals who are trained to be more humane will never overlook the human and social factors that effect job performance. Women can contribute to this by becoming capable educators, teacher trainees, health personnel, or even social workers.

Research is another area that some women can enter. This would basically consist of research on human welfare as a whole. It could be about the nature, growth, development, and well-being of man. Other areas include education and health. Being more sensitive to women's feelings and needs, women can make productive and creative research contributions towards understanding those needs and problems.

Finally some women should contribute towards policy making. Men cannot be sensitive to everything. Their nature and perceptions make them more sensitive to certain aspects of life, but they do not always take a special interest in the well-being of women, children, and family life. By their very nature they cannot understand matters peculiar to women. So whatever is missed by men has to be included by women. It is therefore necessary to have women within the policy making group. Otherwise policies will be sex-biased and often to the disadvantage of women. No doubt the Qur'an has provided all the basic principles of living. But the ways men and women interpret them, react to them, and apply them differ depending on how much they are affected by these principles. There are a lot of things in law—especially on questions of marriage, divorce, and alimony—that would seem more fair to women had women been given a chance to express their opinions and feelings. It would therefore be more gentlemanly for men to recognize and accept their limitations in understanding the whole spectrum of human issues and problems and thereby allow women to participate in matters that affect them.

CONCLUSION

The success of a *muslimat* in performing her role as a contributor towards nonviolence depends on several factors. Apart from talent, ability, and education she is affected by several other factors: the types of activities that she is engaged in and her socioeconomic status.

Her activities will affect the way she distributes her time and manages her daily affairs. These affect her own self, her career, her family, and society. If she is ambitious but unable to manage her affairs effectively or without the right support, then her health—mental, physical or emotional—will be affected. This in turn will affect her performance of her tasks and responsibilities. Often enough men like to attribute a woman's inefficiency and shortcomings to the fact that she is a woman. This is not fair. Given fair and proper working conditions, anyone—man or woman—can do his or her job perfectly well.

Socioeconomic position also influences her level of performance. If she is of higher socioeconomic status, then it would be easy for her to obtain needed support. For example, she can get domestic helpers that relieve her of mundane household chores. Thus she can spend more time with her children and husband, attending to their emotional and spiritual needs. A woman's life also will be more bearable if employers understand and appreciate the different types of tasks and responsibilities that she has to carry out. As it is, most employers tend to brush aside family affairs and problems, indicating that these have to be tackled by the employee herself. Such an attitude reflects the lack of concern of employers for family life and the overall well-being of their workers.

However, despite all these factors, it will be the character and personality of the woman, her knowledge, and experience that finally determine whether or not she can make worthy contributions to a nonviolent society. The level of her knowledge and experience will definitely influence her confidence and approach towards tackling the problems that she faces.

In the final analysis how much and how well a woman can contribute towards nonviolence in her capacity as person, wife, mother, or member of society depends on who she is, her education and training, available facilities, and the conditions to which she is

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subjected. Knowledge of Islam provides her with the necessary information. The practice of Islamic teachings will influence her concern towards the issues and problems at hand, subsequently motivating her to want to make contributions. It should be noted, however, that her contributions can become meaningfully effective and productive only if opportunities are given to her. There are increasing numbers of better educated and qualified women capable of filling management and policy-making positions. Room must be made to allow these women to move up, so that any policy or program the government or an organization would like to carry out will always consider the women's viewpoint. If it can be said that by nature men are more aggressive while women are more gentle, then maybe the way we manage our society will be less violent and the environment less destructive if there are also women sitting in the responsible committees.