

ISLAM AND THE MIDDLE WAY: TOWARDS A CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE

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“And thus we have appointed you as a middle nation, that you may be witnesses over other people.”⁵⁰

In the Quran, the concept of a “middle nation” presupposes a “middle way”—an orientation meant to characterize the Muslim community as inheritors of the Prophetic message. This orientation, if correctly applied, would typify how Muslim communities would engage with the human rights discourse in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, whether they are Arabs, Iranians, Europeans, South Asians, Southeast Asians, Africans, or otherwise. That discourse, after all, has its own orientation, or perhaps we might call it a “worldview.”

But what is the middle way? In religious terms, the middle way is best conceived as a theocentric condition in which a relational, but dynamic, balance exists between God, society, the individual, and the universe. This condition finds its fruition in the so-called vertical plane of spirituality and the horizontal plane of the human’s earthly condition. In Islamic terms, humans are conceived as theomorphic beings (of God’s nature)—and thus their sense of responsibility ought to be a function of this divine commitment.

“Whosoever engages a good cause,” says the Quran, “will have the reward thereof, and whosoever engages in an evil cause will bear the consequences thereof.”⁵¹ This theocentric and multidimensional scheme of religious activity provides humans space within themselves to balance social, psychological, and spiritual conditions in order to find equilibrium. “Indeed,” says the Quran, “We have sent our messengers with clear proofs, and revealed with them the Scripture and the Balance that humankind may observe right measure [justice].”⁵² Here the reference to “may observe”

implies a dynamic and active engagement in human attempts to establish “balance” in their lives.

Thus, the middle way is not merely a static ideal but is—in and of itself—both a vitalized and dynamic way of being. It is not a matter of pure intellection as it is one of attitude and orientation. While the concept of the middle way may be epistemically informed with ideas of justice, fairness, clemency, mercy, compassion, love, respect, and tolerance, it remains more vitally and more integrally an ontological condition. Through the cultivation and internalization of the aforementioned qualities and virtues, humans are able to imbibe that productive dynamism of that middle way mentioned in the Quran.

The Integrals of Human Relations

Understanding the *middle way* became crucial to conceptualizing how Muslims, given to an Islamic worldview, might engage with the human rights discourse—and how Muslims might further policies in law or education as a result. The iconic Egyptian scholar, Muhammad Abu Zahra, extrapolated ten vital integral values that are essential to a harmonious social, political, cultural, and religious understanding of human relations based on his readings of the Muslim religious canon and in line with the need to maintain a living and dynamic form of normative Islam. Abu Zahra’s work represents an excellent attempt to make explicit certain guidelines, summarized below, that are endemic throughout the Islamic tradition:

1) Human Dignity

Human dignity is not meant to preserve a particular race, nation, or any particular class of people. The Quranic verse, “And We have bestowed honor upon all the children of Adam”⁵³ is quite emphatic about this.

50 Yusuf A Ali, *The Holy Quran: Translation and Commentary* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre International, 1946); The Quran, 2:143.

51 The Quran, 4:85.

52 The Quran, 57:25.

53 The Quran, 17:70.

This verse—and others like it—are manifestly evident in the various Prophetic traditions (ahadith) as well.

2) All Human Beings Constitute a Single Community.

“O people, We have created you male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may come to know one another (not that you may despise one another). Indeed, the most honored in the sight of Allah is the most righteous amongst you.”⁵⁴

“O people reverence your Lord Who created you from a single essence and created of like nature the mate; and from them two scattered forth countless men and women. Reverence Allah about whom you ask and demand so much; and reverence the wombs that bore you; for Allah ever watches over you.”⁵⁵

There are other verses (ayat) that could be mentioned from the Quran that would make these points clear as well. These two, nevertheless, exemplify the notion that humanity comes from a single essence, and thus unjust discrimination between human beings cannot be viewed as justified. Rather, differences between individuals may be seen as a way for people and peoples to know each other, not so that they might despise one another.

3) The Importance of Human Cooperation

The Quran states, “Assist one another in righteousness and piety; but do not assist another in wrongdoing and rancor.”⁵⁶

The idea of cooperation in Islam is not confined to Muslims. This is evident from two well-known incidents. The first occurred in Mecca before the Prophet Mohamed received his revelations, and the other occurred during the Madinah period.

The former incident is referred to as the *Hilf al-Fudul* (or Alliance of the Virtuous). This alliance of notables in Mecca was established at the house of Abdallah ibn Jud’an to support a foreign merchant whose Meccan client had refused to pay him for merchandise he purchased. The alliance succeeded, and the merchant received his payment. The Prophet Mohamed was

present at this gathering. Many years later—during the days of his Prophethood—he recalled this incident in the company of his companions and said, “I was present at the house of ‘Abdalla ibn Jud’an when this alliance was formed. I was overjoyed with the formation of this alliance (to assist the victim of injustice) and had I been invited to the same during the days of Islam, then I would have responded.”⁵⁷

The latter event is embodied in what is often referred to as the Constitution (or Charter) of Madinah. This charter, or socio-political code, was drawn up during the first year of the Prophet Mohamed’s arrival to Madinah. At the time, the socio-political environment in Madinah was extremely unstable. For many years, wars had raged between the two main Arab tribes of the *Aws* and the *Khazraj*. Even the two “mother” tribes of the Jews—the *Banu Nadhir* and *Banu Quraiza*—had been engaged in seemingly endless internecine conflicts. Due to the urgent need for stability and cooperation within that anarchical society, the Madinah charter was born. For years, the Madinah charter succeeded in maintaining stability and peace amongst the once warring factions.

4) Tolerance and Respect

The Quran states, “Good and evil can never be equal. Repel evil with what is better, than indeed, he between whom and you were enmity would become as if he were an intimate friend.”⁵⁸

Elsewhere the Quran says, “We created not the heavens and the earth, and all that is between them, except for just and truthful ends; and indeed, the Final Hour is surely coming, so overlook any human faults with gracious forgiveness.”⁵⁹

Here, we are reminded in God’s Divine word that forgiveness and forbearance are superior qualities for the human being to uphold. Even where faults are involved, so too is tolerance recommended.

5) Freedom

Abu Zahra addresses three important concepts when it comes to freedom. First, he notes the natural right of any individual to personal and individual freedom.

54 The Quran, 49: 13.

55 The Quran, 4:1.

56 The Quran, 5:2.

57 Muhammad Abu Zahra, (n.d): *al-‘Alaqa al-Dawliyyah fi l-Islam*, Dar al-Fikr al-‘Arabi, 25.

58 The Quran, 41:34.

59 The Quran, 15:85.

From the Islamic point of view, he observed that true freedom is contingent on the individual's ability to emancipate themselves from the shackles of prejudice and unbridled desires.⁶⁰ In the absence of the latter, personal freedom loses much of its meaning. This perspective finds its resonance in many verses of the Quran. In one short verse the Quran states, "Those will prosper who purify themselves"⁶¹ namely from all forms of bigotry, prejudice, malicious envy, hatred, etc.

Second, he discusses the evident freedom of religion and belief. To this end there are numerous directives in the Quran. Amongst them are the following:

- There shall be no compulsion in religion.⁶²
- Had it been the wish of your Lord, then all of humanity would have believed. Do you (Mohammad) then wish to coerce people into becoming believers?⁶³
- To you your religion, and to me mine.⁶⁴
- And if they turn away (from Islam), then know that We have not sent you as a guardian over them. Your duty is but to convey the message.⁶⁵

Third, he explores the universal right of self-determination, which is discussed in relation to the question of freedom of religion and belief in Islam.

Abu Zahra references a telling moment of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab while on a diplomatic mission in Jerusalem. He was close to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher when it was time for one of the five mandatory prayers. He chose to perform the prayer outside the church. On being asked whether it was prohibited to perform the prayer inside the church, his response was, "No. It is not. But I am afraid that ignorant Muslims would come after my time and declare the church a mosque on the grounds that I performed my prayer inside the church."⁶⁶

Because of these and many other similar incidents, the quote, "We have been commanded to leave them free to practice their beliefs" was considered—in classical Muslim scholarship—as a matter of Islamic consensus.⁶⁷

6) Moral Excellence

The concept of moral excellence encompasses the entirety of humanity, regardless of race, color, or creed. According to Abu Zahra,⁶⁸ the importance of maintaining moral excellence and integrity is underscored by the Quranic verse, "And fight those in the way of God (only) those who fight you. But do not transgress (any limits) for God does not love those who transgress."⁶⁹ The Quran emphasizes that during times of war, transgressions are more likely to occur. The question that begs itself, therefore, is that if transgressions are prohibited during times of warfare, then would the prohibition not be greater during times of peace and stability?

For contemporary Muslim scholarship, it is this kind of evidence that highlights the gravity and depravity of modern-day radical groupings, such as, inter alia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, the infamous so-called "Islamic State" (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria, and al-Shabab, the Somali extremist group. In a positive sense, it is also clear that respect of fundamental rights for all is intrinsic to the Islamic worldview, which lays down an excellent basis for future engagement with the human rights discourse.

7) Justice

The word justice is the third most mentioned word in the Quran. According to Naqvi,⁷⁰ it occurs more than a thousand times; the most mentioned word in the Quran is Allah followed by the word knowledge.

The Quran is emphatic about this concept, to the point where it states, "Do not allow the hatred of others

60 Muhammad Abu Zahra, (n.d): *al-'Alaqa al-Dawliyyah fi l-Islam*, Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 27-28.

61 The Quran, 87:14.

62 The Quran, 2:256.

63 The Quran, 10:99.

64 The Quran, 109:6.

65 The Quran, 42:48.

66 Abu Zahra, (n.d): *al-'Alaqa al-Dawliyyah fi l-Islam*, Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 30.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid, 33.

69 The Quran, 2:190.

70 Syed Nawab Haider Naqvi, *Ethics and Economics: An Islamic Synthesis* (UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1981), 86.

against you to cause you to swerve from justice. Be just, for that is closer to piety.”⁷¹

According to Abu Zahra,⁷² one of the Prophets’ principal roles was to disseminate justice amongst their respective people. This view is supported by the Quran where it states, “We have sent (all) our apostles with clear signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance so that people may stand firm in justice.”⁷³

To further imprint the imperative nature of justice, the Prophet Mohammed in a rare moment of invoking retribution upon another said: “O God, he who takes charge of an affair of the affairs of my community (ummah) and treats them severely, be severe towards him. But he who takes charge of an affair of the affairs of my community and acts graciously towards them, be gracious towards him” (Sahih Muslim).

8) Mutual and Equitable Treatment of One Another

According to the following hadith, “Engage and treat others in a manner in which you yourself wish to be engaged and treated”⁷⁴ exemplifies the importance of mutual and equitable treatment and attitude towards others.

However, bigotry, prejudice, exclusivity, and hostility—phobias in a variety of shapes and hues—appear to have emerged as the hallmarks of large tracts of humanity, evident in those who harbor a visceral hatred of Islam and some Muslims who mistake the grist for the wheat, from the Islamic point of view—the exoteric contingencies for the cardinal verities. It is one thing to maintain a detached and confident distance from objective criticism; it is quite another to collapse an entire worldview—founded upon a universal edifice of purposive spirituality—into an obscurantist pit of regressive rigidity.

The Quranic response to such internecine and inter-faith hatred and hostility is quite emphatic:

Had it not been for God’s repelling some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, wherein the name of God

is oft mentioned, would assuredly have been destroyed. God will certainly aid those who aid His cause. Indeed, Allah is full of Strength, Exalted in Might.⁷⁵

9) Fulfilment of Promises and Transactions

The breaking and revoking of contracts, promises, treaties, and transactions already made is severely frowned upon by Islam. Once again, these do not apply only to Muslims. This notion asks for a Muslim’s promises and commitments to any person, regardless of race, color, creed, or nationality, to be upheld.

The Quran states:

And fulfil the covenant of God when you have made a covenant, and do not break your oaths after you have confirmed them. Indeed, you have made God your surety, and God has knowledge of all things.⁷⁶

The Prophet Muhammad also said, “Have I not informed you about who the best of you are? The best of you are those who fulfil their promises and contracts.”⁷⁷

10) Love, Mercy and the Prevention of Corruption and Immorality

The Sahaba (companions of the Prophet Mohammed) once said to the Prophet, “O Messenger of God, you speak so much about mercy, but we are merciful towards our spouses and our children.” To this, the Prophet replied, “(Understand) that this is not the only form of mercy I speak about. The mercy I intend is one that embraces all creation.”⁷⁸

At the macro level, the Quran strongly advocates caution, particularly with respect to those whom Muslims might regard as their enemies.

The Quran states:

It may be that God will bring about love and friendship between you and those whom you regard as your enemies. For God has power over all things; and God is Forgiving, most Merciful.

71 The Quran, 5:9.

72 Muhammad Abu Zahra, (n.d): *al-'Alaqa al-Dawliyyah fi l-Islam*, Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 34-35.

73 The Quran, 57:25.

74 Abu Zahra, (n.d): *al-'Alaqa al-Dawliyyah fi l-Islam*, Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 36.

75 The Quran, 22:40.

76 The Quran, 16:91.

77 Abu Zahra, (n.d): *al-'Alaqa al-Dawliyyah fi l-Islam*, Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 41.

78 Sayyid Muhammad Al-Maliki, *al-Insan al-Kamil*, (Jeddah, 1990).

God does not forbid you from respecting those who do not declare war against you because of your religion; nor those who drive you out of your homes, to deal kindly and justly with them.

God only forbids you with regard to those who fight you because of your faith and who expel you from your homes, from turning to them for friendship and protection. Indeed, it is those who turn to them (under these circumstances) who commit a grievous wrong.⁷⁹

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, there is a vast scope to re-excavate a wholly universalist paradigm within a normative and rooted Islamic discourse. Despite the abuses visited upon Muslim communities via colonialism and different types of imperialism, there remains a need within the Muslim world to emerge from a blighting parochialism that has imprisoned them since the early days of colonialism—and partially as a result of it. Muslim rulers themselves are hardly innocent in that regard, while we simultaneously must recognize that various Muslim communities are abused from within and most certainly from without. The correct understanding of the Muslim identity, historically and normatively,

is predominantly ethical and spiritual in nature, and not national and ethnic.

But these kinds of normative ethical imperatives become entrenched through one avenue—*tarbiya*,⁸⁰ a type of educational enterprise that must become embedded within Muslim education modes as they are already implicit within those modes. Given the challenges of the twenty-first century, *tarbiya* must become explicit, from a young age onward within Arab societies, but also amongst other—within all Muslim educational structures, so that the “Islamic Worldview” (as per the works of the distinguished Malaysian scholar, S. M. Naquib al-Attas) is deeply and widely embedded. Only once *tarbiya* is explicitly stated and implemented, Muslims will be able to engage effectively and constructively with the human rights discourse, from a perspective that is rooted within their own ethical universe. If that is done, then a constructive and thorough critique of the human rights discourse can be carried out, while simultaneously upholding values that are common. Thus, as societies and communities, we might ensure that injustice and abuse, whether carried out by non-Muslims or by Muslims themselves, are diminished, and preferably eradicated. And as the sages and scholars of the Muslims have always insisted: God, alone, knows best.

⁷⁹ The Quran, 50:8-9.

⁸⁰ *Tarbiya* is Arabic for linguistic derivative of the word Rabb (Lord). Colloquially, it means “to raise,” and it denotes a comprehensive process of personal progress, whereby an individual grows spiritually, intellectually, and socially to achieve a godly life.