

## Peace and Religion

Prof. Dr. Nasr Abu Zayd  
Islamic Studies  
Leiden University

After September 11<sup>th</sup> the discussion about Islam and violence became the most favorite topic in the media. Because I do not want to repeat what I have been saying during the last 7 years since I came to Europe I will try here to address the topic "religion and peace". By focusing on the issue of "peace" instead of dealing mainly and directly with the issue of "violence" I try my best to avoid getting into a 'polemic' or 'apologetic' mode of discourse. It goes without saying that the concept "peace" implies in its structure the other side of the coin "war" or "violence". Dealing with religion as not merely a divine production but rather as sphere of communication between God and man, between revelation and history and between the sacred and the profane, would allow us to fully understand why every religion could be a source of peace as well as a source of violence. My contribution to the topic will start dealing with the basic question concerning the meaning of religion and its aim. The second part will be devoted to the relationship between religion and history or rather between the dogma and its historical expressions before moving to the third part about Islam.

### 1-Theoretical Perspective:

My first question is; "what is religion all about"? The simple answer is, 'it is about God, man, and the universe'. If we only limit ourselves to God-man relation, because the concept 'man' presumes that man exists in the universe, it would be appropriate to define 'religion' as sphere of existence that embraces both God and man. It could also be said that in the sphere of 'religion' God is humanized and man is divinized. The 'Covenant' presents this sphere in Judaism, while it is embodied in the person of Jesus in Christianity. In Islam this sphere of existence is presented in the Qur'an, the eternal word of God according to the orthodox theology. The significance of such sphere of existence is to create a peaceful co-existence, or harmony, between man and the world around him. By performing rituality, contemplation, spiritual devotion etc., man is capable of communicating the world exploring the ties and bonds of belonging to the world in general and to the human race in specific. This is not possible without having one active principle penetrating the whole universe. This one active principle has different names in different religious traditions; if we use English for a matter of convenience, the name is God in the three well-known religions.

Then the second question is, "do scholars have to approve that religion, by definition, is a way of creating a peaceful individual state of mind, and, consequently, establishing a peaceful society? The basic doctrine of the "Creator", the Lord of the universe, the Mighty and Merciful, the Omniscience, and the Omnipotent is to explain to man where he stands in this unknown universe. The essential message is to tell man that he is not lonely, his existence is not in vain; that there is a 'meaning' in his life on earth. This meaning could only be attained and reach its full manifestation through communal and social life.

On the top of the agenda of every religion is the establishment of just society. Social justice is based on the fact that all humans are equal in God's eye; they are all dignified by the very fact that each of them represents in a unique way the 'image' of God. Shall I say that 'peace' is then an essential component of any religious decree? Whether it refers to a state of mind or denotes an essential condition of social life it is strongly connected to a certain mode of belief.

### 2-Religions and History:

The third question is, 'is it religion that always determines and shapes social life, or is it also shaped by and interpreted in a certain socio-historical context? In order to approach answering such a question a clear distinction has to be made between the original socio-historical context of a given religion and its development(s) through its socio-historical journey up till present. Judaism, for example, was to set free the people of Israel and to unify the tribes under one religious and political leadership. It was so necessary to advocate the notion of 'the chosen people' alongside so many symbols of exclusive identity, such as circumcision.

Christianity, on the other hand, was to reform Judaism from its materialistic orientation by emphasizing spirituality. 'I did not come to change the law' Jesus says, 'but to bring the people of Israel back to the right path'. The claim that the temple was turned to a market place gave justification to the new message. As for Islam, according to the Qur'an, it was not a new religion; it is the same religion of Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, and Moses. See, for example Qur'an, 57:26 - 29.

Through the long journey of every religion in history, layers of interpretation and re-interpretation, or rather interpretation and counter-interpretation are accumulated around the original texts to the extent that the original socio-historical context is veiled. But fortunately this creates multiplicity of trends of thought within every religion, multiplicity that constitute plurality emphasizing different aspects of it. Our target as scholars of religion and believers also is to emphasize by all possible means this empirical fact; religion is what the believers make out of its original sources. Scriptures do not speak by themselves; they speak out through the voice of the believers. I might even go further to claim that even God speaks through man; His divine discourse is, therefore, man made after all. The religious meaning is either apt to be stagnated or allowed to be progressed and transformed in time and place. It all depends on the socio-political and historical conditions of any given community.

In our modern era it became essential to present an understanding and explanation of religion, which explicate the universal dimension and critically explain the limited significance of its historical dimension. The problem with 'fundamentalism' as a mode of exclusive way of thinking that could automatically lead to violence and terrorism, is that it explicate only the historical dimension of a certain religion and present it as the eternal religious truth. As I mentioned earlier religion is expressed in a scripture, which means human languages, the carrier of its historical and cultural background. Nevertheless, these languages contain the divine revelation of God, which means that these languages signify more than they convey. The literal interpretation adopted essentially by the fundamentalist groups in every religion is absolutely humanizing the divine message by claiming the historical as eternal. For the suggested hermeneutics of religious texts it should not take the other extreme, absolutely divining every passage; it should rather apply analytical methodology to differentiate between the 'universal' and the 'historical' trying to preserve the essential equilibrium in the sphere of religion.

### 3-Some Observations about Islam:

Some people in the Netherlands, some politicians as well as some of the elite, emphatically deny the existence of any other mode of Islam than the literalist, legalist, and the most radical Islam. Well, denying existence does not prove non-existence. As for myself, I do not deny the existence of that radical Islam; it does exist everywhere. Its existence, however, does not imply the non-existence of other modes of Islamic understanding called 'moderate' and/or 'liberal'. This mode does exist also everywhere; it did exist as well as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century –second century of the Islamic calendar. I will limit my discussion in this article to the issue of the Qur'an which is hotly debated in the media.

At the beginning, the theological debate focused on the nature of the Qur'an –the speech of God- and the proper approach to understand it. The discussion centred upon the question whether the Qur'ān was created at a precise moment in history, or was eternal and part of the divine essence. Rational theologians, called *the Mu'tazila*, challenged the notion of the Qur'ān as the "eternal" word of God. They argued that the Qur'an is a speech action which implies the existence of addressee and the need for a code of communication to be comprehended by the addressee. The language of the Qur'an, Arabic, is the human language adopted by God to reveal His message to the Arabs. It is to be understood by reflection and rational knowledge through the application of textual linguistic methodology.

In the Classical era (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century), a great variety of schools of interpretation existed: philological, theological, philosophical as well as mystical and juridical.

New interpretation never stopped in the history of Islam since then, even if some were condemned by the authorities. Until now, it is an ongoing, albeit difficult, process.

The dominance of the most radical dogma about the Qur'an is connected to the decay of Islamic civilization because of the Mongol invasion of Baghdad (1258) and the crusade. The political power fell in the hands of military groups which despised intellectual research. The orthodox theology became the adopted political ideology of most Muslim states because it emphasizes "obedience" as a religious obligatory duty. The elitist clergy, allied with the political power, closed "the gate of rational reflection" (*ijithṣa*) in the face of the public and kept it as a privilege for the religious elite.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Western countries colonized the Muslim world, a new wave of exegesis emerged to meet the challenge of modernity by two basic ways, either to reopen the meaning or to adhere to tradition. In my published research conducted for the WRR, I made a monograph of the process of Islamic Reformation from the 18<sup>th</sup> century until now; it available at the website, so I don't have to repeat here what I explained there.

I would like now to address certain issues connected to the meaning of the Qur'an. What I am going to say is not entirely my own personal reflection, but it is a mode of understanding which is shared by the majority of Muslim modernist scholar –males as well as females- all over the world. They may employ different approaches, formulate different analytical methodology or use different vocabularies, but the mode of understanding and the domain of 'meaning' is the same.

First of all, all the liberal and modernist Muslim intellectual believe that one of the major and very important objectives of Islam is the establishment of human rational conduct and understanding instead of blindly following tradition and copying the past, an attitude which is labelled in the Qur'an as "*jṣhiliyya*", literally 'paganism' and some times translated as 'ignorance'.

Secondly, applying historical critical approach in analysing the Qur'an would show its richness and complexity both as a text and a discourse, and would, subsequently, show how it has been reduced to just a 'book of law' or a 'book of science' by the *ulama*'s who pretend to follow it literally. If everything mentioned in the Qur'an is to be literally followed as a divine law, Muslims should re-institute 'slavery' as socioeconomic system. It is mentioned in the Qur'an, isn't it?

Recontextualization of religions and reconstructing their meaning accordingly is an essential procedure to bring them together in order to activate the power of faith in the right direction, the benefit and welfare, not only of all human, but also of all beings on earth.

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