

Violence and Extremism in Islamic Teachings

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Abstract

This article first deals with the phenomenon of violence within the human history and refers to the sacred texts of the religions. It then studies the religious recommendations to avoid violence and to practice peace. Further, the article also addresses the reasons behind violence from different aspects in the modern world, and highlights the fact that every religious sect considers its beliefs as true: this has led to violence, whereas the dignity of human beings should be taken into account. The article provides that the promotion of friendship and kindness plays a great role in the elimination of violence. Finally, it concludes that peace and reconciliation should be the main criteria among nations in their interactions.

Keywords: Violence, Extremism, Sacred texts, Peace, Friendship.

I. Introduction

The phenomenon of violence is as old as human history. Sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions trace back the history of the first instance of violence to the time of creation of Adam, his life on Earth and the conflict between two of his sons. Regardless of reality or symbolic nature of this event, its report in the sacred texts indicates that violence and aggression are born with human beings.

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Another outstanding feature of this story is that human beings have two inborn or inherent tendencies, namely the ability either to practice or to avoid violence. Cain, who greedily and jealously threatens his own brother with death and removes the sapling of his life from the face of existence, is a symbol of Man's ability to practice violence. On the other hand, Abel, who tolerantly takes distance from the application of force and announces his peaceful stance towards his brother, is a manifestation (symbol) of Man's capacity to avoid violence.

Through a cursory look at modern and ancient histories, one can find several practical examples of both tendencies among human beings. On the one hand, we come across human beings who enjoy decent characteristics such as tolerance, self-restraint and kindness while, on the other, there are people who do not spare any violence and just like savage beasts inflict injuries on others.

II. The Modern World and Violence Avoidance Discourse

Throughout the course of history, violence has had different ethnic, religious, political, economic and gender based reasons. History bears eloquent testimony to the fact that mankind, as a human being, has not enjoyed essential dignity and his/her honour and status has been subject to belonging to so and so an ethnicity, religion, political ideology, etc. A definite principle accepted by the people of any ethnicity or religion or political ideology has been that: Those who are not from us or with us, are necessarily against us and hence deserve any aggression, punishment, humiliation, torture, and violent treatment. This is clearly expressed in the literature of *jihād*, *fiqh* and related ideas.

Belief in this definite principle, which is based on the violence of man against man and at times was considered permissible or even necessary, has its roots in a set of epistemological and ontological foundations.

From an epistemological viewpoint, every ethnic group or religious sect or political method considered its beliefs as a truth itself, arguing that truthfulness

(righteousness) could only be found only in its own beliefs and thus cultivating the seeds of vengeance and violence (against others) among its followers. From an existential point of view, every ethnic dynasty or religious or political group would have considered “humanity and dignity” to be the exclusive asset of its followers, considering others devoid of these characteristics.

In today’s modern world, the foundations of these epistemological and existential prejudgments – which were truly the main incentives for practising violence – and the domination of humanistic, rationalistic and pluralistic literature have jointly prepared the grounds for the emergence of the discourse of tolerance and avoidance of violence. It was for the first time in this historical period that the concepts of “dignity and status” were defined as essential elements of every human being.

During the 20th century in the aftermath of the Second World War, when irrational ideologies – as Karl Popper has said¹ – sent millions of human beings to the clutches of the devil of death this concept gained greater importance and became the basis of all the lofty human concepts in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Hence all kinds of discrimination against human beings based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, and political ideology became impermissible.

It is pertinent to mention here that the emergence of the “violence avoidance discourse” in the human rights literature and denouncing of any discrimination against human beings does not indicate the success of modern human beings in containing violence and aggression; rather the new trend of aggression and violence that began with the First and Second World Wars is still going on. However, what is noteworthy is that the violence avoidance discourse for the first time in human existence is founded on a strong theoretical basis and has been turned into a rational, reasonable approach.

¹ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, [trans. E. Fouladvand] Tehran: Kharazmi Publishers.

What is regrettable and unfortunate is that, in the present century, religious incentives have been placed at the top of the reasons behind conflict and violence as if the followers of religion have neglected the main philosophy and objective of the divine religions.

Today, I would like to mention a very important principle for the promotion of friendship, which can play a crucial role in eradication of violence. What should be done for the promotion and deepening of friendship? There are various ways presented in Islamic literature for the promotion and deepening of friendship. Among those ways, one is mentioned in the holy Qur'an, which, in my opinion, is very important and noteworthy. Interestingly, the Qur'an accepts the difficulties of this practice and indicates that it is not easy for everybody or group to traverse this path. In fact only great people and advanced, progressive societies can traverse this path. Let us have look at the following verses of the holy Qur'an:

وَلَا تَسْتَوِي الْحَسَنَةُ وَلَا السَّيِّئَةُ ادْفَعْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا الَّذِي بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَهُ عَدَاوَةٌ كَأَنَّهُ وَلِيٌّ حَمِيمٌ²
وَمَا يُقْنَهَا إِلَّا الَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا وَمَا يُقْنَهَا إِلَّا دُو حَظٌّ عَظِيمٌ³
وَأِمَّا يَنْزَغَنَّكَ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ نَزْعٌ فَاسْتَعِذْ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ⁴

“Good and evil deeds are not equal. Repel [evil deed] with that which is most just, and see, the one whom there is enmity between you will be as if he were a loyal guide.”⁵

“But none will receive it [repelling bad deed with good deed] except those who are patient and, none shall receive it, except he who has a great share [of wisdom and human perfection].”⁶

And “If a provocation from Satan should provoke you, seek refuge in Allah. He is the hearer, the knower.”⁷

² Fussilat, 34.

³ Fussilat, 35.

⁴ Fussilat, 36.

⁵ 41: 34.

⁶ 41: 35.

There are several points to note in the abovementioned verses of the Holy Qur'an:

1– This strategy, namely of repelling the bad deed with a good deed would turn enemies into friends: this is known as *hamim* in Arabic which means warm friends indeed.

It is an interesting expression because, once a warm friendship has developed, it is followed by devotion, kindness and love.

2– God, Who is fully aware of the inner feelings of humans, confirms that taking a decision in this regard is not an easy task. Indeed, this task faces two opposite forces: first, the inner force which is anger and rage; and, second, the external force, which includes the people who benefit from war and animosity. Such people spare no efforts to protract animosity and hostility. Therefore, those who can follow the aforementioned path have two characteristics: first, they can resist their inner anger; and secondly, they do not yield to external temptations. The Holy Qur'an calls these external tempters "Satans" or devils. The Qur'an indicates that the two aforesaid characteristics can be acquired. In fact, psychological resistance can be acquired in the light of contemplation and rationality.

III. Concluding Remarks: What Should Be Done to Resist External Satans (Devils)?

The main enemies to reconciliation among nations and communities, according to the Qur'an, are Satans (devils). In other words, peace and reconciliation are among the Names and Manifestations of God and are in contrast to animosity and hostility which are among satanic efforts. When hostility occurs between two groups of human beings, as soon as a word is spoken about peace, the Satans become active, revive the past hostilities and provoke the two sides. At this stage, if one of the parties decides to repel the bad deeds of the other party

⁷ 41:36.

with good deeds, in the first reaction, the Satans would say: In the case that you do not practice violence and instead respond through good deeds, the other party will become more aggressive and consider you weak.

The followers of religions must consider friendship and kindness as divine gifts and hostility and violence as products of Satan and must try to not follow the path of Satan.