The Central Role of Compassion in Muslim Ethics[1]

By
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Compassion (rahmah) is such a central value within Islam. Yet, it is also one that is most neglected in the Muslim world today. In this article, we explore some doctrinal expositions of this concept and discuss how such values can be reinstituted within the bigger framework of addressing the problem of moral incompetence amidst us.

Introduction

Islam today means many different things to many different people. Seeing the magnitude and scale of violence plaguing many Muslim societies, a friend of mine had no choice but to ask: "Are Muslims capable of showing any compassion at all?" I find his question highly suspect and problematic. Yet, I do not blame him. Given the media's representation of Islam, coupled with some Muslims' taste for cheap publicity to gain world attention to their struggles, real or not, I find that an adequate response needs to be given. Values, which are so central to any religious system in this world, have not been given much prominence in today's discourse on Islam. It is not as if Islam is devoid of any values. Within the rich history of Muslims' intellectual traditions, we find a plethora of ethical concepts that were developed and are still relevant to today's society. One such concept is *compassion.* However, it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the genesis and development of this concept within the Muslim traditions. Instead, I shall explore some expositions, employed largely from the doctrinal resources within Islam, to argue that compassion is indeed a well-pronounced concept within the corpus of Muslim thought.

But first, let me clarify that by deliberating on the Muslims' concept of compassion, I do not mean to say that there is such a thing as an exclusive understanding of compassion amongst Muslims. To me, Muslim ethics is *universal* – Muhammad himself was sent as a mercy to all creatures (Q. 21:107). That is why I refuse to adopt the term 'Islamic Compassion' or 'Islam *and* Compassion', as if '*Islam*' is one entity and ethical values are another - perpetually in need of some form of distinction or conciliation. To me, compassion is compassion and cannot be distinguished by any racial, religious and national identity. For example, if a non-Muslim were to help a destitute Muslim, then I will not hesitate to call it an act of compassion. Similarly, a Muslim helping a destitute non-Muslim is an act of compassion too. Ethical categories are universal dictates and they form shared values amongst the entire human race. A non-Muslim's act of compassion is no lesser than a Muslim's act of compassion, and vice-versa. If we can accept this, then there is no need to call a good deed as "Islamic", "Buddhistic", "Hinduistic", "Christian" and such. Good deeds are just *human* and *humane.*

Nevertheless, we must not jump to the conclusion that what is ethical, good and moral is purely devoid of any religious underpinnings. In fact, it is on the contrary. Great religious traditions have been a source of great ethical reflections. It is on this ethical plane that religion will continue to remain relevant and play an important role in society.

Compassion – A Doctrinal Exposition

Compassion as Divine attribute

In the Qur'an, one cannot but to notice the abundance of Arabic idioms to denote *rahmah*. This term "is used to denote the type of tenderness which stimulates in one the urge to show kindness to others." It covers "the qualities of love, compassion, benevolence and generosity".[2] One of the chapters in the Qur'an is called *Al-Rahman*, meaning Most Compassionate. This term is significantly a divine attribute of God. It is an attribute that finds itself mentioned no further than the second verse of the first chapter of the Qur'an. (Q1:2) Various exegetes have shown that this verse's relation to the proceeding verses indicates that God's mercy and compassion encompasses all aspects of His creations. Indeed, His mercy encompasses all things (Q7:156). Incidentally, Muslims are encouraged to recite "In the Name of God, Most Compassionate, Most Merciful" before they begin an act. The point to note here is that this recitation is not just a mere invocation by the Muslims. This recitation is supposed to be a reminder for them to embody the divine values of mercy and compassion within themselves and in every conduct of theirs. In an important verse in the Qur'an, God says that He had inscribed upon Himself the law of mercy (Q6:12). In another verse, God tells man not to despair of His mercy (Q39:53). Thus, there is no doubt that God, as portrayed in the Qur'an, is essentially a benevolent God. As one scholar puts it:

> "The mercy of the Almighty is one of the grandest themes of the Koran. The very name [*Al-Rahman*] with which each chapter opens, and with which He is invoked, expresses a deep, all-penetrating conviction of that love, that divine mercy which enfolds creation."[3]

Compassion as an extension of other ethical imperatives

The presence of compassion can also be discerned from its various extensions in ethics. The basis of imperatives such as to be kind, just and tolerant, is always compassion. There are various *ahadith* [recorded traditions of Prophet Muhammad] to indicate this. One oft-quoted saying of Muhammad is: "Be merciful to the inhabitants of the earth and He who is in Heaven will be merciful to you." In another similar saying, Muhammad said: "One who is not compassionate, God will not be compassionate to him." The references in Islamic sources to argue for a tolerant, just and merciful conduct in all affairs of Muslim life are too numerous for me to elaborate here.

It is important to note also that compassion is an ethical imperative that extends itself to all humanity, even the natural world. In one narration, one of the Companions of Muhammad, Abu Musa al-Ash'ari told him that "You remind us so frequently concerning compassion (*rahmah*) even though we actually think that we are compassionate toward one another." To this, Muhammad replied: "But I mean compassion to all", meaning here, to humanity at large, including to animals and all of God's creations.[4]

The Qur'an undoubtedly recognized that even animals forms part of our diverse communities and we are to treat them well (Q6:38). In one famous *hadith*, a prostitute feeds a thirsty dog and she was promised Heaven for her one good deed. In another *hadith*, Muhammad saw a camel that had been overburdened, so much so that there was nothing much left between its hump and belly. When he saw this, Muhammad reminded his Companions to ride these animals properly and to feed them well.

These *ahadith* reveals how the Qur'anic basis of mercy and compassion is to be found in the very character of Muhammad himself. The Qur'an itself acknowledges that Muhammad is one possessing an exalted standard of character (Q. 68:4) and a beautiful pattern of conduct (Q. 33:21). This forms the basic argument why Muslims ought to emulate him in their life.

Compassion as the basis for social emancipation

In addition, Muhammad, as many scholars pointed out, was not just a prophet; he was also a social reformer. The reforms that he brought to 7th century Arabia were especially targeted to alleviate the suffering and oppression faced by the poor and the weak.[5] In fact, some scholars had argued that Islam came to primarily address the human condition. If this is true, then compassion is the basis for this genuine concern for man's conditions. In other words, a compassionate person will be moved when he sees the extent of suffering and evil that his fellow men had wrought upon themselves and their surroundings. In the words of Sa'di, a Persian Sufi poet:

> "All Adam's sons are limbs of one another.
> Each of the selfsame substance as his brother,
> So, while one member suffers ache and grief,
> The other members cannot win relief.
> You who are heedless of thy brother's pain,
> It is not right at all to name thee Man."[6]

And this is how Muhammad saw his mission – that of alleviating suffering and oppression. In fact, Muhammad's compassion is one that knows no boundaries. When the Muslims in Medina were in a state of war with the tribe of *Quraysh* in Mecca, he ordered for five hundred *dinars* to purchase wheat to feed the poor in Mecca because Mecca was experiencing drought at that time.[7]

The feeding of the poor, protecting the orphans, being kind to parents and practicing forgiveness and restrain of anger, are all dominant themes within the Qur'an and further exemplified in Muhammad's life. In fact, the Qur'an declares that even prayers are meaningless if one does not have any regards for the feeding of the poor and protecting the orphans (Q107:1-7).

Compassion as an affirmation of man's dignity and self-worth

It is important here to point out the reason why Islam pays so much attention to helping the poor, the needy and the weak – it is because of the high value it attaches to the dignity and worth of a human being. In fact, human life is regarded with so much sanctity that the Qur'an declares that to kill an innocent man is akin to killing an entire

human race (Q. 5:32). Without the value that one attaches to the human life, there can be no justification for any form of compassion. This sanctity accorded to man is further exemplified in man's assigned role and responsibility as God's vicegerent on earth (Q33:72), He is to administer the world in the best manner and not to create corruptions on this earth (*fasad fi'l-ard*), a theme often mentioned in the Qur'an. In a letter sent to Malik al-Astar, governor of Egypt, Caliph Ali bin Abi Talib calls on him to ""Infuse your heart with mercy, love and kindness for your subjects" and to be compassionate and practice magnanimity to those who commit mistake, intentionally or otherwise.

Even in Muslim legal theory, there exist concepts to extend compassion within society, albeit through a legal framework. The most important of these is the five basic values that must be protected within *Syar'iah* (Divine Law). These are the protection of and right to (1) life, (2) religion, (3) intellect, (4) lineage or honour, and (5) property. These five basic values cannot be violated upon any individual. They form the aims and objectives of Divine law (*maqasid al-syari'ah*).[8] They are also proof of the symbiotic relationship between compassion and justice, tolerance and forgiveness. Other principles like *istihsan* (equity or fairness) and *maslahah mursalah* (considerations of public interest) are well-defined for applications within the legal framework of ensuring that law serves its purpose of ensuring justice and welfare of people. Ibn al-Qayyim, for example, argued that "The *Shari'ah* is God's justice among His servants, and His mercy among His creatures."[9] More significantly, he went on to argue that any injustices that might occur from the application of God's law must be ascribed to a faulty interpretation of the text. Any injustices cannot be justified and imposed in the name of *shari'ah*.

Present Concerns

Having explored some doctrinal resources within Muslim traditions, it is clear that Islam is, at its very roots, a religion that promotes the good and welfare for humanity. It started as a movement to (1) reestablish that obscured relationship between man and his ultimate destiny – the Creator, and (2) redefine human relationship amongst fellow human beings and his surroundings, based on certain universal, humanistic principles and values.

Yet, what we observed today is a rising trend within the Muslim world towards bigotry, vengeance, extremism and violence. At its peak, we are observing the rise of suicide bombings and indiscriminate killings of non-combatants, including women and children. Now, before we conclude that Islam breeds hatred, violence and intolerance, as some people will like to believe, we need to understand that just like any religious traditions, religion can be subjected to an ideological interest. Religious extremism is one such manifestation of religious abuse. Today, '*Islam*' has become an easy object to achieve immediate political gains. Many terrorist organizations would easily couch their struggle using religious idioms. Suicide bombers were sanctified and called martyrs. Killing of innocent civilians in mindless bombings are called '*jihad*'. Yet many Muslims are attracted to these wayward ideologies because of the way these extremists had managed to fire up their religious imagination with the sense of 'holy cause or struggle'. Anyone who refuse to identify themselves with these extremist ideologies were immediately labeled as unsympathetic, heartless, Westernized, irreligiously secular, or simply not '*Muslim*' enough because his heart does not goes out to Muslims who are oppressed in various lands like Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan.

But the issue is not whether we are sympathetic or not. Almost all concerned Muslims are well-informed of the hegemonic interests of several Western nations and how their foreign policies reflect a certain double-standard and prejudicial views. Muslims are aware of it. But regardless of the explanations and motivations for terrorism, we cannot suspend our moral judgment. Regardless of what drives a terrorist to do the dastardly act of killing women and children in public restaurants, hotels and buses, we must look within our own conscience and ask ourselves whether these acts are moral or not.[10] If they are immoral – and I believe this is what Islam teaches – then it becomes our duty to speak out against such acts. Our silence will only reflect our moral incompetence and inability to grasp the seriousness of such issues.

Some Impediments towards Inculcating a Person's Moral Sense

Lastly, let me discuss some problems that may hinder the development of an ethical conception of religion and the religious life. Hopefully, by recognizing these impediments, we can see clearer the way to address the problem of moral incompetence that is plaguing our society.

Firstly, we have amidst us, the problem of *religious authoritarianism*. By religious authoritarianism, I mean a situation in which a person is totally dependent upon an authority – other than his own self – in all matters pertaining to his religious life. When this happens, man is alienated from his own being and his productive forces of love and reason. In other words, his religiosity is something that needs to be imposed from *without*, instead of a process of *becoming*.[11] However, we must distinguish between *rational* and *irrational* authority. Rational authority commands a moral obligation to submit based upon the authority's competency. In the words of Erich Fromm, "The person whose authority is respected functions competently in the task with which he is entrusted by those who conferred it upon him." On the other hand, irrational authority is "always power over people".[12] An irrational authority always have the tendency to want to decide for people - what they should or should not do, what is good and bad for others – without any justifications. Irrational authority also seeks to be consulted in all matters, not by virtue of their competency but simply because of their position, i.e. belonging to a certain privileged class or group.

How does this numb the moral conscience of the individual? Foremost, it stunts the development of an individual to think for himself as a morally worth individual who shall stand responsible before his Creator in the Hereafter. Allowing oneself to submit to blind authority will slowly incapacitate an individual's moral competence. When confronted with, say, suicide bombing, one cannot make a moral stand but must seek the views and *fatwas* (religious edicts) of the clerics.

Secondly, we have a problem of the *backward conception of religion* – i.e. seeing religion in terms of gains and rewards.[13] This perception of religion is basically an ego-centric attitude that seeks personal salvation. Its manifestation is the overemphasis on rituals to the neglect of the ethical and moral dimensions of religion. We see, for example, how the *zakat* (religious tithes) has acquired slogans such as cleansing or purifying one's wealth or that each donation will be a brick by brick construction of one's paradise in the hereafter. Not that I am against a little motivation for people to spend their wealth on the poor and needy. But the effect of such rhetoric is that it detached the giver from any emotional attachment towards the condition of his recipients. In the end, it will only numb one's

moral sense. This is very much against the spirit of *zakat*. It was meant as a redistribution of income to correct imbalances in a society where the gap between the rich and the poor gets wider and wider. If one were to study the Qur'an, almost every verses that speaks of establishing prayers, comes together with the feeding of the poor or protecting the orphans. In other words, rituals are meant to entrench the moral personality of an individual and not to obscure it.

In today's society too, we see the problem of *legalism*. This is a more complex form of ritualism. When we see an issue from legalistic perspective only, we will ignore the ethical dimension even within the legal ruling itself. At times, our obsession with legal matters drives one to totally lose sight of one's moral conscience. Examples are aplenty. One of the most disturbing example occurred when no less than fourteen young school girls were burnt to death or asphyxiated when Saudi religious police (known as *mutawwa'un*) prevented these girls to escape from their burning school or be saved by civil defense personnel, simply because the girls were not properly covered in veils and to avoid contact between the male rescuers and the girls trapped in the building.[14] In Singapore, some Muslims demanded for *fatwas* on whether they can drink Newater despite being assured of processes to cleanse the impurities. In another example, a community leader questioned on whether *zakat* money can be used to fund a project to address the rising number of divorce cases amongst Muslims, and if yes, which *asnaf* (categorization for *zakat* recipients) it shall fall under. We can easily conclude that the overt-legalism that dominates one's mind can obscure one's moral sense and duty.

Thirdly, we face the problem of *politicization of religion*. This is the greatest problem and hindrance towards achieving an ethical conception of religion. By politicization of religion, I mean the act of using religion to achieve political goals. For example, we see this growing movement towards acquiring political ends within many Muslim fundamentalist groups. These groups will freely evoke the religious imagination within the general Muslim populace and employ religious idioms to discredit their political nemesis. For example, we hear *clichés* like "Islam is anti-secular", "West is decadent, atheistic, corrupt, and immoral", "Democracy is a Western product" etc. To me, these *clichés* will force vision away from commonalities and instead, divide humanity through a binary view of the world. When we see things in perfect binaries, we will close our eyes to the goodness that others actually have. This, in itself, is a moral disaster. Khaled Abou El Fadl succinctly captures this problem when he pointed out that "political interests have come to dominate the public discourse, and to a large extent, moral discourses have become marginalized in modern Islam."[15]

Conclusion

The lack of ethical considerations when one discourse on Islam today is a problem that is in need of urgent attention. In this essay, I had attempted to evoke some doctrinal resources to project the centrality of compassion in Muslim ethics. It is for us now to negotiate how we can now employ these resources in our efforts to inject values within our religious discourses. The issue of ethics should occupy one's conception of what religion *is* and *ought to be*.

> "[Islam] is not a mere creed; it is a life to be lived in the present – a religion
> of right-doing, right-thinking, and right-speaking, founded on divine love;
> universal charity, and the equality of man in the sight of the Lord…. The

present life is the seed-ground of the future. To work in all humility of spirit for the human good, to strive with all energy to approach the perfection of the All-Perfect, is the essential of Islam."[16]

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End Notes

[1] This article is an extended version of my speech delivered at the *Buddhist Fellowship, Singapore* on 22nd August this year. It has been slightly modified to suit the purpose of this publication.

[2] Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad, *The Opening Chapter of the Qur'an.* Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2001. p. 47

[3] Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam.* New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2000.

[4] Muhammad Hashim Kamali, *The Dignity of Man: An Islamic Perspective.* Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2002. p. 70

[5] This is a central argument in several Muslim scholars' analysis of Muhammad's mission. See Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology: Essays on Liberative Elements in Islam.* New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1990. Also, Hassan Hanafi, *Islam in the Modern World*, 2 Vols. Heliopolis: Dar Kebaa, 2000; Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an.* Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1999.

[6] Sa'di, *Gulistan.* Cited in Nasrollah S. Fatemi *et. al.*, *Sufism: Message of Brotherhood, Harmony, and Hope.* New Jersey: A. S. Barnes, 1976.

[7] Muhammad Hashim Kamali, *The Dignity of Man: An Islamic Perspective.*

[8] This concept was elaborated by several Muslim jurists, including Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Shatibi and Shihab al-Din al-Qarafi. For discussions and some possible applications of this concept, see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Issues in the Legal Theory of Usul and Prospects for Reform.* Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University of Malaysia, 2002; Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004. Muhammad Khalid Masud, *Shatibi's Philosophy of Islamic Law.* Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1995.

[9] Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *I'lam al-Muwaqqi'in.* Cited in Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women.* Oxford: Oneworld, 2001. p. 14

[10] The possibility of moral conscience is not something that is alien in Islam. The Qur'an acknowledges that man is endowed with certain noble qualities (Q. 17:70; 30:30-1) and that his soul contains the inner capability of knowing right and wrong (Q. 91:7-10). In another verse, the Qur'an elaborated that what is good and evil must be evaluated according to experience and reflections (Q. 22:46-7). There are also numerous verses calling man to ponder (*ta'qilun*), reflect (*tafakkara*) and to understand (*faqiha*) their cosmological purpose and significance within the schema of God's creations. These points to the ability of man to evaluate what is good and evil, through his reflective, inner conscience. This ability is sometimes identified as *fitra* (inner disposition). *Fitra* constitutes a well-defined theory in Muslim ethical philosophy. For discussion on the concept of *fitra*, see Yasien Mohamed, *The Islamic Concept of Human Nature.* Leicester: Ta-Ha, 1996.

[11] This is a psychological phenomenon as studied by the psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm. See Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself*; *Having and Being*; *Escape from Freedom*; and *Psychoanalysis and Religion.*

[12] Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself.* London: Routledge, 2000.

[13] This term is employed by Shaharuddin Maaruf, "*Negative Attitudes Towards Religion,*" in *One God, Many Paths: Essays on the Social Relevance of Religion in Malaysia.* Kuala Lumpur: Aliran Publications, 1980.

[14] This incident occurred in mid March 2002 and was widely reported in Saudi newspapers such as *Saudi Gazette* and *Al-Iqtisadiyya*. Following public outcry, Crown Prince Abdullah announced the following day that the government will investigate and punish those who are responsible. However, three days later, the Saudi government ordered all newspapers to desist from publishing anything about the tragedy. See Khaled Abou El Fadl, "*The Ugly Modern and the Modern Ugly: Reclaiming the Beautiful in Islam,*" in Omid Safi (ed.), *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism.* Oxford: Oneworld, 2003.

[15] Khaled Abou el-Fadl, "*Peaceful Jihad*" in Michael Wolfe *et.al.* (eds.), *Taking Back Islam: American Muslims Reclaim Their Faith.* USA: Rodale Inc. and Beliefnet Inc., 2002. p. 36.

[16] Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam.* p. 145.