Understanding Islam
Series Three: Building a Just Society

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Part Ten: Peace, war and *jihad*

If we go right back to the beginning of Understanding Islam and look at the relationship of the three terms: *islam, muslim* and *salam* all being built on the root **slm**, then we will remember that this root brings with it the range of meanings: harmony, justice, due order, safety, security, balance, and peace, which, in the case of human beings possessed of free will, requires that we submit in obedience to the revealed ethical divine will. Then we can see two things: *salam* requires that state of abiding *islam* that is built on justice, etc. and that this is not something that just happens but it is built and maintained by human beings struggling to learn, rationally understand and live out the requirements of the revealed divine will. Thus, *salam* means more than a meagre "peace" describing the absence of war and want, it is something much more far-reaching; the Islamic understanding of peace is that state of the whole of creation in justice, harmony and obedience within itself and with the creator. This state of *salam* is the goal of human life, which leads to Paradise, one of the names for which is the Abode of Peace (*Dar al-salam*). It requires the struggle above all for the principal ethic of justice; without justice, there can be no peace.

The greater *jihad*

Although every human being is born in the state of *islam*, in harmony with God and creation, and although *islam* is the natural way of life for the human being, we do not remain in this state for long; the pull of our lower instincts and the pressures of others can easily draw us away. It is the parents' responsibility to train their children in the ways of Islam and raise them according to that guidance. The Qur'an speaks of the existence of *jinn* [Q. 51:56]. They are neither angels nor humans but a different form of life. This is where we get the folklore of the genie of the lamp. One of these *jinn* was Iblis [Q. 18:50]. He rebelled against God by saying that he knew better than God. He became the *Shaytan* (Satan), the Great Tempter. He has set himself to tempt human beings to rebel against God's commands [Q. 38:71-85]. Society, influenced by the sins of others, can also be a breeding ground for temptation.

Even when we grow to adulthood and can make our own decision to follow the way of Islam, we have a natural inclination to be forgetful and to stray off the path. The Qur'an tells us that this life is a test; an opportunity for human beings to put into practice the guidance of God, to do good and keep away from wrong [Q. 18:7]. This requires a constant effort, a struggle, or in Arabic, a *jihad*. The word *jihad* means to struggle or strive. Any man or woman who wants to live the life of Islam must be ready to undertake *jihad* every day and every minute [Q. 29: 5-7]. To struggle against temptation, to obey God's commands and keep away from those things that God forbids. In this way we can say that *jihad* is a constant, life-long commitment that is

obligatory for every Muslim [Q. 22:78]. Temptation is to be resisted with all one's strength. If one does sin, then there should be immediate repentance and seeking the mercy of God. Full repentance includes avoiding the circumstances that lead to sin.

This struggle is first of all an inner one, against our own lower inclinations, our laziness, impatience and arrogance. Unless this inner struggle is undertaken, we are no use in trying to guide wider society in the right way. It is reported that Muhammad was returning from fighting off an enemy attack when he told his companions that they were returning from the lesser *jihad* to resume the greater *jihad*, the inner struggle. The struggle must not end within ourselves but also has to affect the outer world of our lives too. The kind of work that we do, the people with whom we mix and the way that we carry out our duties within the family, are all part of the *jihad* too. This is where living within a Muslim community can be so important as we ought to find there people who are struggling in the same direction. Even if Muslims live in a society that does not share Islamic values, this does not mean that they can allow themselves to adopt them. They are called to live in the world but not necessarily to accept all of its values; this might be thought of a kind of psychological withdrawal. This could mean changing one's job or one's companions, moving to another area or even moving to another country where it would be easier to live a godly life [Q. 4:97].

Promoting the good and opposing the evil

However Muslims must also look outside themselves at what is happening around them. Their struggle has also to be an outward one, to establish justice on the earth [Q. 5:8; 4:135]. The Muslim is not permitted to sit back and allow evil to pollute the world but is required to "command the good and forbid the evil" upon the earth [Q. 9:71; 3:104; 3:110]. In particular, Muslims are required to stand firm on the principle of justice. Justice overrules all partiality; a Muslim is commanded by the Qur'an to do justice even if it goes against oneself [Q. 4:135]. This *jihad* is a struggle to establish justice and to root out evil and oppression [Q. 4:74-76]. As a servant, a Muslim doesn't own their own life and so the struggle for justice upon the earth might involve even giving up their own life as a martyr, if God so wills. This helps to explain why Muslims are called to resist injustice, even, in the extreme case, at the cost of their own lives.

Every individual has the duty to promote the good of society. It is not enough just to be good and pious within oneself. Muslims are required to seek to *do* good not just to *be* good. Even the smallest thing can be part of a Muslim's duty to do good: smiling at someone, being the first to greet them, removing a stone from the pavement, showing hospitality, going to visit those who are sick, and so on. The Muslim habit of praying in community with others provides many opportunities for showing concern for them after the prayers are over. The other side of doing good is opposing evil: not allowing others to tell lies about someone, standing up for those who are oppressed or trying to prevent an injustice.

Muslim wisdom sees three levels of this "promoting the good and opposing the evil" [Q. 3:104]. First, through taking action; going to the aid of those who are oppressed or suffer injustice. Second, if action is not possible, then speaking out, campaigning or writing about the matter. As the Prophet said, the greatest *jihad* is to speak the word of truth into the face of a tyrant. Third, if these are not possible, then at least not allowing the bad influence to take root in one's own heart: but, as Muhammad said, "this is the weakest form." This should make Muslims active citizens within society, engaged in all manner of public affairs, to seek the good of the whole and guide society away from anything that is or will lead to the bad. This could be on a large scale: setting up a charity to promote good works, campaigning against the evils of racism, ignorance, hatred or oppression, or joining a political movement for the betterment of all. Even if one cannot achieve all that the ideals of Islam would like, this struggle to do good is obligatory and part of promoting *taqwa* in one's own life and being a model for others.

The *jihad* of legitimate force

What to do when men are intent on attacking innocent people and killing them? What to do when tyranny and oppression are walking the streets? What to do when campaigns, arguments, negotiation and appeals to international justice have proved useless and people continue to suffer? When all else has failed and injustice cannot be checked in any other way, then the Islamic position is not "peace at any cost." It may be necessary to take up arms and use legitimate force to oppose the evil.

Fighting, and therefore being open to the possibility of killing other people, is the most serious thing that human beings can ever undertake. It must never be entered into lightly but is to be governed by strict rules; it must be regulated according to the laws of God. An armed *jihad* must be the last resort after all else has been tried and can only be defensive; either of one's own community or of others who need help to defend themselves or to preserve the Islamic way of life against injustice, as this is "defending the rights of God." It must be called by legitimate authority; historically, this was the Caliph but some scholars argue that in the present divided nature of Muslims worldwide, this could be the leader of a nation. There must be a reasonable chance of success and it must be a collective effort.

The rules of engagement

When it comes to fighting, this must be conducted according to the Islamic rules of engagement laid down for all fighting, both *jihad* and war. These rules were drawn up in the earliest years of Islam based on the Qur'an and the teaching of Prophet Muhammad. Minimum force is to be used and this must be directed against opposing combatants. Muslims must distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. Non-combatants include all women, children, the elderly, the sick and those who have thrown down their weapons. Such people must not be killed, attacked or intimidated. Fighting must not bring about a human or ecological disaster. In seventh century terms, that meant not poisoning a water supply or burning food crops, whether in the

field or in the barn, and trees must not be cut down. In 21st century terms, this means weapons of mass destruction: nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. By their nature, such weapons are indiscriminate and kill or injure non-combatants; therefore they are immoral and illegal. If all these conditions are met, then it may be necessary for every able-bodied man to take up arms and answer the call. As the Qur'an says, fighting may be required of you even though you detest it [Q. 2:216]. If the only alternative is that evil is allowed to oppress people, then we can see the weight of the argument. If it is to protect the God-given Islamic way of life, which is the natural state of the human being, then not to resist such evil would be to give in to human degradation.

Wars of territorial expansion

There were times in the history of Islam when the Islamic Empire went to war to gain territory and bring it under the rule of the Caliph. Such wars must be distinguished from *jihads*. There have been occasions in history when aggressive wars to gain land have wrongly been called *jihads*. Sometimes, as in every other community, the rules of engagement have not been followed. Perhaps the closest that we have come to a legitimate *jihad* in modern times was the effort by the Mujahidin in Afghanistan to drive back the Russian invasion (1979-89) or the defence of the Bosnians in the war after the break-up of Yugoslavia. In both cases, Muslim men from around the world responded by going to join in the fight to defend those who could not defend themselves.

Weapons of mass destruction

With the development in the West of long-range artillery, bomber aircraft, and biological, chemical and nuclear weapons, many more non-combatants are killed in modern warfare than ever before. Christian and Muslim scholars have questioned whether such methods can ever meet the terms of the Christian just war theory or the Muslim rules of engagement. Both Muslim and Christian political leaders are torn between the demands of the guidance of God and their perceived need to protect their people from aggression. This can help us to see why some Muslim-majority countries, such as Pakistan, openly hold nuclear weapons, which their politicians feel to be necessary as a deterrent to attack.