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PEACE AND HARMONY IN ISLAM: A 21ST CENTURY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The word "Islam" came from the Arabic root "Salema" which means peace, submission, purity and obedience. Islam is not a new religion. It evolved from the times of Prophet Adam (peace be upon him) and approximately 240,000 other prophets which included Prophet Isa (peace be upon him). The correct number of prophets or God's Messengers is not known but the Quran mentions that a prophet was sent to each nation and that Muhammad was the last Messenger. In Islam, one becomes a Muslim/Muslimah by affirming and declaring his or her belief that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is His last Messenger. Islam allows personal space but it also promotes the public space as a way of life. You are an individual with your own freewill to do what you wish but you are always accounted for all your actions because you are also responsible for your society and environment. There is your relationship with God and there is also your relationship with fellow beings and your environment.

How do Muslims talk about all these in the 21st century in which Islam is often associated with terrorism, extremism, intolerance, poverty and laziness which give birth to Islamophobia and distrust? With all the technologies in the world, can Islam survive? Can it help promote peace and harmony? Can we trust again?

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INTRODUCTION

Gandhi, Dalai Lama, Karen Armstrong are among those who believe that peace, compassion, harmony and understanding are values which exist in the heart of every religion. However, I read a very dangerous book by Harvard-Yale-trained Religious Studies scholar Stephen Prothero entitled *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World-and Why Their Differences Matter* (2010) who argues that while world's religious traditions share many ethical precepts, it is dangerous and disrespectful to pretend that all religions lead to the same essential end. Prothero believes that dismissing religious differences as trivial does not make the world any safer or moral for it is our ignorance that will divide us further. He further argues that, "We need to see religious rivals clash and where they can cooperate" to ensure peace and harmony among us (p. 114).

While there are some good pointers in Prothero's book, his understanding of different religions is so shallow and over-generalised. James Heiser (2012) in his critique of the book pointed out that, "The book is flawed-perhaps fatally so- by the author's apparently weak grasp on the religion practiced by the majority of citizens of his own country."

In one's attempt to understand faith or religion, one must be able to separate the teaching of the religion and the behaviour of its followers. For example, Islam is the Message, Muslims are the those born into or others who embrace the faith. They are not necessarily all good practising Muslims. Here lies the problem-when a religion is hijacked by those who are not at all religious or clueless about the religion, good and sincere practising Muslims bear the brunt. I once met an American who lived in Seoul and after knowing a little bit more about Islam and meeting real Muslims, he asked me, "Why don't you guys engage a media image consultant to explain the religion?" But I think all religions need a media or social media image consultant. It happens not only to Islam but I believe practically what we see in the news, crimes and atrocities could not have been done by people who are religiously enlightened and would be at peace not only with themselves but with those around them. If you have not read Paul Collier's book *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (2007), you will find that he does not name religion as the cause for conflicts or wars but rather the four traps which are the conflict trap, the natural resource trap, the problem of being landlocked with bad neighbours and finally, bad governance in a small country (but I would add bad

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governance in superpower countries as well). Collier who is much known for his extensive research on revolutions and civil wars as far back as the French Revolution to the more recent Arab Springs, points out that, "The kind of people most likely to engage in political violence are the young, the uneducated, and those without dependents". He believes that there are three economic characteristics which make a country prone to civil war - low income, slow growth, and dependence upon primary commodity exports.

Once we get rid of this accusation that religion causes violence and war throughout the history of mankind, then it is easier to see religion and sincere believers as capable of being agents of peace and harmony in this world. Philip and Axelrod's three-volume *Encyclopedia of Wars*, documents that out of 1,763 wars waged over the course of human history, only 123 were being religious in nature. This is 6.98% of all wars.

Islam's attitude towards war

The word "jihad" is often misconstrued as Muslims' holy war against non-Muslims and there has never been so much abuse of a word than the word "jihad". In an article by catchyworld.com on jihad, it is pointed out that the word comes from the Arabic word "JUHD" which means "to strive" or "to struggle". The concept of the "holy war" is nowhere to be found in the Quran or the hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). The concept of "holy war" was used by the Christian crusaders. If we were to translate the concept into Arabic, it should be Harbun Mulkaddasa which does not appear anywhere in the Quran or the hadith (Catchyworld). "Jihad" means giving our best to achieve something for the sake of Allah. NYC in his article on "Islam's View on War and Terrorism: A Survey of the Quran and Prophetic Traditions" points out that "jihad has long been associated with chivalry, courage, and a military honor that represents a legacy of moral and ethical excellence" (2011). While the Quran offers much emphasis on peace, diplomacy and clemency, it does not prohibit war totally given man's propensity for material exploitation and self-aggrandizement. However, war in Islam is only permissible as self-defense and it is forbidden to be the aggressor. The Quran is clear on the value of even one life in Chapter 5 Verse 32: "Whosoever killeth a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as though he had killed all of mankind, and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind."

"Take not life, which God hath made sacred, except by way of justice and law: this He has commanded you that you may understand." (Qur'an 6:151)

"Nor take life-which God has made sacred-except for just cause. And if anyone is slain wrongfully, we have given his heir authority (to demand justice or to forgive): but let [the heir] not exceed bounds in the matter of taking life; for he is helped (by the Law)." (Qur'an 17:33)

"Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities. Lo! God loveth not aggressors." (Qur'an 2:190)

"There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is henceforth distinct from error. And he who rejecteth false

deities and believeth in God hath grasped a firm handhold which will never break." (Qur'an 2:56).

"We ordained therein for [the Children of Israel]: 'Life for life, eye for eye, nose or nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth, and wounds equal for equal.' But if any one remits the retaliation by way of charity, it is an act of atonement for himself." (Qur'an 5:45)

"If [non-Muslims] withdraw from you and do not war against you and offer you peace, God alloweth you no way to [to war] against them." (Quran 4:90)

"O you who have believed, do not consume one another's wealth unjustly but only [in lawful] business by mutual consent. And do not kill yourselves [or one another]. Indeed, God is to you ever Merciful." (Qur'an 4:29)

If war were inevitable, there are war ethics to be observed and there are various hadith from *Sahih Bukhari*, *Sahih Muslim*, *Sunnan Abu Dawud*, *Sunnan Al-Tirmidhi*, the *Musnad* of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, and the celebrated *Al-Muwatta* of Malik ibn Anas which outlined what a just war should be like. Before engaging in battle, the Prophet Muhammad instructed his soldiers:

"Do not kill any child, any woman, or any elder or sick person." (Sunan Abu Dawud)

"Do not practice treachery or mutilation. Do not uproot or burn palms or cut down fruitful trees. Do not slaughter a sheep or a cow or a camel, except for food." (Al-Muwatta)

"If one fights his brother, [he must] avoid striking the face, for God created him in the image of Adam." (Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim)

"Do not kill the monks in monasteries, and do not kill those sitting in places of worship." (Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal)

"Do not destroy the villages and towns, do not spoil the cultivated fields and gardens, and do not slaughter the cattle." (Sahih Bukhari; Sunan Abu Dawud)

"Do not wish for an encounter with the enemy; pray to God to grant you security; but when you [are forced to] encounter them, exercise patience." (Sahih Muslim)

"No one may punish with fire except the Lord of Fire." (Sunan Abu Dawud).

"Accustom yourselves to do good if people do good, and to not do wrong even if they commit evil." (Al-Tirmidhi)

Bernard Lewis wrote in his book *Islam: The Religion and the People* (2008) that at no time did the Muslim jurist approve of terrorism and that "The emergence of the now widespread terrorism practice of suicide bombing is a development of the 20th century. It has no antecedents in Islamic history, and no justification in terms of Islamic theology, law, or tradition. It is a pity that those who practice this form of terrorism are not better acquainted with their own religion, and with the culture that grew up under the auspices of that religion." (qtd in NYC). As pointed out by Karen Armstrong (2001) in an article entitled "The True, Peaceful Face of Islam", several passages that dealt with the conduct of armed struggle were revealed in the context of an all-out war and warfare was a desperate business on the Arabian Peninsula.

Armstrong reasserted the well-known fact of war in Islam-that it is done so in self-defense:

Muslims may not begin hostilities (2:190). Warfare is always evil, but sometimes you have to fight in order to avoid the kind of persecution that Mecca inflicted on the Muslims (2:191; 2:217) or to preserve decent values (4:75; 22:40). The Koran quotes the Torah, the Jewish scriptures, which permits people to retaliate eye for eye, tooth for tooth, but like the Gospels, the Koran suggests that it is meritorious to forgo revenge in a spirit of charity (5:45). Hostilities must be brought to an end as quickly as possible and must cease the minute the enemy sues for peace (2:192-3) (qtd in Armstrong)

Think about this: if Islam spread by swords and that its mission was to conquer and convert everyone under its rule, why were there minorities and well-protected even during the times of the Prophet? The Quran is clear again on this: There must be no coercion in matters of faith (2:256) and Muslims are to respect Jews and Christians-People of the Book who worship the same God (29:46). If you see any Muslim who deviates from these teachings, then you have the right to doubt his or her understanding of the Quran. To know if a Muslim has gone astray, you will have to know the Quran and the Hadith to help bring him/her back to the right path. Take full control of your own understanding of Islam before thinking that all of its followers are threats to global security.

Overcoming a distorted image of Islam and Muslims as a world threat in the 21st century

Cyber warfare is often associated with politically motivated disruption caused on government's IT system and network infrastructure and a large of focus is also on espionage. However, recent elections in several countries around the world including those won by Obama and Trump have shown how powerful the use of big data analytics is and how this could possibly extend the definition of cyber warfare to include campaigns which could shape public opinions and change the world. In an article by Imran Awan in the *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* entitled "Islamophobia on Social Media: A Qualitative Analysis of the Facebook's Walls of Hate" (2016), he found that out of 100 different Facebook pages, posts and comments, 494 instances of hate speech were directed against Muslim communities and he created five characteristics of anti-Muslim hate espoused on Facebook:

1. The opportunistic-those who use hate speech against Muslims to promote violence and post offline threats after a particular incident such as ISIS attacks etc
2. The deceptive-someone who creates fear through the use of posts which are related to false events in order to intensify the Islamophobic hate comments online
3. Fantasists-those who fantasise over Muslim deaths and consequences with respect to Muslim events
4. Producers-Those who use and promote racist images and videos to create a climate of fear, anti-Muslim hate and hostility. They are linked to the next offender: the distributor
5. Distributors-Those who use social media and facebook to distribute messages online hate through posts, likes, images, videos, and comments on Facebook (p.8)

The Britain First Page. English Defence League and The English Brotherhood are names mentioned by Awan as those who are responsible for hate speeches/comments in pages he studied for his research. However, groups who smear the good name of Islam and well-meaning Muslims also include ISIS, an organisation which claims itself as Islamic and Muslim. For those who know real teachings of Islam, they would see through this group and reject it out rightly. How could anyone claim to be a Muslim if what he or she does is contrary to the teachings of the religion? When war was inevitable, Muslims went to war to live and bring order in their society not to die to go to heaven. Dying what more as a martyr is not for anyone to decide. Whoever whose using the religion to frame it as evil and violent religion must first know the religion. Otherwise, only the ignorant will continue to live in fear at the sight of a Muslim. The Quran reminds us that whoever saves a life, it shall reckon as though he/she has saved the life of all mankind (5:32). The threat of vilifying and demonising Islam and Muslims takes place on both sides: those who are not Muslims but also those who (claim) they are Muslims. In an article by the Anti-Defamation League, "Hashtag Terror: How ISIS Manipulates Social Media", it is pointed out how ISIS uses the social media to spread its messages and recruit followers as well as empower its supporters to take part in the process. ISIS's online propaganda is said to target westerners. According to the ADL article, Twitter account is said to be the secondary means of communication and terrorist propaganda is made available in extreme forums in which one could download magazines, videos and brochures. Whether you may wonder who exactly is behind ISIS or not, their messages to the world intensifies fear and violence and continue to position Islam and Muslims in a bad shade, a life-threatening situation in fact.

How do we overcome all these negativities? Although the internet use among Muslim populations around the world varies from country to country, it is still low (except for those in Asia like Indonesia and Malaysia) in comparison to usage in developed countries. Facebook is still the most popular form of communication among social media users, followed by Whatsapp. Due to low access of the internet in developing very often also, Muslim countries, Islam and Muslims continue to be misrepresented and their voices silenced, sometimes also due to language barrier in addition to technological and digital divide and those who have both (language and technology means) do not necessarily always well-informed of their own religion and Islamic tradition and heritage. This paper wishes to propose that the way forward for all peace-loving people, regardless of creed, that an interfaith dialogues, seminars such as this continue and that we learn to trust each other and learn to live together based on core values of peace as outlined by our religions and as captured by UNESCO (1998): love, compassion, caring, sharing, empathy, spirituality, gratitude, interdependence. Tolerance while observing human rights to truth, equality, justice, respect for human dignity, integrity, accountability, honesty, acceptance, freedom, responsibility, cooperation and appreciation of diversity (p.6).

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