**The Concept of Human Rights in Islam (Part II)**

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A summary of how the Qur’an deals with the concept of human rights as covered in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) follows: Article 1, 2, UDHR: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Islam teaches the ethic of reciprocity, which entails treating others as we would wish them to treat us:

“None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.” (See Hadith no. 13 in Imam Al-Nawawi’s Forty Hadiths). From this extends the principle that each individual is of equal worth, simply because they are human. As such, every human being should be considered of equal value despite superficial differences.

As mentioned above, the following verse lays the blueprint for brotherhood between people: “O mankind, We created you from the same male and female, and rendered you distinct peoples and tribes, that you may recognize one another. The best among you in the sight of GOD is the most righteous. GOD is Omniscient, Cognizant..” (Qur’an, 49:13)

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, “An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, or a non-Arab over an Arab, or a black person over a white, or a white over a black person except by being more righteous.” (Prophet’s Farewell Sermon).

It has been reported that during the Caliphate of Umar ibn-ul Khattab, the son of Amr ibn al-As, the governor of Egypt entered into a horse race with a native Egyptian Christian. The Egyptian won the race, which angered Amr’s son who slapped the Egyptian. The Egyptian brought the issue before Umar, who ordered the father and son to Medina and reprimanded him by saying, “Why do you enslave people whose mothers have given birth to them as free human beings.”

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Professor Arnold Toynbee, the British historian who completed a twelve-volume analysis of the rise and fall of civilizations, remarked: “The extinction of race consciousness as between Muslims is one of the extraordinary moral achievements of Islam, and in the contemporary world there is as it happens a crying need for the propagation of this Islamic virtue.”

The Qur’an also contains numerous verses which beautifully capture what it means to behave in a spirit of brotherhood as it encourages the uttering of kind words, honesty, restraining anger, avoiding greed, practising forgiveness, giving due measure, condemning fraud and bribery, behaving humbly, admonishing mockery and sarcasm, honouring one’s promises and commitments, and encouraging peace, reconciliation, charity, tolerance, generosity and respect.

Article 3, UDHR: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

The ethic of reciprocity clearly covers this right too (as well as most of the articles in the UDHR). The Qur’an also states: “Because of this did we ordain unto the children of Israel that if anyone slays a human being unless it be [in punishment] for murder or for spreading corruption on earth-it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; whereas, if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind.” (Qur’an, 5:32).

From this, we not only take cognizance of the fact that every individual has the right to life, but that every life is sacred and that the killing of one life is as atrocious as the destruction of the entire human race. In Islam, the first and foremost basic right is the right to life.

Article 4, UDHR: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

All the spiritual teachings found in the Qur’an address the topic of slavery in one way or another. For example, the Qur’an encourages the ethic of reciprocity, the spirit of brotherhood, protects the sanctity and dignity of human life, and calls for ending the oppression of others. All these dictates stand in stark contrast to the institution of slavery. Here is one very clear passage: “… the way of blame is only against those who oppress [other] people and behave outrageously on earth, offending against all right: for them, there is grievous suffering in store!” (Qur’an, 42:41).

God even specifically encourages the freeing of slaves in the following passage:

“And it is not conceivable that a believer should slay another believer, unless it be by mistake. And upon him who has slain a believer by mistake there is the duty of freeing a believing soul from bondage and paying an indemnity to the victim’s relations.” (Qur’an 4:92)

And while the reader will note that the verse stipulates the victim of the crime being “another believer”, it should be emphasized here that “believers” referred to in the Qur’an are all peoples that believe in God, including the followers of the 25 prophets mentioned in the Qur’an as well as the followers of all the thousands of Prophets not mentioned in the Qur’an. This is evident in the following Qur’anic verse:

“Behold, We have inspired thee [O Prophet] just as we inspired Noah and all the prophets after him- as We inspired Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants, including Jesus and Job and Jonah, and Aaron, and Solomon; and as We vouchsafed unto David a book of divine wisdom; and as [We inspired other] apostles whom We have mentioned to thee before this, as well as apostles whom We have not mentioned to thee; and as God spoke His word unto Moses: [We sent all these] apostles as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, so that men might have no excuse before God after the coming of these apostles, and God is indeed almighty, wise.” (Qur’an 4:163) And:

“Verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds – shall have their reward with their Sustainer and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.” (Qur’an, 2:62). And:

“Say: “We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed by their Sustainer unto Moses and Jesus and all the other prophets: we make no distinction between any of them. And unto Him do we surrender ourselves.” (Qur’an, 3:84).

Article 5, and 6, UDHR: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Again, the golden rule is “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” The following Qur’anic verse alludes directly to the subject of torture and other inhuman treatment of others: “…the way of blame is only against those who oppress [other] people and behave outrageously on earth, offending against all right: for them there is grievous suffering in store!” (Qur’an, 42:41).

Moreover, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) laid down the ground rules for engagement in warfare during the battle of Badr, which took place on March 17, 624 CE: Non-combatants cannot be killed, prisoners of war cannot be tortured, temples and churches cannot be demolished, green trees cannot be uprooted, standing crops cannot be destroyed and the wounded people cannot be attacked. Some of these ground rules are evident from the following Prophetic directives:

“Do not kill any old person, any child or any woman.” (Sunan Abi Dawood).

“Do not kill the monks in monasteries.”

“Do not kill the people who are sitting in places of worship.” (Musnad ibn Hanbal).

It is a historical fact that during the battle of Badr, no prisoner of war was tortured, because of these specific orders given by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), nor were there any custodial killings or kidnappings. Not surprisingly, when Umar came with the suggestion that all prisoners of war should be killed because they had fought against Muslims, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) chose to release them instead.

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