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## The Convergence of Thought in Islam and Dr. King's Teachings

by Ahmed Afzaal

As recent political events suggest, invaluable resources for creating a more just and peaceful world can be found in the Islamic religious tradition. In this essay, I will present one possible model of how to identify some of these resources, by highlighting the Islamic relevance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



For a Muslim, encountering the legacy of Dr. King can elicit an intense experience of *déjà vu*. His goals and approach, his confidence that he's doing God's work, his trust in the success of his mission, his refusal to hate his opponents — all of these can sound eerily familiar. In some powerful yet subtle way, there seems to be a not insignificant *overlap* between certain aspects of the Islamic tradition and the ideas and activism of Dr. King. Muslims who are in tune with the highest values of their own heritage can hear many an echo of the Islamic religious tradition as they listen to Dr. King's voice.

I fully expect the above judgment to sound meaningless, if not absurd, to many readers. After all, what possible connection could there be between the theology and ethics of a black Baptist minister from the American South and the teachings of the Islamic religious heritage? Indeed, at first glance there appears to be absolutely no common ground between them.

Appearances, however, can be deceiving. Tertullian, a second/third century Christian theologian, once asked rhetorically: *What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?* His implied answer was: "nothing." Athens, a symbol for rationality, could not possibly have anything in common with Jerusalem, a symbol for the authority of revealed scriptures. Following Tertullian, we may want to ask: *What has Mecca to do with Montgomery?* I would suggest: "a great lot more than we think." Just as rationality and the revealed scriptures *do* have a lot in common, the same is true for the Islamic religious heritage on the one hand and the thoughts and activism of Dr. King on the other.

By making this claim, I do not wish to say that "Islam" is somehow synonymous with "nonviolence," nor to gloss over the actual instances of organized violence that have taken place throughout Muslim history. What I intend to emphasize is that the concepts and values associated with nonviolence are not as alien to the Islamic heritage as many of us have been socialized to believe.

In an essay titled "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" (1958), King discussed six characteristics that, taken together, defined his understanding of nonviolence. For each of these defining features of nonviolence, I would like to argue that similar or parallel teachings, if not exactly identical ones, can be found rather easily in the Islamic tradition.

Let us, then, consider Dr. King's six points.

*First, nonviolence is a method of resistance that requires spiritual and moral strength.* King refers to Gandhi's position that violent resistance is preferable to cowardice; a person who lacks either the courage or the strength to fight back cannot be nonviolent in the true sense of the word, for one cannot denounce what is beyond one's reach. According to King, "nonviolent resistance is not a method for cowards." Only those with great inner strength are able to practice this form of resistance to oppression.

The teachings of the Islamic scripture, the Qur'an, are quite explicit regarding the duty of resisting oppression (*fitna*) and establishing justice (*'adl* or *qist*). The Qur'an retains the pre-Islamic Bedouin values of bravery and heroism, but rejects personal glory and tribal chauvinism as their legitimate ends; instead, bravery and heroism are desirable only in the course of the struggle to overcome corruption (*fasad*) and eliminate injustice (*zulm*). The Qur'an reinterprets cowardice as a deficiency of faith. Believers need not fear anyone except God, for nothing can harm them without God's permission, and if God chooses to help them then nobody can stop God from doing so. Faith in God is therefore the ultimate source for the believers' courage and their willingness to put their lives in danger; such faith cannot co-exist with cowardice. At the same time, real strength can be found neither in one's wealth and possessions nor in the number of one's allies and supporters; instead, it comes from one's inner capacity to *trust* God.

Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "The strong person is not one who overcomes others by his [physical] strength, but the strong person is one who controls himself when he is angry." This statement redefines *strength* as the ability to manage one's own emotions, including the ability to control oneself from acting impulsively. According to this teaching, the capacity to exercise self-control is a better indicator of one's strength than the ability to overpower or coerce other people.

*Second, the purpose of nonviolence is to create the beloved community.* King writes that nonviolence "does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding." He emphasizes that boycotts and other forms of non-cooperation are nothing more than the means to achieve the higher objectives of "redemption and reconciliation." While the aftermath of violence is "tragic bitterness," the aftermath of nonviolence is "the creation of the beloved community."

The Qur'an allows retributive justice, but simultaneously presents forgiveness as a more virtuous option: "The recompense for an injury is an injury equal to it; but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from God; surely God does not love the unjust" (42:40). This encouragement to forgive and reconcile is in sharp contrast to the pre-Islamic Bedouin obsession with vengeance and settling scores. The Qur'an further teaches that one should do good to those who have done evil, for this may help replace bitterness with friendship and community: "A beautiful deed is not the same as an evil deed; repel [evil] with what is more beautiful; then he, between whom and you was enmity, will become as if he were your intimate friend" (41:34). Elsewhere, the pious are identified as those who "restrain [themselves in] anger and forgive [the offenses of] people" (3:134).

Prophet Muhammad forgave his worst opponents on several occasions, thereby providing for his followers a most "beautiful example" to imitate. He pardoned a non-Muslim woman who had tried to kill him by bringing him poisoned meat. When the city of Mecca surrendered to his authority, Muhammad announced general amnesty for those who had been opposing him for more than twenty years. Reconciliation with former enemies was clearly a higher priority for him than defeating or humiliating them.

*Third, nonviolence does not allow personalizing the conflict.* According to King, "It is evil

that the nonviolent resister seeks to defeat, not the persons victimized by evil.” He goes on to emphasize that the conflict is ultimately between “justice and injustice.” In active nonviolence, therefore, no opponent is to be demonized or treated as less than human.

The principle of human dignity is at the heart of the Qur’anic message. Human beings have been created according to the divine form (or image), which makes them naturally inclined towards truth and goodness. Corruption happens not because there is anything evil or wicked in human nature, but due to such weaknesses as forgetfulness, impatience, short-sightedness, and ignorance. An evil deed is not simply a transgression against God, but it is, first and foremost, an act of injustice against one’s own self. Since we are good-natured by default, the possibility of repentance is ever present even for the worst offenders. No one is inherently or incorrigibly evil. We all carry the divine spark within us.

*Fourth, voluntary suffering can transform and redeem people.* For King, this means “a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation.” He emphasizes that “unearned suffering” has tremendous educational, transformative, and redemptive value, which is why the nonviolent resister is willing to suffer if necessary but is unwilling to inflict suffering on anyone else.

There are striking examples of the redemptive power of unearned suffering in the Islamic tradition. During the first 13 years of his mission, otherwise known as the Meccan period, Prophet Muhammad required his followers to take all persecution, whether verbal or physical, without any retaliation. Throughout this period, the Qur’anic revelation repeatedly enjoined the persecuted Muslims to remain steadfast, to be patient, and to persevere, assuring them that their suffering will be duly rewarded. In one famous incident, a man who had just beaten up his unresisting sister and her equally unresisting husband for having become Muslims, felt an immediate weakening of his own resolve to such a degree that he himself ended up converting to Islam. The man was ‘Umar bin al-Khattab, who later became the second caliph after Muhammad’s death.

*Fifth, nonviolence is motivated by love, and not hate.* In King’s own words, nonviolence “avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of the spirit.” The nonviolent imperative is not only to avoid harming the opponents but also to avoid



*hating* them. “At the center of nonviolence,” according to King, “stands the principle of love.”

This is an exceedingly important point, requiring a slightly longer explanation. King enumerates three forms of love: *eros*, or romantic love; *philia*, or brotherly love; and *agape*, or unconditional love, which he further interprets as a willingness to sacrifice in the interest of mutuality and community. Thus defined, *agape* is best rendered into Islamic

vocabulary as “rahma,” which, in turn, is translated into English as both *mercy* and as *compassion*. The two most frequently used divine names in the Qur’an, Al-Rahman and Al-Rahim — usually translated as *All-Merciful* and *Most Compassionate* — are derived from the same three-letter root (R-H-M) as the Hebrew word “rachum,” meaning “compassionate” or “merciful.” The root meaning of all these Semitic words is “womb,” and hence the kind of mercy or compassion that these words denote has an obvious

feminine and maternal quality. A mother's love is indeed spontaneous and unconditional; it is willing to sacrifice a great deal, perhaps everything, and asks little or nothing in return. A saying of Prophet Muhammad explicitly compares God's love for the creation with a mother's love for her children.

The New Testament frequently uses the Greek word *agape* when referring to God's love, or when Jesus says "love your enemies." Since Jesus is not known to have been a Greek speaker, he must have used a Hebrew or Aramaic word which was later rendered as *agape*. The King James Bible of 1611 translates *agape* as "charity." This also suggests that the Christian notion of *agape* as "unconditional love" is very similar to the Jewish and Islamic concept of a mother's compassion for her child, which, in turn, is identical to the Qur'anic notion of *rahma*. Relevant in this context is the fact that the First Epistle of John refers to God as "love" (1 John 4:8) while classical Muslim theologians have identified "mercy" as the most fundamental attribute of God, an attribute that defines the Divine Essence itself. Since the Islamic ideal is to "adopt the character traits of God," or, put differently, to "dye oneself in the color of God" (2:138), it can be seen that the principle of mercy, compassion, maternal love, charity, or *agape* forms the very core of Islamic ethics.

*Sixth, nonviolence is in harmony with the inherent tendencies of reality itself.* According to King, nonviolence "is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice." The nonviolent resisters are sure of their ultimate victory against injustice because they are aware of having "cosmic companionship." After all, "there is a creative force in this universe," also known as God, who is working "to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole." In the end, for King it was evident that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

There is nothing in this passage that shouldn't already be familiar to any educated Muslim. To say that "the universe is on the side of justice" is another way of expressing the Qur'anic teaching that *Reality* is neither evil nor morally indifferent; that human actions do have consequences; that God will reward the righteous for their labor and hold the evil-doers accountable for their misdeeds. To say that the nonviolent resisters have "cosmic companionship" is another way of articulating the Qur'anic notion that God is on the side of the oppressed, the patient, the striving, and the steadfast. Finally, to say that God is bringing "the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole" is another way of conveying the Qur'anic message that creation is ongoing; that the universe is constantly growing and evolving towards an increasingly clear manifestation of divine signs. Overall, King taught that the universe, or reality, has certain inherent dispositions, and that if we align ourselves with these dispositions then we *cannot* possibly fail. The Qur'an expresses the same idea as follows: "if you help God, God will help you" (47:7).

I have summarized above the six principles that defined for Dr. King his understanding of nonviolence. I have also tried to demonstrate that for each of these defining features of nonviolence, similar or parallel teachings exist in the Islamic tradition. Indeed, as the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt indicate, Muslims are as capable of organizing nonviolent resistance as anyone else in the world. This constitutes for me compelling evidence that, despite what we may conclude by looking at the globe, Mecca and Montgomery are really not that far from each other after all.

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