

## “The Sanctity of Life in Islam”

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The Islamic worldview, based on the Qur’an and the Sunnah [i.e. the way of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him)] emphasized the sanctity of life in many verses and traditions. In what follows, I will begin by exploring the story of Adam and his children. Then I will move to specific issues in Islamic jurisprudence including abortion, suicide, and warfare.

The first account of the story of the creation of Adam is presented in the Qur’an in a way that reflects the role of the human being on earth:

Behold, thy Lord said to the angels; “I will create a vicegerent [*khalifah*] on earth.” They said: “Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief and shed blood? Whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?”  
He said: “I know what ye know not” Qur’an, 2:30

The message in this verse is that Adam, Eve, and their children were created to fulfill a rather positive role on earth. It is positive engagement in life that would facilitate the submission of the human being to the will of his/her Lord. The concept of vicegerency [*Khilafah*] in Islam was erroneously reduced to the political realm. In fact, in its original Qur’anic usage, it covers all positive human economic, social and political activity.

In the story of the two sons of Adam one of them threatened to kill his brother before the actual killing took place. The threatened brother responded by saying:

If thou dost stretch thy hand against me, to slay me, it is not for me to stretch my hand against thee to slay thee: for I fear Allah, the Cherisher of the Worlds. Qur’an, 5: 28

This position represents a passive response that reflects deep respect for life. These stories are included in revelation for the moral lesson that they contain. In other words, the Qur’an was sent to show humanity the Right Path, which in this instance dictates that to submit oneself in this fashion is winning the moral battle. It was possible for the slain brother to run away or to defend himself. The latter option would have meant killing his brother; he chose not to. Was this a lesson for all humanity? The answer is absolutely yes. The Qur’an declares that killing one person is tantamount to killing all humanity:

On that account: We ordained for the Children of Israel that if anyone slew a person-unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land- it would be as if he slew the whole people...Qur’an, 5: 32

### **Abortion:**

It is prohibited to terminate a pregnancy unless for medical reasons (e.g. the life of the mother is endangered). All scholars agree that this is the case after ensoulment. They differ however about the time of ensoulment because there are two conflicting traditions. In Islamic literature, abortion is equated with infanticide, a phenomenon that existed in pre-Islamic Arabia.

### **Suicide:**

...Nor kill (or destroy) yourselves: for verily Allah hath been to you Most Merciful! (Qur'an, 4: 29)

Say: "Come, I will rehearse what Allah hath (really) prohibited you from": join not anything with Him: be good to your parents; kill not your children on a plea of want;- We provide sustenance for you and for them;- come not nigh to indecent deeds, whether open or secret; take not life, which Allah hath made sacred, except by way of justice and law: thus doth He command you, that ye may learn wisdom. (Qur'an, 6: 151)

The Islamic worldview recognizes life as a gift from Allah. It is a trust that should be preserved and kept well until Allah decrees that it was time for the return. It is He who giveth and it is He who taketh. No degree of pain or suffering permits suicide, not even for political reasons.

This position covers what is described as assisted suicide. Active euthanasia is also prohibited. Passive euthanasia, such as the removal of life support of a brain dead person, is not.

### **Revenge:**

...And if anyone is slain wrongfully, We have given his heir authority (to demand Qisas or to forgive): but let him not exceed bounds in the matter of taking life; for he is helped (by the law). (Qur'an, 17:33)

It is obvious from this verse in the Qur'an that God is inviting people to forgive in case one's relative is killed, rather than to seek revenge.

### **War Ethics:**

Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, the first Muslim head of state after the death of the Prophet, addressed the army of Usama Ibn Zaid and said: "Do not kill children, women or elderly. Allow monks to live peacefully in their monasteries. Do not cut a tree (as a collective punishment), or kill an animal except for food."

I believe that, within its own historical context, this statement reflects a very sublime standard. Nevertheless, from the moment civilians began falling because of the advancement in weaponry, I believe that war in itself could not be

justified anymore. As to what happens if a people fall under occupation, I strongly believe that non-violent resistance, which was practiced by the Prophet in Mecca, is a viable solution. Mahatma Ghandi proved that it is possible to gain independence through non-violence. I also believe that this method allows room for reconciliation between the two conflicting parties. Violence, on the other hand, makes it extremely difficult to reconcile because many people, on both sides, lose their beloved ones during the conflict.

Having said this, I would like to stress that there is no equality between oppressors and oppressed, occupiers and occupied. Those who initiate and inflict harm are ultimately responsible for the ensued violence. Violence is the result of a context not a text. In fact, there are no “cycles” of violence. Violence is linear with a specific historical beginning.