

## ISLAM, ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY AND PEACE

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Washington Irving, of Andalusian fame, relates an uncommon story having to do with that Qur'anic *ayah* or verse for which Islam is sometimes accused of being a "religion of war":<sup>1</sup> the prophet, being indisposed to attend the annual Mecca gathering of Arab pilgrims and traders during which time a cease-fire was customarily observed between all warring tribes, delegates Abu Bakr to attend and speak on his behalf. But at the last minute Ali turns up, saying the Prophet has sent him to declare the latest revelation, an *ayah* announcing that Moslems should pursue their war against the Kuraish tribe as soon as the annual festivities have finished. Having thus far been on the receiving end of Kuraishi belligerency, this incident is thus read as constituting a turning point in the Prophet's policy. As Irving describes it, until then the Prophet was almost "Christian" in his teachings. But from that point on, Islam becomes a warring force.

Qur'anic exegesists do not disagree over whether the Qur'an exhorts Moslems to *defend* themselves against aggressors. But they do disagree on whether the various relevant Qur'anic verses relating to conflict and war can be read to indicate that the Qur'an exhorts Moslems to *initiate* war against non-Moslems. The Kuraishi verse stands out because this was an explicit exhortation to a belligerent act being declared to Moslems. It thus constitutes a vital building-block in the argument for Islam's supposed support for "violent proselytization". To corroborate this argument Islam's critics and hard-liners sometimes also quote a supposed saying of the Prophet where, in contrasting his religion to that of Moses and Jesus, he is attributed with actually describing his religion as being that of the sword. But not all Moslem experts accept the authenticity of this attribution, and the matter of whether Islam is indeed a religion of the sword -textually speaking- is one that is therefore not settled among Moslem scholars.

Now I hope it is abundantly clear that, text notwithstanding, the bearers of a religion (i.e. a community of believers), can in the name of that religion either be practitioners of violence or pacifists, depending on all sorts of extraneous factors. St. Francis of Assisi stands out as a proponent of dialogue and ne-

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<sup>1</sup> Washinton Irving (1783-1859) worked for a while at the American Legation in Madrid, and is foremost known for having brought Al-Hambra to the attention of the Western traveller. His **Life of Mohammad**, (Ipswich Press, Massachusetts, 1989, introduced by R. Pitai) refers (pp178-9) to the Qur'anic *ayah* (Tawbah:5), which was announced in Mecca by Ali, the Prophet's nephew, while the Prophet himself was in Medinah!. Also see pps 84ff. for the reference to a (weakly authenticated) *hadith* in which the prophet supposedly declares that his is the religion of the sword. For a contemporary discussion of whether Islam is a religion of war, see Sheikh Qardawi's interpretation in IslamOnline.net.

gotiations precisely because of the crusading violence which constituted his historic and political surrounding. His form of christianity, though in line with Christ's teachings, was the exception rather than the rule. The Christian rule at the time, quite unexceptionally, was the sword. Similar examples can be found in other religions, such as Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, or even Hinduism, as well as in different ideologies, including national ideologies. Naturally, even religious zealots will extoll the virtues of peace, but typically the peace we are encouraged to believe in by these religionists exists in the afterlife rather than in this world. As to this world, from Plato onwards, and whether in the domain of religion or in that of philosophy, intellectuals operating within a particular conflict-ridden milieu have more often than not reflected in their political writings the mood of their milieu -for example by articulating how best to conduct war- or they have kept silent. It is not often, in the archives of the past -that is, right up to the twentieth century- that we find philosophers who are conscientious objectors, such as Bertrand Russell, or who stand up publicly against the war waged by their own country, such as Noam Chomsky. The theory of non-violence as a means to address conflict, and the philosophy of peace as an expression of universal love and harmony has come into fashion in the world, if at all, only in recent years. In the past, bards and poets (also in the Arab and Moslem worlds) would more often than not sing the praises of chivalrous warriors rather than of peaceful farmers.

It may be useful in this context to pit Ghandi against Tagore, and in so doing perhaps delve a little deeper into what a philosophy of peace might be about. Apparently, while Ghandi did espouse non-violence as a means of struggle, he was nonetheless informed by a nationalist imperative, and did not believe it was morally wrong to die for one's country. Dying for one's country may be one notch lower on the scale than killing for one's country, but it still involves the preparedness to sacrifice human life for a cause. Tagore, on the other hand, educator, poet, philosopher, seems to have eschewed even that. No cause can justify the ending of human life, he is credited with having said. Indeed, Tagore's holistic outlook on life allowed him to transcend his own particularism, and that of everything else, thus enabling him to see the overall symphonic harmony of the universe of which he was but part. It is understandable how, from the heights of such a perspective, mortal combats over ideological or national causes can seem so small. Nationalisms, religions, ideologies, cultures, languages, times and places come to be seen as but shells in which the same world soul subsists. Almost in the same spirit, in an ode addressed to children, Mark Twain mournfully decries the evolving American-Japanese military confrontation over the turn of the last century, summing up the humanist's despair over carving up the world into boxes: our mothers, and theirs, or our children, and theirs, or our tears and pains, and theirs. Imagine this: that you are moved to the core at the sight of a crying child, or that you feel your heart throbbing with joy at the sight of that child

breaking into laughter. It is precisely this ability, perhaps, in total abstraction from color or race or religion or nationality, as applied to one's fellow-human beings, which may come closest to describing a philosophical perspective on peace. But such a perspective assumes a fundamental transcendence, an ability to liberate oneself from one's shell.

Which now brings us to Islamic philosophy! Or, more precisely, to that philosophy which was practised in the Islamic milieu.

I must confess that it was a real hardship for me to prepare for this event. After all, how many Kants can there be, who can boast to have written a tract on peace? What seemed worse at the beginning, I also couldn't think of a philosopher in the Islamic milieu who wrote on war. At first I thought such writing might be of help, for then I could at least deduce, by negation, what that writer might have thought on peace. But no such luck. Eventually, however, and as I looked over the pages and leafed through the books of the various relevant philosophers I am acquainted with, it began to dawn on me that the dead-ends I was coming up against were simply the result of my very quest: formulating the question to myself as I had, namely, as I might ask it today of an Israeli or an Arab philosopher, totally obfuscates the issue, or commits me to making a categorical mistake. It would make sense to ask such a question of a Martin Buber, confronted as he was with the predicament of future Jewish/Arab relations; or of a Hanna Arendt, confronted with the predicament of untangling the horrors of the Holocaust. But how can one import an Avicenna or an al-Farabi or an Ibn Tufayl, to cite some examples, into this kind of interrogation? Theirs, after all, seems to consist of totally abstracted intellectual, political or imaginative quests.

But it was precisely as I came to this conclusion that I saw the light: and herein lies the connection between the thesis I shall presently expound, and what I now hope will be seen as having been a build-up to this thesis in the references to the humanism of a Mark Twain, or the universalism of a Tagore. Because, as I shall now argue, it was precisely in the fact that my philosophers approached life, and the universe around them, by abstracting themselves from their particularist shells that I can claim they truly represented humanist voices of peace.

Take Avicenna's allegorical *Epistle of the Birds*: this is neither about Moslems and non-Moslems; nor is it yet about Arabs and Persians; it is not about Sunnis and Shi'ites, or whatever. Rather, it is about the human predicament as Avicenna views this, or about the soul's quest to shed its mortal shell, and to seek a state of intellectual immortality and happiness. It is Avicenna's ability, as he portrays the human being's primary predicament, to abstract from nation and religion, from time and place, from language and culture, that makes him, transcendently, a humanist voice of peace.

Alfarabi, a foremost political writer in that philosophical tradition, in his various writings on an ideal polity, pointedly abstracts his republic from the particular religious context in which he lives. Plato himself was not faced with having to present his contemporary readers with a totally different model community to that which existed in Athens. But Alfarabi, in keeping with his political message, had to: his was not necessarily an Islamic community, such as that in which he lived; nor was it a community which was ruled by a prophet in the first place. His, rather, was a non-specific community, held together not by blood-ties, tribal bonding and such-like, as by secular mechanisms and structures enabling human beings to realize their innate potentials as human beings, rather than as Turks or as Moslems.

My point is, these philosophers saw themselves primarily as human beings, and rather than allow themselves to be embroiled on one side or another of the endless factional schisms which pervaded their real lives, they first of all rose above those schisms and affiliations, and they secondly saw their real predicament as having to do, not with the mortal combats between the various factions and identities around them, but with the human quest for knowledge and happiness. In that, they represented, to my mind, a true philosophy of peace.

Ibn Tufayl's political allegory *Hayy Bin Yaqzan* perhaps expresses this message in extreme form: Salaman and Absal grow up together in a religious community, and both feel held back by the beliefs of their community. To deal with his intellectual melancholy Absal travels alone to a nearby island where he hopes to engage in solitary meditation on the human predicament. Once there he chances upon a Rousseau-type, "state of nature"-self-accomplished man of wisdom, from whose knowledge he comes to see his own community's religious beliefs in their proper perspective. Feeling that in this way his intellectual melancholy has been treated he decides to invite his newly-discovered friend back to his city, there perhaps to be able to guide his fellow-citizens along the truth path. The "state-of-nature" wise man agrees. On their return Absal discovers that his childhood friend, Salaman, had in the meantime become the political ruler. Salaman's chosen path for treating their common adolescent melancholy was clearly the exact opposite of Absal's. Instead of solitary meditation, he had chosen full civic immersion. They had each in their own way -one through the practical arts, and the other through theoretical knowledge- overcome their joint human melancholy. But now they were miles apart. The uncoverable distance between them is expressed in the story by showing how the community, though joyous and hospitable at first on receiving Absal back with his friend, gradually becomes hostile to them and intolerant of what they have to say. The allegory's message is clear: neither can society tolerate the bearers of truth and wisdom, nor can those pursue their quest in its midst. In the story, Absal's friend asks that he

be allowed to return to his solitary island, and Absal decides that he, too, no longer has a place among men, and accordingly decides that he, too, shall leave.

Our model philosopher here is thus neither one who seeks to describe society, nor is he therefore one to change it. Rather, his center of immediate attention is the individual soul. In one of his allegorical epistles Avicenna, who lived before Ibn Tufayl, tells his readers this: "Should you ever come across a story about Salaman and Absal then know this, that Salaman is but a symbol for you, and that Absal is a symbol for your state of wisdom". In his *Epistle of the Birds* Avicenna likens the soul to a bird tethered by the human body, seeking to free itself in search of knowledge. Avicenna's bird, Absal, is clearly not one which is tied down by those contingent circumstances, such as religion or culture or language, or even place or time, associated with a specific community, and therefore subject to the vicissitudes of men. Rather, Absal is the human-being's quest for ultimate wisdom. In another of his allegorical epistles, having the same title as that of Ibn Tufayl, Avicenna's state-of-nature philosopher relates to his seekers that though he originally comes from Jerusalem (Bayt el-Maqdes), his "profession" is that of "touring the world". Avicenna's model philosopher is thus a "man-of-the-world", an "Enlightenment" seeker of the truth, more an affiliate of other free souls than of a specific culture, religion or geographic location.

I will close off this brief presentation by returning to Alfarabi, who, unlike Avicenna and Ibn Tufayl after him, was more politically-inclined. Also unlike Avicenna, Alfarabi gave more weight to the intellect rather than to the soul, believing that it is through the intellect that a human-being achieves epistemic and thus existential perfection. But even for him, I should like to say, the quest is secular. If for Avicenna the philosopher's real companions are like-minded souls rather than next-door neighbors or compatriots, for Alfarabi they are like-minded intellects, subsisting in free time and space. In short, all these philosophers, in seeking to shed off their contingent circumstances, and in attempting to see themselves as voices of humanity rather than as voices of the shells in which they happened to find themselves living, represented true voices of peace, or were themselves philosophers of peace, very much, I want to say, as Tagore was, or as those other voices from across the world, whether poets or philosophers, who, upon looking at their inner selves and then at the world around them, could not discern a difference with a claim to the justification of taking a human life.

In conclusion I would like to say that, to my mind, a philosophy of peace - maybe even philosophy as such- would truly consist in this, namely, a beckoning to that heart (intellect or soul) which throbs inside the human shell, encouraging it to free itself of its particular circumstance, not so much in order to make it deny or disclaim that circumstance, be it gender or religion or nation

or culture, as to help it recognize it as such, and as therefore never to allow it to subdue or submerge the underlying humanity that unites us all: a red alert-light should immediately come on inside our heads should our sense of being Jewish, Christian or Moslem -Israeli, Palestinian, European- ever seem to take precedence over our sense of being human.

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