ALAM, Manal

What determines if a religion is peaceful or not? What do we, as a society, view as largely peaceful? Don't all religions have the commonality of providing some sort of moral framework[i] for individuals to do 'good', thus, as we would assume, for individuals to be 'peaceful'? I believe that the reasoning behind this broad question being posed is a matter in itself which one must delve into in order to fully excogitate a response. On the face of it, this question is simple and rather elementary, yet when you consider the different factors which contribute to this being asked in the first place, the question becomes fairly abstruse- perhaps, even more abstruse than it needs be. In this essay, I will discuss these factors and the thinking behind this question being posed so as to fully develop a response.

'Peaceful' can be defined as follows- "Not involving a war, violence or argument", "Trying to create peace or to live in peace; not liking violence or argument"[ii]. In terms of interaction between beings according to Islamic teachings, the main concepts can be derived from the following verse:

"O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted"- Hujarat 49:13[iii]

 The entirety of mankind has been directly addressed in this verse to outline that, though humans may be of different 'tribes'/nations- and thus have different races, ethnicities, cultures, languages etc- they all share the same origin. We have the same substance; we bleed the same colour- it was simply human nature for us to diverge into different 'groups' of people. But these natural distinctions which humans share should never determine one's social ranking, nor should they be a reason for inequality and/or prejudice. Rather, the only basis for one being 'superior' to another is when one is just and virtuous. Anyone is worthy of this, regardless of any other factors or physical attributes. This highlights the Islamic belief of opposing discrimination under any circumstances, and rewarding one when they are inherently 'good', which could be said to advocate for peace and harmony between all.

However, according to the definition, there is always the inference that there is a type of pacifism which comes into play whilst determining if something is 'peaceful' or not, due to the reoccurring reference to wars. To say that Islam is a fully pacifistic religion would simply be untrue. While the morals of Islam do not actively advocate for or encourage 'war' or 'violence', as many people seem to misconstrue, the principles rather *condone* war for Muslims to engage in, under certain justifications. Even then, there are rules to follow in order to keep everything fair and just. Refer to these verses-

"And what is [the matter] with you that you fight not in the cause of Allah and [for] the oppressed among men, women, and children who say, "Our Lord, take us out of this city of oppressive people and appoint for us from Yourself a protector and appoint for us from Yourself a helper?" - 4:75[iv]

"Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged. And indeed, Allah is competent to give them victory."- 22:39[v]

"[They are] those who have been evicted from their homes without right - only because they say, 'Our Lord is Allah' And were it not that Allah checks the people, some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of Allah is much mentioned. And Allah will surely support those who support Him. Indeed, Allah is Powerful and Exalted in Might." - 22:40[vi]

"Because of that, We decreed upon the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land - it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one - it is as if he had saved mankind entirely. And our messengers had certainly come to them with clear proofs. Then indeed many of them, [even] after that, throughout the land, were transgressors." -Ma'idah 5:32[vii]

According to these principles set out in the Qur'an, Islam will allow for war in certain situations-

1) In an act of self-defense (22:39)- to *defend* Islam, not 'spread' it

3) To protect those who have been turned out or rejected forcefully as they are Muslims (22:40)

4) To protect the oppressed innocents[viii] (4:75) & (5:32)

As presented, Islam doesn't clearly favour 'pacifism' as such, but rather aligns with the Western doctrine of the 'Just War Theory'[ix], which can be largely accepted as a peaceful solution to any threat, and for violence and conflict to be used as a last resort. These principles seem to share the same sentiments as the Geneva Conventions on War and The UN Declaration of Human Rights, where various parallels can be drawn. The 'ideal' Islamic conduct relating to war can be shown through the rules which Abu Bakr (the 1st Caliph) gave his army[x] -

1)Do not commit treachery or deviate from the right path

2)You must not mutilate dead bodies

3)Do not kill a woman, a child, or an aged man

4)Do not cut down fruitful trees; do not destroy inhabited areas

5)Do not embezzle (e.g. no misappropriation of booty or spoils of war) nor be guilty of cowardliness

Again, these heavily correlate with the Geneva Conventions on War[xi] which, in basic terms, list that-

1) Injured persons and those who are not taking part in hostilities must be respected humanely and protected both morally and physically.

2) You cannot kill/injure an enemy who surrenders or is injured and thus out of action

3) The wounded and sick must be cared for

4) Captured persons must have their human rights intact and are not to be subject to violence, torture, or degrading punishment, instead, protected. They can communicate with family and receive relief. They must not be held accountable for acts they did not commit

5) Weapons which cause unnecessary loss and suffering must not be employed and instead avoided

6) Civilians are not to be attacked- the focus should be against military objectives only

It is also important to note that war is only permissible in Islam under exceptional circumstances, and generally, peace is the norm in society. Nonetheless, the Qur'an would not have referred to war/violence if it wasn't pre-existing in society at the time- the early Muslims in Mecca were faced with violence and intolerance from Jews, Christians, and various tribes who were collectively spiting and actively working against the Muslims. Common verses which have been misinterpreted by both 'radical Muslims' and those with 'anti-Muslim' sentiments are as follows:

"O you who have believed, do not take the disbelievers as allies instead of the believers. Do you wish to give Allah against yourselves a clear case?"- 4:144[xii]

"O you who have believed, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies. They are [in fact] allies of one another. And whoever is an ally to them among you - then indeed, he is [one] of them. Indeed, Allah guides not the wrongdoing people." -5:51[xiii]

These verses were 'revealed' at a time in Madinah where there was a hostile socio-religious climate. They explicitly refer to the Jews and Christians who were in direct accompaniment with the early Muslims, and are absolutely non-applicable or related whatsoever to the regular non-Muslims of today. This is solely a singular example out of an array of phrases which are chosen selectively by both extremists, to push their personal political agenda, and those who wish to villainise Muslims, alike. Thus, historical context is extremely crucial to consider when discussing matters, as what is written in the Qur'an is very much open to misinterpretation, as has been displayed perpetually in history.[xiv] It also must be understood that, as society has evolved over time, societal expectations and norms have progressed- multitudinous things which may have been morally acceptable in society at the time of the Qur'an being written very much may not be viewed as morally acceptable nowadays. This is an ideology which regular Muslims understand and agree with, but one which the 'extremist' or 'radical' Muslims deliberately fail to acknowledge and consider. There is a certain irony wherein those who wish to spite Muslim ideology will 'cherry-pick' phrases with misinterpretations to fuel their Islamophobia, as the extremists do the exact same. Both groups blindly hold the belief that the teachings of Islam are riddled with war-like, hateful and aggressive propaganda, as opposed to the rather simplistic core beliefs of Islam.[xv]

So how does one explain the atrocious acts of terror which those who commit and endorse seemingly malign with Islam? I have already established that those who justify their barbaric, war-like and torturous actions by incorrectly referring to the Qur'anic verses are incorrect, and many seem to be potentially misled or brainwashed by those in charge of politically motivated organisations, such as ISIS. Here, self-proclaimed religious leaders take full advantage of people's set beliefs by use of emotional manipulation. Many devout religious individuals believe to have a deep-set connection with their God(s), and are easy 'targets' in the eyes of controlling leaders who exploit people's devotion to some higher being, in order to establish their own cult-like following. Though of course in recent years the majority of terrorist groups or violent individuals seem to have linked their actions with Islam, this is not to say that terrorism is singular or limited to this one religion or ideology.[xvi]There have been organisations or actions taken which have been fueled by various religions- or, simply, by no religion at all. Though I do not wish to delve too deep into the tense political climate between some Muslim countries and 'Western' countries, it must be said that the deliberately misinterpreted teachings of a religion should not be used to justify certain political actions, and that various laws or prohibitions within certain countries may very well be unrelated to the evolved principles of the Qur'an, nor do these countries represent the billions of Muslims which live across the world, and those which have adopted a 'modern', forward-thinking approach to the religion. Many laws or prohibitions within countries even go so far to go *against* core Islamic teachings and principles to be applied in a modern context.[xvii]

In reference back to my original point- why must this question be asked only of Islam? Other religions may well have a minority of those with extremist views, yet many do not feel the need to question whether the religion itself is unpeaceful. This, ostensibly, seems not to be the case regarding Islam, even though the acts committed are due to man, not by the veracious teachings of a religion. The media and religious stigma surrounding Islam (intertwined with xenophobia in various non-Muslim/minority Muslim countries) has occurred as a result of individuals or sects who claim to be Muslim while committing atrocious acts (in the name of their God) which in fact defies and contradicts the very essence and true teachings of the religion, as outlined above- in relation to war, interactions with non-Muslims etc. Hence, though the question at first seems slightly impertinent, it is in fact a necessary conversation to be had, due to the apparent pre-conceived thoughts that many hold regarding Islam. So, to answer the question simply, yes. The word 'Islam' itself is derived from the Arabic word 'salam', which directly translates to the word 'peace'.[xviii] I believe it would be a great shame to view the likes of Osama bin Laden as a true representation of Islam, just as it would be to view Anders Behring Breivik as a true representation of Christianity[xix], or to view Baruch Goldstein as a true representation of Judaism.[xx]

Authors Note

In this essay I chose to focus mainly on: Pacifism, the misconstrued pre-conceptions that individuals hold against Islam, as well as the important of historical context regarding certain verses. Given the broad nature of the question, I maintained focus on these few specific sections, so as to discuss the matter in slightly more detail. While I would have loved to mention more about not only the 'negative' aspects or misconstrued thoughts regarding the religion, but the verses and teachings in Islam which strive and advocate for peace, the areas I focused on allowed for a more in-depth discussion to be held in terms of the question which, presumably, was being asked under the impression that many feel Islam is in fact *not* a religion of peace.

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