

Peace Resources in Islam: @PKO Now! No. 85

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An Islamic Approach to Peace and Nonviolence

A number of scholars have argued that religious actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) could do more to encourage reconciliation and peacebuilding¹. Although an Inter-Religious Council was created in 1997 in BiH on the initiative of the World Council of Religions for Peace, it has been observed that the council has not been particularly effective in bringing about meaningful dialogue between faith groups². Further, Janine Clark argues that in some cases, not only are religious actors not doing enough to contribute to harmonious coexistence, but are even hindering peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts, and she refers to the example of the erection of Catholic crosses in Stolac in 2001 that coincided with return of many Muslims to the town after they were expelled in 1993—acts which were seen by many as a misuse of religious symbols designed to humiliate and dominate the Bosnian Muslims³. Obstacles to reconciliation also include the failure of religious leaders to condemn past war crimes and human rights abuses committed by their co-religionists in BiH⁴ and the fact that religious leaders are often seen to have a political and ethnic alignment⁵. Commentators have called on religious peacebuilders in BiH to play a more active role in promoting reconciliation, to counter the actions of religious bigots, and to be part of the solution rather than the problem⁶.

Narrowing the focus to Bosnian Muslims in particular, during my month-long fieldwork in BiH in 2009, I encountered many individual Muslims working in peacebuilding and reconciliation in organizations such as the Centre for Nonviolent Action (Sarajevo), Small Steps, Face to Face (and the Pontanima Choir), Nansen Dialogue Centre (in Mostar),

Merhamet, and International Bosnia Forum. Not all of these are Muslim organizations—and among them are secular, inter-faith, and Franciscan initiatives—but at least at the individual level, it was clear that the Muslims affiliated to these organizations or initiatives were aspiring and working for peace. Nevertheless, what I found to be lacking or underexplored in BiH during my fieldtrip was a systematic and explicit effort by Bosnian Muslims to connect the teachings, principles and symbols of their faith to peacebuilding at an organizational level.

A similar observation might be made of the nonviolent protests of Palestinian Muslims. In his book *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* (2003)⁷, Abu-Nimer refers to the Palestinian intifada as an example of a Muslim nonviolent campaign. It is argued that the first intifada from 1987 to 1993 was largely nonviolent, characterized mainly by various methods of civil disobedience (such as general strikes, boycotts, and barricades); albeit accompanied by stone-throwing incidents⁸. Yet as Karen Abi-Ezzi points out, although undoubtedly the intifada leaders were operating within an Arab culture, it is unclear from Abu-Nimer's work that the leadership consciously drew on Islamic teachings to limit the use of violence⁹. Likewise with regard to the Arab Spring, there is little scholarship investigating to what extent religious commitments informed the nonviolent methods employed during the struggles for democracy.

One may question whether it is in fact necessary to find examples of peacebuilding and reconciliation work undertaken by explicitly Muslim organizations, or to locate the premise and rationale of such work in Islamic principles. Is it not enough that Muslim individuals are working for peace in their respective regions of the world?—it might be asked. Yet, given the central importance of Islamic scriptures to groups such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas in advocating a violent response¹⁰, the value of developing a counter Islamic theory on peace and nonviolence cannot be underestimated. Below, I look at two examples—one historical, and the other contemporary—where peacebuilding and nonviolence have been consciously grounded in the Islamic faith by Muslim actors.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the Khudai Khidmatgars

In 1929, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a Pashtun from a landed family in the Peshawar region of colonial India¹¹ created and led a “nonviolent army” called the Khudai Khidmatgars (Servants of God). This was, in short, a social reform movement aimed at uplifting Pashtun communities. Among other things, their activities included the establishment of schools, improvement of community safety and public health, and nonviolence resistance to the colonial administration¹². Ghaffar Khan maintained cooperative relations with the Indian National Congress and met Mahatma Gandhi for the first time in 1928¹³. The influence of Gandhi and the Congress leaders upon Ghaffar Khan’s thinking cannot be denied, though according to his son, Ghaffar Khan’s espousal of nonviolence predated his meeting with Gandhi¹⁴. One of the chief motivations for the nonviolent stance of this Pashtun leader appears to be his lamentation of the “blood feuds” where Pashtuns would kill other Pashtuns¹⁶.

To reform such customs and to work for the betterment of Pashtun society, the Khudai Khidmatgar movement required its members to take an oath comprising the following principles:

- (1) I am a Khudai Khidmatgar (Servant of God); and as God needs no service, but serving his creation is serving him, I promise to serve humanity in the name of God.
- (2) promise to refrain from violence and from taking revenge.
- (3) I promise to forgive those who oppress me or treat me with cruelty.
- (4) I promise to refrain from taking part in feuds and quarrels and from creating enmity.
- (5) I promise to treat every Pashtun as my brother and friend
- (6) I promise to refrain from antisocial customs and practices.
- (7) I promise to live a simple life, to practice virtue and to refrain from evil.

(8) I promise to practice good manners and good behavior and not to lead a life of idleness.

(9) I promise to devote at least two hours a day to social work¹⁷.

From the nature of this oath it is clear that the movement was one which primarily focused on the internal development of Pashtun society.

The Khudai Khidmatgars were structured like an "army," where officer corps were organized into platoons, with recruits taught basic army discipline unassociated with the use of arms¹⁸. Membership was voluntary, but once recruited the members were required to obey their commanders as long as the orders were "legitimate" and persons found to violate any part of the oath were dismissed immediately¹⁹. Ghaffar Khan also wished to see the advancement of women in his society, and allowed women to join the Khudai Khidmatgars and to play significant roles therein²⁰. Membership of this non-violent army during the 1930s has been reported variously, ranging from 100,000 to 300,000 Pashtuns²¹.

The Khudai Khidmatgars were inspired by the teachings and examples found within their own faith tradition. Their leaders gave religious instruction to the recruits with an emphasis on patience, forgiveness, and tolerance, and particular weight was placed on the chapters of the Qur'an revealed during the early years of the Prophet Mohammad's teaching in Mecca, when the Prophet had encountered ridicule and persecution²². During these years, the Prophet and his followers had exercised sabr (patience, forbearance, steadfastness), renouncing violent retaliation against their persecutors in submission to God²³. Although it is considered that after the Prophet's exile to Medina, God's revelations endorsed warfare in defense of the faith, the example of sabr by the early Muslims in Mecca served as particular inspiration for Abdul Ghaffar Khan's nonviolence.

The nonviolent commitment of the Khudai Khidmatgars was successfully put to the test against the many repressive measures of the British government throughout the 1930s and 1940s. For the Pashtuns, taking an oath had a direct bearing on their honour, and their culture and temperament urged them to keep their pledge even at the expense of their life. A conspicuous example of the Khudai Khidmatgars' nonviolent sacrifice is seen in an incident

that occurred in Peshawar on 23 April 1930. On that day, after Abdul Ghaffar Khan had made a public address in Utmanzai in which he urged civil resistance against the British, he was arrested in a nearby town called Naki²⁴. In response to his arrest, the local townspeople took the oath of Khudai Khidmatgar membership, and protested nonviolently surrounding the jail which held Ghaffar Khan. Leaders of the Khudai Khidmatgar were also arrested and a spontaneous general strike ensued. The British then drove their armored vehicles into the crowd and fired upon the protesters to disperse them but the Khudai Khidmatgars refused to leave and kept their nonviolent discipline, repeating the refrain "God is Great" to hearten themselves as they faced their death²⁵. It is said that on that day, approximately several hundred Pashtuns were killed, and many more wounded²⁶.

The Khudai Khidmatgars provide an example of a social movement where Muslims drew on their faith to maintain a nonviolent stance in the face of repression and work for the positive development of their society. The case is one that has been an inspiration to many other activists, including Mubarak Awad, who founded the Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence²⁷.

Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN)

A more contemporary example of Muslims engaged in peacebuilding can be found in the activities of Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN), which operated under the name of Asian Resource Foundation (ARF) before their organization was registered in Thailand (where the headquarters is located)²⁸. In a Buddhist country like Thailand, AMAN has faced challenges operating under an organizational appellation which identifies as Muslim, and even today, many of their projects are described as being conducted by ARF in collaboration with AMAN.

AMAN and ARF jointly host the International Institute of Peace Studies (IIPS) which offers courses and workshops on peacebuilding, healing, negotiation, reconciliation, and human rights across Asia, as well as interfaith forums and dialogue exchanges on social issues such as climate change and HIV/Aids²⁹. A key undertaking of IIPS is running the School of Peace Studies and Conflict Transformation, which conducts training on conflict analysis, prevention and peace building, with an emphasis on how various religious traditions can be a force for

peace³⁰. Other activities of the IIPS and AMAN/ARF include programmes to develop youth leadership for the promotion of social justice, and funding research and publication on peace-related topics. AMAN has also worked in conflict areas like the Malay Patani region in the south of Thailand where increasing violence has been seen in recent years. When BRN-Coordinate (BRN-Koordinasi), the group spearheading the insurgency, has invoked Salafist ideology using mosques and Islamic schools to propagate their position, AMAN's peace work in the area (which includes the creation of a healing centre for those who have lost family in the conflict, peace training for imams and teachers, and youth programmes to better understand the nature of the conflict) provides a needed counter-initiative by Muslims upholding nonviolence.

AMAN is a network of Asian Muslim thinkers and peace activists, and as such is characterized by a loose structure that allows for ideological pluralism (rather than internal homogeneity), though the members do tend to share a commitment to celebrating diversity, nonviolence, interfaith cooperation and a progressive approach to addressing contemporary problems. From my fieldwork in 2009, I noted that many of AMAN's council members were highly educated, and quite a number of them were university professors or holders of doctorate degrees. A large proportion of the membership also has roots in South Asia, and it seems that the historical experience of India's independence movement has had an influence on the broad espousal of nonviolence within AMAN.

Several of AMAN's key members have written on the subjects of peace and nonviolence from an Islamic perspective. To cite one example, Chaiwat Satha-Anand (an AMAN council member who is also the Founder and Director of Peace Information Centre at Thammasat University) advances the following "eight theses of nonviolence" which logically develop an Islamic position for renouncing violence while nevertheless resisting injustice³¹.

(1) For Muslims the problem of violence is an integral part of the Islamic moral sphere;

(2) Violence, if any, used by Muslims must be governed by rules prescribed in the Qur'an and Hadith³²;

(3) If violence used cannot discriminate between combatants and non-combatants, then it is unacceptable to Islam;

(4) Modern technologies of destruction render discrimination virtually impossible at present;

(5) In the modern world, Muslims cannot use violence;

(6) Islam teaches Muslims to fight for justice with the understanding that human lives, as all parts of God's creation, are purposeful and sacred;

(7) In order to be true to Islam, Muslims must utilize nonviolent action as a new mode of struggle; and

(8) Islam itself is fertile soil for nonviolence because of its potential for disobedience, strong discipline, sharing and social responsibility, perseverance and self-sacrifice, and the belief in the unity of the Muslim community and the oneness of humanity.

Although in thesis (2), there seems to be an acceptance of a limited basis in Islam on which force can be legitimately used, in theses (4) and (5), we learn that due to the nature of modern weaponry, which makes it difficult to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants, Muslims today should not resort to force; and yet, because Islam obliges its believers to oppose social injustice, Satha-Anand asserts that the new mode of struggle in the contemporary world should be one of nonviolence. Scholarship such as this, which develops a theory of an alternative mode of struggle to violence from an Islamic perspective, are valuable and ought to form the cornerstone of peace education within Muslim communities.

Conclusion

This article has argued in favour of the development of a theory of nonviolence and peacebuilding premised in Islam to encourage Muslims to engage in reconciliation, peacebuilding, and nonviolent action. It has pointed to Bosnian and Palestinian cases to

suggest that there is a need for Islamic resources to be mobilized in peace work to counter the use of religious symbols and scriptures by extremist groups advocating exclusion and violence. Two examples of nonviolence and peacebuilding in the Muslim world were reviewed to demonstrate how Islamic peace resources have been translated into concrete action on the ground. It is hoped that the emerging scholarship in this area³³ will allow more Muslims to better appreciate the aspects of their faith that uphold tolerance, inclusivity and peaceful coexistence in the course of pursuing social justice.

End Notes

- ¹ Douglas M. Johnston and Jonathon Eastvold (2004) "History Unrequired: Religion as Provocateur and peacemaker in the Bosnian Conflict" in Harold Coward and Gordon S. Smith (Eds). Religion and Peacebuilding. New York: State University of New York Press, 213-242; Janine Natalya Clark (2010). "Religion and Reconciliation in Bosnia & Herzegovina: Are Religious Actors Doing Enough?" Europe-Asia Studies 62(4): 671-694 at 690; R. Scott Appleby (2000) The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 64-80.
- ² R. Scott Appleby (2000) The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers at 78; Bill Sterland and John Beauclerk (2008) Faith Communities as Potential Agents for Peace Building in the Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Countries of Former Yugoslavia, available at: <https://www.kirkensnodhjelp.no/contentassets/c1403acd5da84d39a120090004899173/2008/faith-communities-balkans.pdf>(accessed 11 March 2015) at iii.
- ³ Janine Natalya Clark (2010). "Religion and Reconciliation in Bosnia & Herzegovina: Are Religious Actors Doing Enough?" Europe-Asia Studies 62(4): 671-694 at 685.
- ⁴ Ibid. at 678; Gerard Powers. "Religion Conflict and Prospects for Peace in Bosnia Croatia and Yugoslavia" in Paul Mojzes (ed.) Religion and the War in Bosnia. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.
- ⁵ Janine Natalya Clark (2010) "Religion and Reconciliation in Bosnia & Herzegovina: Are Religious Actors Doing Enough?" Europe-Asia Studies 62(4): 671-694 at 675
- ⁶ Douglas M. Johnston and Jonathon Eastvold. (2004) "History Unrequired: Religion as Provocateur and peacemaker in the Bosnian Conflict" in Harold Coward and Gordon S. Smith (2004). Religion and Peacebuilding. New York: State University of New York Press at 234; Janine Natalya Clark (2010). "Religion and Reconciliation in Bosnia & Herzegovina: Are Religious Actors Doing Enough?" Europe-Asia Studies 62(4): 671-694 at 691.
- ⁷ Mohammed Abu-Nimer (2003). Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- ⁸ Sumantra Bose (2009) Contested Lands: Israel-Palestine, Kashmir, Bosnia, Cyprus, and Sri Lanka. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- ⁹ J Karen Abi-Ezzi (2003) "Peace and Conflict Resolution (Book Review) Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice, by Mohammed Abu-Nimer" Middle East Journal 57(4): 292-294 at 693.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ A region incorporated into the North West Frontier Province which was an administrative unit under the British-ruled colonial India.

¹² Robert C. Johansen (1997) "Radical Islam and Nonviolence: A Case Study of Religious Empowerment and Constraint Among Pashtuns," *Journal of Peace Research* 34(1) 53-71 at 59-61.

¹³ Khan Abdul Wali Khan (1995) "Life and Thought of Badshah Khan" in Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan: A Centennial Tribute, New Delhi: Har-anand publications at 3.

¹⁴ Khan Abdul Wali Khan (1995) "Life and Thought of Badshah Khan" in Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan: A Centennial Tribute, New Delhi: Har-anand publications at 12.

¹⁵ Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1969) *My Life and Struggle: Autobiography of Badshah Khan*, Delhi: Shiksha Bharati Press at 97.

¹⁶ D. G. Tendulkar (1967) *Abdul Ghaffar Khan: Faith is a battle*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan at 7.

¹⁷ Note that this is the version that appears in the English rendition of Abdul Ghaffar Khan's autobiography: Abdul Ghaffar Khan, (1969) *My Life and Struggle: Autobiography of Badshah Khan*, Delhi: Shiksha Bharati Press at 97. However, there appear to be different versions of this oath which was orally transmitted. See for example, Sayed Wiqar Ali Shar. (1999) *Ethnicity, Islam and Nationalism: Muslim Politics in the North-West Frontier Province, 1937-1947*. Karachi: Oxford University Press at 44, note 38.

¹⁸ Robert C. Johansen, (1997) "Radical Islam and Nonviolence: A Case Study of Religious Empowerment and Constraint Among Pashtuns," *Journal of Peace Research* 34(1) 53-71 at 60.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Attar Chand, (1989) *India, Pakistan and Afghanistan: A Study of Freedom Struggle and Abdul Ghaffar Khan*, New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers a 71-77.

²¹ Nayar Pyarelal (1950) *A Pilgrimage of Peace: Gandhi and Frontier Gandhi Among N.W.F. Pathans*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan at 37; M.S. Korejo, (1994) *The Frontier Gandhi: His Place in History*, Karachi: Oxford University Press at 61-62.

²² Robert C. Johansen, (1997) "Radical Islam and Nonviolence: A Case Study of Religious Empowerment and Constraint Among Pashtuns," *Journal of Peace Research* 34(1): 53-71 at 60.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.* at 62.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Gene Sharp (1960) *Gandhi Wields the Weapons of Moral Power: Three case Histories*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House at 110.

²⁷ Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Joe Groves (2003) "Peace Building and Nonviolent Political Movements in Arab-Muslim Communities," in Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida at 163.

²⁸ Interview with Mr. Abdus Sabur, Founder and Secretary General of AMAN 21 September 2009.

²⁹ International Institute of Peace and Development Studies

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Chaiwat Satha-Anand (2001) "The nonviolent crescent: eight theses on Muslim nonviolent action" in Abdul Aziz Said, Nathan C. Funk, and Ayse S Kadayifci (Eds.) *Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam: Precept and Practice*, Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.

³² The reports of the teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

³³ See for example, Mohammed Abu-Nimer (2000-2001) "A Framework for Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islam," *Journal of Law and Religion* 15(1/2): 217-265; Arsalan T. Iftikhar (2011) *Islamic Pacifism: Confessions of a Muslim Gandhi*, Washington D. C: Potomac Books. See also Michael Shank (2011) "Islam's Nonviolent Tradition," *The Nation*, 27 April 2011.