Is Islam A Religion of Peace?
Asking the Right Questions
Dr. Ahmed Afzaal

Ever since the atrocious events of September 11, 2001, the question has been raised and discussed countless times: Is Islam a religion of peace? I do not wish to add yet another answer to the already huge pile of responses that have been produced by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Instead, I would like to argue that the question itself is not — or is no longer — worthy of any serious consideration by intelligent people. I propose to examine this question one last time in order to expose its fatal flaws, before suggesting that we banish it forever. I would then like to propose what I believe is a more constructive and fruitful way of inquiring into the issues involved.

Is Islam a religion of peace? Whenever I hear this, I want to ask a counter-question: Who wants to know? It so happens that the overwhelming majority of people who ask this question do not care about getting an informed or accurate answer. They do not raise this question because they believe they are lacking in the knowledge of the Islamic tradition, and that the response will help them overcome their ignorance by giving them new insights. The question is typically raised by those who are already sure of being in possession of the right answer.

In the majority of these cases, the speaker is an Islamophobe who asks the question only to create an illusion of having carried out an objective inquiry; he/she is then able to present the right answer as an emphatic “no.” Occasionally, this question is raised by an uncritical Islamophile whose response, as expected, is an equally emphatic “yes.” Unfortunately, what this well-meaning friend of Islam does not recognize is that the problem represented by the negative response to the question cannot be solved by simply giving a positive response.

Whether the question is raised for polemical purposes or apologetic ones, it has little or no scientific value. The question fails to generate real inquiry, mostly because it is weighed down by its own ideological underpinnings, which can be revealed by making explicit a series of unacknowledged assumptions without which it cannot function as it currently does. The most obvious assumption is that there are only two possible answers: “yes” and “no.” The yes/no dichotomy coincides with the peace/violence dichotomy that is also assumed in the question. The question implies that Islam is either a “religion of peace” or it is not. If it is not a “religion of peace,” Islam must, ipso facto, be a “religion of violence.” The query does not allow any third choice.

This way of framing the discussion is problematic. As a clichéd joke has it, a man cannot answer the question, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” with either a “yes” or a “no” without admitting his guilt. The same holds true for the question, “Is Islam a religion of peace?” As soon as we agree to offer a response, we find ourselves trapped in the faulty logic of the question. The wording seduces us to respond within the structure of the question, encouraging us to disregard all the details and nuances of the issues that may be pertinent to the matter at hand. In order to say either “yes” or “no,” we must become highly selective in our choice of evidence. Regardless of which side we choose, the exercise does not generate an honest inquiry but a hardening of preconceived positions, an increase in polarization.

The second ideological assumption underlying the question can be exposed by looking more closely at the value-laden word “peace.” The positive connotations of the word “peace” are so strong and pervasive that it is practically impossible for anyone in their right mind to be against peace. This is evidenced by the fact that politicians never tire of speaking about their commitment to “peace,” even when they are in the midst of declaring and conducting wars. There is an inherent bias in our language that favors “peace” over and against “violence,” so much so that “peace” constitutes its own argument but “violence” must be justified in one way or another. As language users, we instinctively know that, by definition, “peace” is good and “violence” is bad. Because of this linguistic bias, it is self-evident that a “religion of peace” is inherently superior
in value to a “religion of violence.” No argument is required to prove this point, and none is given.

In this context, whenever the question “Is Islam a religion of peace?” is raised, everyone thinks that it better be, for it would be really bad for Islam if it can be shown as a “religion of violence.” Fair enough. But the real problem emerges when we look at the people who are raising this question publicly. It turns out that they are rarely pro-peace in their own ethics. Many are known for being anti-Islam and anti-Muslim, and not for their contribution to peacemaking. Their opposition to violence is far from being a principled rejection of all violence; they are definitely against violence when it is perpetrated by Muslims, but they express no comparable indignation when violence is carried out on their behalf and is directed against a group with which they do not identify, including Muslims. In effect, they tend to approve or condone “our” violence against “them” while vehemently criticizing “their” violence against “us.”

It is precisely this contradiction that nullifies the very logic on which the question is built. The appeal of the question depends on the audience’s implicit belief that “peace” is good and “violence” is bad; while the questioners rely on their audience’s moral sense to bolster the validity of the question, they simultaneously undermine that validity by failing to reject violence on a principled, as opposed to a selective and utilitarian, basis.

There is one final assumption underlying the question that we must examine carefully, and it has to do with the word “religion” itself. Whenever the question is raised, there is a tacit understanding that everyone involved shares the same view of religion, i.e., the view that makes the question possible in the first place. However, the particular view of religion that is implied in the question is itself problematic and must not be taken for granted. The question is worded as if “religion” could be accurately understood as a single, circumscribed, well-defined, and unchanging entity, something that is unmistakably distinct from society, culture, history, politics, and economics. This view assumes that each individual religion is easily and obviously distinguishable from all other religions, that each religion has its own unique and fixed essence that can be objectively known, and that there is no overlap between the respective essences of any two religions.

What is being ignored in this framing is that the concept of “religion” is just that — a concept. As such, we are dealing with an abstraction that can be defined and described in many different ways depending on our immediate purpose. This is precisely why it has proven impossible for the experts to agree on a single definition of the term “religion.” Over the last century and a half, the most intelligent minds have failed to draw conceptual boundaries between “religion” on the one hand, and society, culture, history, politics, and economics on the other hand. Furthermore, the boundary between any two religious traditions is also fuzzy at best; historically, no major religion has developed in complete isolation from the rest of the world, and therefore all religious traditions are products of syncretism as well as genuine innovations.

If the concept “religion” is so slippery and unstable as to defy a single, objectively verifiable definition, the more complex notions of “religion of peace” and “religion of violence” pose an even greater challenge to our desire for pinning them down. Neither of them is a precise concept that can be employed in an unambiguous or unbiased manner; both have originated in highly contentious debates over power, authority, and identity, and continue to be contested in a variety of ways. A historically informed perspective does not allow us to treat any religion as if it were a static and monolithic object. No religion speaks with a single voice, and every religious tradition is characterized by a diversity of beliefs, attitudes, and expressions — a diversity that tends to increase with the passage of time. To describe any religion as being solely this or exclusively that, one must reduce its inner complexity to an artificial simplicity, as well as its ever-changing character to a fixed caricature or stereotype. This reduction is itself an act of violence. The resulting image is almost entirely a product of the reductionist enterprise, bearing little resemblance to the dynamic and complex lived reality of the tradition.

In light of the above discussion, the best response I can offer to the question, “Is Islam a religion of peace?” is no response at all. This, however, does not mean that we are trying to avoid or evade the problem; it only means that we must bury this particular question before we can find more constructive and fruitful ways of inquiring into the relevant issues.

One might ask, what would those constructive and fruitful questions look like? Here are some examples. If we are interested in finding out the causes of violence, we may want to ask: “What are the needs of a particular people that they are trying to meet when they act violently?” If we are interested in ending violence, we may want to ask: “How can we help educate a particular people so they can use more effective and peaceful strategies for meeting their needs?” If we are interested in the religious aspects of the problem, we may want to ask: “What are the resources available in a particular religious tradition that might help its adherents make effective contributions to peace?”

From a Muslim viewpoint, the most relevant course of inquiry may well be this: What are the specific resources in the Islamic religious heritage that can help us create a world where everyone can meet their needs peacefully? I find this to be a supremely worthwhile question.

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