

we are no longer free not to wear it. It is not an obligation or a rule, but a traditional practice and the women who do not wear it are not automatically bad Muslims.”

AL BARQ, on the other hand, is of the opposite opinion: “We are really disappointed with this law. Before this law was approved, we staged a sit-in in front of the French Consulate in Milan, claiming the right of religious freedom.

Every one of us must be free to serenely live-out her own faith within the limits of decency and correctness with respect to her neighbours. The veil has often been erroneously defined as a religious symbol, but it is becoming more political than cultural because of the controversies that it has provoked.

In reality, it is only an act of faith rather than a divine rule. To wear one or not depends on how a woman of faith interprets her religion. However, we are not forced to wear it, but have a free choice. It must be clear that it cannot be either an obligation to remove it or an imposition to put it on.

This is what Islam says: ‘There is no compulsion in religion.’ We as young Muslims must denounce actions like female circumcision, the constriction of women to wear the veil, or any other behaviour that affronts the rights of women.”

Beyond the issue of the veil, freedom of opinion is available today to Muslim women of the West, which allows them to emphasize issues linked to their role inside the family and established community in a non-Muslim context.

Polygamy, the right of succession (which gives men double the inheritance of women), mixed marriages (which, in Muslim tradition, prevent women from marrying non-Muslims, while men are able to); these are all issues that regard the rights of women, veiled or not. Without a decisive contribution from women, veiled or not, these issues will remain unheard.

Confronti is a national interreligious magazine based in Rome. The editor-in-chief is Paolo Naso (Waldensian Reformed), and the assistant editor is Mostafa El. Ayoubi (Muslim). For further information, please visit the website: www.confronti.net.

Martin SMEDJEBAK

Review of *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* by Mohammed ABU-NIMER

Today we live in a multicultural world with many religions existing side by side. But still there are many of us Christians who have never met any Muslims. The only time we hear about Islam is on the news, and most of the time these references are connected with violence.

It is not strange that even peace-loving persons have the idea of Islam as a violent religion. Here is a book that might change our view on that. The book is highly recommended for those who want to get a clearer view on Islam and on peace.

JIHAD AND JUST WAR

Mohammed ABU-NIMER is an associate professor in the International Peace and Conflict Resolution Program at the American University in Washington, DC. He has been conducting workshops in conflict resolution since 1982 in numerous countries.

This book of his, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam* (published in Florida in 2003) provides a theoretical framework as well as a practical one. In the theoretical part ABU-NIMER starts with an overview of the many studies done on just war and Islam. It is clear that there is a school of thought in Islam that justifies acts of war and the use of force under certain, although strict, conditions.

Those who support war often point out and quote the Qur'an verse: “Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah does not love transgressors.” (2,190).

Jihad was subsequently applied to religious war, but was never used in the Qur'an in such a sense. The Qur'an says: “Let there be no compulsion in religion.” Jihad should above all be understood as a struggle for the individual Muslim to become a better Muslim.

A number of passages in the Qur'an seem to provide explicit justification for the use of war or fighting unbelievers, and deciding whether the Qur'an actually condones offensive war for faith or offensive war is really just left to the judgment of the exegete and interpreter, according to ABU-NIMER.

What Mohammed ABU-NIMER mainly objects to is that too little research has been focused on the other side of Islam—namely the traditions and teachings of nonviolence and peace building in Islam.

RAHMAH AND PEACE-MAKING HAND IN HAND

It turns out that both the Qur'an and the traditions of Muslim societies harbour many treasures of nonviolence and techniques for resolving conflicts. The word “Islam” is itself defined as the “making of peace.”

The Prophet says: “Break your bows, sever your strings, beat stones on your swords” (to break the blades). “Peace” (*salaam*) in Islam means not merely an absence of war, but also the elimination of the grounds for conflict and the waste and corruption it creates.

Peace thus understood is indeed God's true purpose for humanity. The Qur'an also affirms the sacredness of all human life: “And if anyone saved a life, it would be as if one saved the life of the whole people.”

There are countless stories about how the Prophet Muhammed acted as an arbitrator when two parties were in conflict, which shows that third-party intervention (mediation) is an acceptable option to end fighting in Islam.

During the Meccan period of the Prophet's life (610–622), the Prophet showed no inclination towards the use of force in any form, even for self-defence. He practiced a non-violent resistance that was reflected in all his teachings during that period, when Muslims were a minority and under threat.

Although tortured, accused of blasphemy, humiliated, ostracized, he permitted himself neither violence nor even swearing. The Prophet always prayed when he was persecuted during the Mecca Period, saying, “Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do.” This is something that we Christians have absolutely no problem recognizing.

Some of the Prophet's followers asked him to invoke the wrath of God upon the Meccans, because of their persecution of Muslims. His reply to them was: “I have not been sent to curse anyone but to be a source of *rahmah* (compassion and mercy).”

PEACE OR JUSTICE?

Justice is the ultimate goal of Islamic religious teachings. It can be argued that pursuing justice and peace through non-violent strategies is a more viable and effective method for achieving it.

Except for the existence of one God, no other religious moral principles are more emphasized in the Qur'an and Islamic traditions than the principles of justice, uprightness, equity and temperance. The notion that peace cannot be achieved without justice is echoed in the works of numerous peace-building researchers and activists. It is also supported by the Qur'an:

“It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East or the West; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the last day, and the Angels and the Book and the Messengers; to spend your substance, out of love for him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves.” (2,177)

MUSLIM NONVIOLENCE

There are a few new Islamic scholars who have begun to study the connection between Islam and nonviolence. One that ABU-NIMER mentions is SATHA-ANAND. He argues that even if Islam once accepted violence as a way of defence, it is today forbidden because of the modern technology of war that has been invented in the meantime.

Since Muslims are forbidden to kill civilians, and since modern weapons cannot generally distinguish between soldiers and civilians, Muslims should not use violence. But Muslims are not allowed to be passive when they face injustice either, so therefore they should use nonviolence as a way to resist injustice.

So there seems to be a good and solid foundation for a non-violent struggle in Islam. Has this been practiced by Muslims? It leads us to the practical part of the book, where ABU-NIMER shows us examples of different non-violent campaigns in Muslim communities.

Such movements are the mass protests against the British in Egypt in 1919; the revolt of Muslims of Peshawar Pathans in Pakistan in 1950; the Palestinian general strike of 1956; the 1948 Iraqi uprising; the Iran Revolution of 1978–1979; the Golan Druze resistance movement in 1981–1982; the activities in defence of al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem since the 1970s; the Sudanese insurrection of 1985; and the first Palestinian Intifada, which began in 1987.

The most famous Muslim non-violent resister in modern time would be Abdul Ghaffar KHAN and his “Army of God,” consisting of people from the Pashtun nation, who used to be known as feared warriors. It was a nonviolence movement of about 100,000 people, who struggled non-violently for twenty years against the British occupation in what is today Pakistan.

KHAN said: “There is nothing surprising in a Muslim or a Pashtun subscribing to the creed of nonviolence. It is not a new creed. It was followed fourteen hundred years ago by the Prophet all the time he was in Mecca, and it has since been followed by all those who wanted to throw off an oppressor's yoke. But we had forgotten it.” When recruited, the “Servants of God” had to sign a 10-point pledge in which they swore to serve God and to live only by non-violent principles.

OBSTACLES TO PEACE-MAKING

Although ABU-NIMER wants to show the world the good examples of nonviolence in Muslim communities, he is also critical that there are not more efforts of peace building and nonviolence from the Arab world.

The obstacles are, according to him, a lack of creativity from the leadership, patriarchal social structures, extensive authoritarian control systems and an extensive lack of critical self-examination.

There are also different myths in the Islamic world that ABU-NIMER sees as obstacles to peace building. One widespread myth in the Middle East is that violence is able to eliminate conflicts. “What was taken by force can only be returned by force” is an old Arabic saying.

Another myth is that nonviolence is not an effective method. ABU-NIMER mentions that one antidote to this myths can be to remind Muslims of the considerable experience the Prophet in waging non-violent campaigns against his oppressors.

Even if Islam contains plenty of nonviolence principles, these thoughts and words can still be seen as something “Western” for many Muslims in the Arab world. There are also obstacles to overcome due to differences in culture, if people from the West come to these countries to train in nonviolence.

He also points out that Western conflict resolution methods would often not be effective in settling disputes in Muslim communities, since there is frequently a fear that some of their indigenous values and norms might not only be violated, but also entirely undermined.

Knowing about all these differences and obstacles should increase significantly the chances of succeeding in training of nonviolence and conflict resolution where participants come from both Arabic and Western countries.

THE FIRST INTIFADA: A CASE STUDY

In the last part of the book, ABU-NIMER makes a case study of nonviolence during the first Intifada (uprising) in Palestine. ABU-NIMER shows convincingly that although the Palestinian Intifada is known for its violence, it was really dominated by a massive and impressive non-violent campaign.

He is not saying that the Intifada was an Islamic movement, because it was foremost a Palestinian struggle, Muslims and Christians side by side. But like the civil rights movement in the United States, religious institutions played a huge part.

The Palestinian people gathered for their political meetings mostly in mosques and churches. The loudspeakers in the mosques were used to direct demonstrators or to encourage them in their efforts.

ABU-NIMER argues that if it was not for their religion, they would not have been able to preserve their humanity and their patience. He shows it with the example of an Israeli soldier in Hebron being protected by an Arab family.

The martyr plays an important role in the Intifada. One can see it easily when at a demonstration in Palestine. Many mothers and fathers have pictures with them of their loved ones who had been killed in the struggle.

Even though some think that blowing themselves up will bring them to heaven, ABU-NIMER shows that the thinking about martyrdom varies a lot between different Palestinians themselves.

Everybody sees them as witnesses to the Palestinian struggle, but whether the *shahid* (martyr) went to heaven was "a matter for God to decide." This attitude has the very practical effect of religious tolerance and political flexibility.

It does not judge the outcome for a Christian Palestinian who died in the struggle. It allows religious Muslims to honour them equally. Before the Intifada, a primary symbol of the occupation was the armed guerrilla. Now, in place of this symbol of heroic armed aggression, stands a symbol of innocent suffering.

It should be said, however, that posters of martyrs in Palestine almost always contain weapons. I can testify myself that even if unarmed children have been made into martyrs, they are often pictured with weapons in the posters.

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RELIGIOUS RESPONSIBILITY IN PEACE-MAKING

In conclusion, Mohammed ABU-NIMER says that Islam can reinforce both violence and nonviolence, and it has been doing both during the course of history. Pretty much like Christianity, we can say.

Islam has not developed an explicit ideology of nonviolence, and Muslims have done little preaching or teaching about nonviolence as a way of life, but the roots and the traditions are all in place creating a fertile ground for nonviolence.

ABU-NIMER's wish is clear with one of his last statements in the book: "Every religion can foster either violence or nonviolence. It is the responsibility of those who follow a particular faith to cull these resources for nonviolence from their religious scriptures."

Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam has helped me tremendously in understanding the tradition of nonviolence and conflict resolution in Islam, and ABU-NIMER is to be thanked for this. I can recommend this book to anyone interested in religion and peace issues.

Religion is a mighty power. Our future could depend on us treating it right. This book gives us tools and knowledge to make Islam a powerful force for peace in co-operation with other peace-loving religions in the world.

Henrik Lindberg HANSEN
The Garden of God

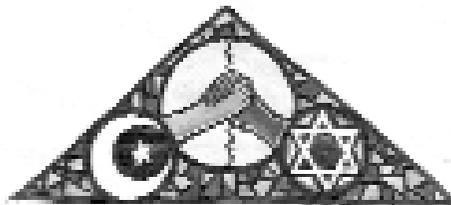
No person can stand in front of another without having something to give and to receive. This is life as it is given us. If I as a Christian stand in front of a Muslim, she or he has something to give me and to receive from me. This is true not only in terms of philosophy or theology as expressions of faith; but also in terms of the life given this particular creature of God.

The dynamics of interpersonal and intercommunitarian relations in life throw us in the arms of the one standing in front of us—not only because the person in front of us is created by God, but also because God's presence in this person's life is given expression through philosophy or theology in this particular person's faith.

DYNAMICS OF DIVERSE CREATION

God did not create us alone as individuals or as groups; we are all a part of God's creation as God has created it. This diversity is an ultimate expression of the dynamics of God and the dynamics in which God created, and for this we owe God praise.

We could choose to ignore this diversity; we could even try to combat it. But we must know that if we succeed, we will lose the dynamics of diverse creation which God obviously intended for God's creation.



If we look around us we see an abundance of diversity; and when we appreciate the beauty of this abundance, let us look at each other and start to enjoy the beauty which God has given to each one of us.

Let us first look at the person in front of us: not as a reflection of ourselves, but as an image of God. Let us take part in the beauty God has given this person and appreciate God through this person, and let us invite the person in front of us to do the same with us.

Let us speak of how God has revealed Godself to us. I am Christian, and therefore I will try to restrict myself to delivering what I have heard from Muslims as honestly as possible. The truth of God should be whispered in friendly intimacy, conveyed from one creature to another before it is exclaimed from the rooftops.

It is theology based on the faith of persons with an intimate relationship with God and must therefore be received with the utmost sincerity, even though it can at

times seem very far from the place which we are given in this diverse creation of God.

I pray that I would be able to convey this in the text even though my vocabulary is Christian; and I pray I will make it accessible by comparing it with the revelation given to me as a Christian.