

CHAPTER EIGHT

ISLAM AND WESTERN SOCIETY

- Important values and concepts in Western society
- Islam confirms these principles and adds its own ideas about how these values enrich our lives
- Muslims are useful members of Western society and their traditions contribute to the plurality of American society
- We need to show that we are good Americans and proud committed Muslims

Important Concepts And Values Of American Society

America used to be a colony of the British Empire. The American Revolution occurred as a result of people freeing themselves of persecution and establishing their own society based on the values of justice, equality and human liberty.

JUSTICE AND LIBERTY

Every person is responsible under the law of the land and should be treated with fairness and justice. No one is to wrong another person or to take away his rights. Every person is innocent till he is proven guilty, and every one deserves due process of law.

What Does Islam Say About Justice And Liberty?

Justice is a central concept in Islam. Without justice the powerful

will dominate the poor and the rich will enslave the poor. The Qur'an states:

﴿ كَيْ لَا يَكُونَ دُولَةً بَيْنَ الْأَغْنِيَاءِ مِنْكُمْ ﴾ [الحشر: ٧]

"In order that it does not become a circuit for the rich amongst you" (Al-Hashr 59 : 7).

The Qur'an orders Muslims to be just in all their affairs:

﴿ يٰٓأَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ شُهَدَاءَ لِلّٰهِ وَلَوْ عَلَىٰٓ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَوِ الْوَالِدِينَ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ ؕ إِن يَكُنْ غَنِيًّا أَوْ فَقِيرًا فَاللّٰهُ أَوْلَىٰ بِهِمَا ؕ فَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا هَوَىٰٓ أَنْ تَعْدِلُوا ؕ وَإِن تَلَوْنَا أَوْ تَعْرِضُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا ﴾ [النساء: ١٣٥]

"O you who believe stand up for justice and as witnesses for God, even if it is against yourselves or your parents or kindred; if he is rich or poor, God will take care of both of them; do not follow your vain desires for you will not be just; and if you deviate from justice or decline to be just, surely God is well aware of everything that you do" (An-Nesa'a 4 : 135).

Justice is a corner stone of faith and piety:

﴿ يٰٓأَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ لِلّٰهِ شُهَدَاءَ بِالْقِسْطِ ؕ وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَاٰنُ قَوْمٍ عَلَىٰٓ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا ؕ أَعْدِلُوا هُوَ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ ؕ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ؕ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴾ [المائدة: ٨]

"O you who believe stand up for God as witnesses for justice; do not allow the hatred of others to make you unjust; be just for this is closer to piety, and be conscious of God, for God is well acquainted with all that you do" (Al-Maeda 5 : 8)

If we follow our vain desires and not follow the truth or be just and fair in our dealings, this will only result in corruption and evil on earth:

﴿ وَلَوْ اتَّبَعَ الْحَقُّ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ لَفَسَدَتِ السَّمٰوٰتُ وَالْأَرْضُ ﴾ [المؤمنون: ٧١]

"If the truth follows their vain desires everything in heaven and in earth will be corrupted" (Al-Mumenoun 23 : 71).

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was just even with his enemies. He sets an example for us for proper behavior and for standing up for fairness and justice. He told his followers: (How can you enslave others realizing that they were born free).

Justice does not apply only to individuals, but applies as well to communities and nations. A ruthless oppressive community that does not safeguard the rights of the weak and poor cannot foster harmony or good will among its citizens. On the contrary, hatred and ill-feelings will prevail, and such a society becomes fertile ground for fanatic ideas and for extremism. Suppressing such ideology by force will only result in such wrong ideas to go underground and fester. Establishing justice and allowing freedom is the only solution. Strong nations cannot force their ideals and morals on weak and poor nations. We should allow them to help themselves in their own way.

EQUALITY OF MANKIND

The Qur'an explains our common origin, then how we were made into different tribes and nations, to illustrate the need to know each other and work together:

﴿ يٰۤاَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اِنَّا خَلَقْنٰكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَّاُنْثٰى وَجَعَلْنٰكُمْ شُعُوْبًا وَّقَبَاۤىِٕلَ لِتَعَارَفُوْۤا اِنَّ اَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللّٰهِ اَتْقٰىكُمْ اِنَّ اللّٰهَ عَلِيْمٌ حَبِيْرٌ ﴿۱۳﴾ [الحجرات: ۱۳]

"O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full Knowledge and is well-acquainted (with all things)" (Al-Hujerat 49 : 13)

This verse clearly proves that our origin is one regardless of our color or ethnic background or the language that we speak. No race is superior to another race, and no person is better than another person by virtue of his birth or where he was born. It is not our money or power or position that distinguishes a person, rather it is his work and his usefulness to others. Therefore, the notion that a race is superior to another that has been advocated in history and given as an excuse to dominate the world has no truth.

There is no racial prejudice in Islam. A white person is not superior to a black person. When the Qur'an was revealed, more than 1400 years ago, slavery was a fact of life, and wars among the tribes were common. The Qur'an urged the freeing of slaves as an atonement of sin, for example in Surat Al-Maeda (Chapter 5), verse 89:

﴿ لَا يُؤَاخِذُكُمُ اللَّهُ بِاللَّغْوِ فِي أَيْمَانِكُمْ وَلَٰكِنْ يُؤَاخِذُكُمْ بِمَا عَقَدْتُمُ الْأَيْمَانَ ۖ فَكَفِّرْتُهُۥٓ إِطْعَامَ عَشْرَةِ مَسْكِينٍ مِّنْ أَوْسَطِ مَا تُطْعَمُونَ أَهْلِيكُمْ أَوْ كِسْوَتُهُمْ أَوْ تَحْرِيرَ رَقَبَةٍ ۗ فَمَنْ لَّمْ يَجِدْ فَصِيَامُ ثَلَاثَةِ أَيَّامٍ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ كَفْرَةُ أَيْمَانِكُمْ إِذَا حَلَفْتُمْ ۗ وَاحْفَظُوا أَيْمَانَكُمْ ۗ كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ ءَايَاتِهِۦ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾ [المائدة: ٨٩]

“Allah will call you to account for your deliberate oaths; for expiation feed ten indigent persons, similar to what you feed your families, or clothe them, or give a slave his freedom; if that is beyond your means then fast three days. That is the expiation for the oaths you have sworn” (Al-Maeda 5 : 89)

Neither should there be an ethnic prejudice. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: (An Arab has no distinction over a non-Arab except for his piety).

When we look and evaluate a human being, we should not look at the color of his skin, or the language that he speaks, or what ethnic background he comes from. Rather, we look at his character and behavior and what he has done with his life.

DEMOCRACY

Mean that power resides with the people, who elect their representatives. The people have the right to remove those elected through a democratic process, if they fail to fulfill their duties. Those who govern do so to serve the populus, and not to oppress others, or to strip them of their freedom.

Islam gives certain rights to those elected to govern. Among these rights is to obey the leaders as long as they obey Allah and His messenger. Also the right to be given sincere advice. The Qur'an states:

﴿ أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِيَ الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ فَإِنْ تَنَزَعْتُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ فَرُدُّوهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَالرَّسُولِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ﴾ [النساء: ٥٩]

“And Obey Allah and obey the messenger, and those charged with authority among you. If you differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and His messenger, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day” (An-Nesa'a 4 : 59).

The leader is obligated to be pious and to care for those under his authority. He should fulfill the trust that God trusted him with, namely to rule with justice, and to care for his people, especially the weak and poor. If he behaves this way, then his reward is great and his prayer to God is responded to. But if he abuses his authority, or use his position to enrich himself, or his family, then his punishment from God is terrible.

Islam, also provides guidelines of proper behavior for those being ruled. They should not hesitate to give sincere advice and to point out the wrong that is being done. They should not be afraid of a ruthless dictator. Should a person die on the hand of a tyrant for speaking out the truth, he is then the best of martyrs. Constructive criticism is always welcomed, but finding faults in everything or everyone and not providing answers is deplorable.

Islam did not specify a certain form of government because each society is different, and what suits one country is not proper for another country. What is important is justice and freedom, regardless of the shape or form of government.

Protecting Civil Liberties

Every person should feel safe regarding his life, possessions, how to worship and the ability to express himself unafraid of reprisals. Such basic civil liberties are safeguarded in Islam, for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Human life is sacred, and the property and possessions of others should be respected and safeguarded. God gave each person the freedom to worship Him or to reject faith.

DIVERSITY

Diversity is recognized in the Qur'an and celebrated as a sign of God. Surat Ar-Rum (Chapter 30) verse 22 states:

﴿ وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَالْوَلَوَاتِكُمْ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ ﴾ [الروم: ٢٢]

“And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences in your colors and tongues; indeed in this is a sign for those who know” (Ar-Rum 30 : 22).

This diversity is meant to enrich our lives so that we may learn from each other. Since we are different, each person has his own prospective, based on his experience, intellect and background. It is through this collective experiences and wisdom that we appreciate the truth in its varied manifestations and implications.

MUSLIM PROSPECTIVE

Does Islam provide answers to the problems of poverty, oppression, injustice, decline of moral values and the glorification of material values? Can Islam provide solutions to the question of our goals and mission in life, or our relationship with God?

Poverty

God's earth is full of bounties and is made subject to mankind. The Qur'an states:

﴿ أَلَمْ تَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ سَخَّرَ لَكُمْ مَّا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَأَسْبَغَ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَهُ ظَهْرَةً وَبَاطِنَةً ۗ وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يُجَادِلُ فِي اللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ وَلَا هُدًى وَلَا كِتَابٍ مُّنبِئٍ ۗ ﴾ [لقمان: ٢٠]

“Do you not see that Allah has subjected to your use all things in the Heavens and on Earth, and has made His bounties flow to you

in exceeding measure, both seen and unseen; yet there are those who dispute about Allah, without knowledge, and without guidance, and without a Book to enlighten them” (Luqman 31 : 20).

The Qur’an states that God endowed riches in the earth:

﴿ وَجَعَلَ فِيهَا رَوَاسِيَ مِنْ فَوْقِهَا وَبَرَكَ فِيهَا وَقَدَّرَ فِيهَا أَقْوَامًا فِي أَرْبَعَةِ أَيَّامٍ سَوَاءً لِّلسَّالِبِينَ ﴾ [فصلت: ١٠]

“He set on the Earth mountains standing firm high above it, and bestowed blessings on the earth, and measured therein its sustenance in four days, alike for all who ask” (Fusselat 41 : 10).

The problem, therefore, is not that the resources on earth are not enough for its inhabitants. Rather, few usurp the wealth and hoard it for their use and influence, at the expense of others. This applies to individuals as well as to nations who are strong and exploit other poor or weak nations.

One way to solve the problem of poverty is through charity. Those who are well to do are obligated to share God’s blessings with those less fortunate. The poor and needy have a right in the wealth of those who are rich. In Islam such a right is not left to the generosity of the wealthy, but is enforced by law. Money is meant to be circulated and not stored and hoarded. This way jobs are created and people have the dignity of work and earning an honest living, rather than depending on the charity of others, who may or may not give.

The Decline In Morality And The Glorification Of Desires And Material Possessions

The Qur’an warns believers against becoming too preoccupied with the material things in life, or indulging in extravagance or boasting. The primary objective is to seek God’s pleasure by living our life as He commanded and by being useful members in our society. The Qur’an states:

﴿ أَعْلَمُوا أَنَّمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَهُوَ زِينَةٌ وَتَفَاخُرٌ بَيْنَكُمْ وَتَكَاثُرٌ فِي الْأَمْوَالِ
وَالْأَوْلَادِ ﴾ [الحديد: ٢٠]

“Know that the life of this world is but play and a pastime, adornment and mutual boasting, and multiplying in rivalry among yourselves, riches and children.” (Al-Hadeed 57 : 20).

Money and children have always been the allure and pleasure in this life. The Qur’an states:

﴿ الْمَالُ وَالْبَنُونَ زِينَةُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَالْبَاقِيَاتُ الصَّالِحَاتُ خَيْرٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ ثَوَابًا وَخَيْرٌ أَمْلاً ﴾ [الكهف: ٤٦]

“Wealth and sons are allurements of the life of this world; but the things that endure, good deeds, are best in the sight of your Lord as rewards, and best as foundations for hopes” (Al-Kahf 18 : 46)

Our children, spouses and money can be a test for us, to see how are we going to behave. Do we do wrong in our attempts to provide for them and make them happy, or are we going to observe and adhere to what we are commanded to do:

﴿ إِنَّمَا أَمْوَالُكُمْ وَأَوْلَادُكُمْ فِتْنَةٌ وَاللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ أَجْرٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴾ [التغابن: ١٥]

“Indeed your riches and your children may be a trial, whereas with Allah is the highest reward” (At-Taghabun 64 : 15)

We can see that living in a society that values money and power and glamorizes success at any cost, adultery and sex can be a real challenge. It is not easy for a person to be content with what God wills for him, if it is little. He looks around and sees wealth and immediate gratification. Having patience, faith and perseverance can be a difficult process. Yet this is what God has willed, some are tested with success and abundance of wealth, whereas others are tested with poverty and difficult life:

﴿ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ ۗ وَنَبْلُوكُم بِالشَّرِّ وَالْخَيْرِ فِتْنَةً ۗ وَإِلَيْنَا تُرْجَعُونَ ﴾ [الأنبياء: ٣٥]

“Every soul shall have a taste of death, and We test you by evil, and by good by way of trial, to Us must ye return” (Al-Anbia'a 21 : 35)

Islam charts a road of moderation in the way that we live: no extravagance, yet not niggardly either:

﴿ وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا أَنْفَقُوا لَمْ يُسْرِفُوا وَلَمْ يَقْتُرُوا وَكَانَ بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ قَوَامًا ﴾

[الفرقان: ٦٧]

“And those who, when they spend, are not extravagant and not niggardly, but hold a just balance between those extremes”

(Al-Furqan 25 : 67)

Islam encourages us to enjoy life, but at the same time understand our accountability to God. This means that we follow God’s commands, and help establish morality, and stand up against immorality, wrong-doing and shameful deeds:

﴿ الَّذِينَ إِنْ مَكَّنَّهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ أَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَمَرُوا بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَوْا عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ الْأُمُورُ ﴾ [الحج: ٤١]

“They are those who, if We establish them in the land, establish regular prayers, and give Zakat (obligatory charity), enjoin the right, and forbid wrong. With God rests the end and decision of all affairs” (Al-Hajj 22 : 41).

This verse tells us that it is our duty as those who believe in God to work for social justice and to further morality, and fight immorality. How this is applied should vary from one society to the next. Obviously in a Western democracy the way to further morality is through education and spreading useful information, not by applying rigid rules that are not suitable.

There is nothing wrong in enjoying life and what God blessed us with. The Qur’an states:

﴿ قُلْ مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَ لِعِبَادِهِ ۖ وَالطَّيِّبَاتِ مِنَ الرِّزْقِ ﴾ [الأعراف: ٣٢]

“Say: Who has forbidden the beautiful gifts of Allah, which He has produced for His servants, and the things, clean and pure, which He has provided for sustenance?” (Al-Ara’f 7 : 32).

What should be clear is that we cannot force our morality on others.

We can guide and explain, but it is up to them to choose their own way of life. Those with a rigid narrow point of view wish to enforce their own values and their own interpretation of Islam on others. Most of the time, their way is hard and restrictive and not natural. There is no room for compromise in their mind; it is either black or white. This is contrary to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Aesha (his wife) stated that whenever the messenger of Allah (PBUH) was given a choice between two courses of action, both are allowed, he always chose the easy way (Bokhari). This tradition implies that we should not make life difficult for ourselves, or make it difficult on others. Rather we should simplify things and make life easy and practical.

There is nothing in the Qur'an or in the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that looks down on wealth or considers it a curse. When wealth is used properly, it is a blessing from God and will be amply rewarded. But the glorification of money that is used to pursue every vain desire leads to sin and mistakes. As stated previously, we are accountable for what we do with our money. Therefore, in Islam, money is a vehicle to be used to achieve what is good for our families, our community and us. It is to be used in a way that brings us God's pleasure, and not His anger.

This notion that immediate gratification and doing what makes you happy is what really counts, is counter productive. If every person pursues his material pleasures and lives for himself and for the present, without giving to others or contributing to his society, then we become a society that values and glorifies money and pleasure, not achievements or morality. Total disregard of Divine orders, and the attitude of pursuing personal pleasures is what caused the ruin and destruction of previous civilization. A society based on immorality and glorification of money and pleasures is doomed. Sooner or later it will disintegrate.

SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

This concept is the result of struggle to overcome the power and abuse of the church in Europe. The Church tried to dictate its ideas on the people and to control their lives. It was against science and philosophy

and free thinking. It imposed its teachings and punished those who refused to listen to absurd logic. The result was a revolt against the authority of the church and the separation of what was religious from what affected the lives of people. The state and its system of government and the laws that govern the lives of people and how they interact with each other became separate from the teachings of the church. This proved useful for the advancement of man's ability to think critically, experiment and advance in various fields.

In Islam the form of government is left up to each society to develop based on their needs and unique circumstances. The state and its systems is not part of the basic elements of faith in Islam. All Muslim scholars agree that this Imama or leadership or form of government is not part of faith. The only exception is the Shi'a Al-Imameyya who believes that God chooses the Imam and that obedience to the Imam is a cornerstone of faith.

To American Muslims this doctrine of the separation of church and state poses no problem. It actually has provided a basis for the freedom of faith and that the state cannot force its own values or beliefs on minorities. Muslims live as a minority among a Christian majority, but the constitution safeguards the rights of minorities and prevents the majority from enforcing its own values on others. It safeguards for every person the right to believe or reject faith as he or she desires.

The allegiance of Muslims regarding the state is to their country and the laws that govern them. Their allegiance regarding their faith is to their religion Islam. The same concerns Jewish Americans or Christian Americans: They are loyal to their system of government, and they are loyal to their faith and traditions.