Compassion in Islam

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All praise and thanks are due to God almighty, and may His peace and blessings be upon His apostles, prophets and messengers starting with Adam, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and ending with Muhammad.

Compassion is a trait inherent in man and is granted to him by his creator, the most compassionate, the most merciful God.

The word compassion in Arabic is Rahmah. It is one of God’s attributes used repeatedly in the Qur’an, the Muslim’s Holy Scripture. The Book begins with, “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.” Some scholars translate the words Rahman and Raheem, two adjectives derived from the same root word that means mercy and according to their pattern of exaggerated attributes, as the most compassionate, the ever merciful. This word, Rahmah, (mercy, compassion) and its various derivatives have been used more than 300 times in the Qur’an. Rahmah, according to an authentic dictionary of the Qur’anic terms, by Imam Raghib al-Asfahani, means: softening of heart towards one who deserves our mercy and induces us to do good to him/her. It is interesting to note that the womb of mother is called rahm which is the root word of Rahmah, (mercy, compassion.) A Mother is always very soft towards her children and showers love and affection on them.

Muslims have been taught to begin everything by reciting Bismi-‘laha al-Rahman al-Rahim (In the name of Allah (who) is Compassionate and Merciful). Thus a Muslim is supposed to invoke Allah the Compassionate and Merciful at every step. He does not invoke Allah’s other names (Allah has 99 names according to the Islamic belief) as often as he invokes Him as Merciful and Compassionate.

His compassion is overwhelming, great and tremendous. He does not discriminate between his servants, the human kind or any other kind of creation for that matter. Everyone, believers as well as those who do not believe, are entitled to His mercy in this world. He is the Master, the Lord of the world and He is a kind and compassionate Lord.

Abu Huraira, a companion of the Prophet reported Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: “When Allah created the creation, He wrote in the Book, which is with Him over His Throne: ‘Verily, My mercy predominates My wrath.’” (al-Bukhari)

Salman, another companion of Muhammad reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: Verily, Allah created, on the same very day when He created the heavens and the earth, one hundred parts of mercy. Every part of mercy is coextensive with the space between the heavens and the earth and He out of this mercy endowed one part to the earth and it is because of this that the mother shows affection to her child and even the beasts and birds show kindness to one another and when there would be the Day of Resurrection, Allah would make full (use of Mercy). (Muslim)

God’s compassion was distributed among God’s great and compassionate prophets and messengers. We learned about the kindness of Jesus and we, Muslims, are told that God’s final Prophet and messenger, Muhammad, was sent as Mercy to the Worlds.

The Quran asserts, in Chapter 21, verse 107, “We have not sent thee, but as a mercy to the worlds.” This includes all of God’s creation.
His teachings included kindness to not only humans, but also to animals. While instructing his followers regarding slaugh-
tering animals, he would teach: “if you slaughter an animal, slaughter it gently. If anyone of you has to slay an animal, he
should sharpen the blade first and treat the animal well.”

Ibn ‘Abbas, the Prophet’s cousin, relates that a man threw a goat on its side and then started sharpening his knife. When
the Prophet saw him he said: “Do you want to kill it twice? Why did you not sharpen the knife before throwing it on the
ground?”

The Prophet once was seen gently wiping the face and mane of his horse with his gown. On being asked by his compan-
ions he explained that he was admonished by Allah for neglecting his horse.

The prophet’s companions once asked: “O Messenger of Allah, is there recompense in the matter of beasts and wild ani-
mals?” The Prophet replied: “There is recompense in regard to every creature that has a living heart.”

When a woman of disrepute came to him and said that she saved a thirsty cat from dying by fetching water from a pit with
the help of her socks, the prophet told her that God will pardon all her sins and that she will enter paradise. The Prophet,
according to one of his sayings described all of creation (including humans, animals and trees and plants) as family of Al-
lah and all should be treated with compassion and sensitivity.

Muhammad, a Mercy Towards his Enemies

The prisoners of war taken captive at the battle of Badr were amongst his bitterest enemies. Nevertheless, Muhammad
made sure that they were given the best of treatment. Among them was a man who denounced the prophet and Umar, one
of the prophet’s closest companions suggested that two of his lower teeth be pulled so he may not speak evil. The prophet
replied: “Were I to do this, Allah would disfigure me on the Day of Judgment, despite the fact that I am His messenger.”

In Makkah, Muhammad’s birth place, his people inflicted him with every kind of suffering, eventually forcing him to flee his
town, and they then waged war on him for five years while he was residing in Madinah. When God granted him victory and
conquered Makkah without shedding blood he asked the Makkan unbelievers who were awaiting his decision about them: “How
do you expect me to treat you?” They responded unanimously: “You are a noble one, the son of a noble one.” He an-
nounced to them his decision: “You may go free! No reproach this day shall be on you; may God forgive you.”

Thus a true follower of the Prophet has to be merciful and compassionate to the extent humanly possible. Anyone who is
cruel and has no sensitivity towards the suffering of others cannot be the prophet’s true follower.

Suffering Human Beings

The Qur’an again and again shows its sympathy for the weaker sections of the society, in which it includes, among others,
orphans, widows, the poor and the exploited, and other politically or socially and economically oppressed people. It em-
phasizes different ways of helping them. Zakah, the poor-due, has been made obligatory on all believing Muslims, men or
women to help the less fortunate ones. Thus the Qur’an says, “(Zakat) charity is only for the poor and the needy and those
employed to administer it, and those whose hearts are made to incline, and (to free) the captives, and those in debt, and in
the way of Allah and for the wayfarer – an ordinance from Allah. And Allah is Knowing, Wise.” (9:60)

Not only is the verse’s aim is to remove arrogance from the wealthy and powerful, it is also to empower the weak so that
there is no suffering in the world. It says clearly and unambiguously, “And We desired to bestow a favor upon those who
were deemed weak in the land, and to make them the leaders, and to make them the inheritors.” (28:5) Thus the Qur’an
favors the weaker sections to those powerful and arrogant.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is very central to the concept of compassion both spiritually and materially. Fasting
in the spiritual sense is a form of worship, and an attempt to shun consumerism in order to cultivate one’s spiritual poten-
tial. At the same time, it also helps one develop sensitivity to others suffering from hunger and thirst and consequently de-
velop compassion towards the poor.

Compassion towards the poor is so important that the Prophet used to say that even if one person remains hungry in a
locality no angel will descend in that locality until that hungry person is fed. Also the Prophet is reported to have said that it
is more meritorious to feed a hungry widow than to pray whole night. Thus one can see the intensity of the prophet’s com-
passion towards others suffering, particularly those of the weaker sections of society.

We as human beings have our own limitations. We tend to love people of our own faith more than those belonging to other
religious groups; and we love those speaking our own tongue more than those speaking other tongues. We should love
all human beings equally whether they belong to our religion or not, whether they speak our tongue or not and whether
they have the same color of skin as we have or not. If GOD is Rahman (Compassionate) to all, then we as His servants too should imitate Him as much as possible.

Thus a real Muslim is one who despite being firm in his/her faith tradition shows equal love and compassion for all human beings whether they belong to his faith tradition or not. Every faith tradition is unique and should be recognized as such but it should not become a tool of discrimination. The Qur'an itself declares that all human beings, all children of Adam have been honored equally. "We have honored the Children of Adam and carried them on land and sea, and provided them with good things, and preferred them greatly over many of those We created. (17:70)

Further emphasis on equality with the additional concept of fraternity can be found in Verse 13 of chapter 49; "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 God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)." Thus there is no justification in showing any discrimination on the basis of faith as far as the Qur'an is concerned.

When the Qur'an refers to weaker sections it does not qualify it with Muslim. It uses as inclusive of all human beings. All of them are equally entitled to our compassion and Allah's mercy, no less, no more. The Qur'an does not use words like Muslim orphans, Muslim widows or Muslim destitute. It uses these words in general without any qualification whatsoever. Similarly the Qur'an does not use any qualification for the powerful and arrogant sections. They can belong to any religion, race or ethnicity. Arrogance is condemnable when found anywhere.

Conclusion:

We have fallen victims to our animal passions of greed and other selfish desires that shattered our world. Today, we are torn between insanity and violence. Greed, hatred, jealousy, and prejudice are the obstacles to restoring human dignity and eliminating human suffering. When these obstacles are removed, man returns to his pure nature of compassion and kindness. Returning to our pure and intrinsic nature strengthens the bond of fraternity for no one is superior over another. We are like a big family to God.

Yes the population of the world is increasing and so are the needs of the less fortunate ones here and abroad. Some are hungry for power while others are hungry for food. Some wear their uniforms while others have nothing to wear. Some sleep on comfortable beds while others are without shelter. And some wish to live long while others wish to die. It's a horrible feeling.

The Prophet Muhammad said: "Verily, God will only show mercy to those of His servants who do good to others." He also said: "Help your brother, whether he is an oppressor or he is oppressed." People asked, O Allah's apostle, it is all right to help him if he is oppressed, but how should we help him if he is an oppressor?" The Prophet said, "By preventing him from oppressing others" (al-Bukhari). Another saying of his: "Allah will help his servants as long as they help their fellow brothers."

The bible and the Qur'an teach, "God helps the helpless!"

I submit, without us as a cause what would be the effect?

Compassion is the best human quality and no one deserves to be human unless he is compassionate. It is truly central to the teachings of Islam.

May God alleviate the sufferings of all of His creation, Ameen.