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The Koran and the humanitarian Conventions

The commandment to help those who are suffering is one of the commandments which is to be found in most of the great religions. The Revue internationale has already published several articles in a series of analyses devoted to similar precepts.

The idea which gives motive force to the Red Cross, the Red Crescent and to the Red Lion and Sun spring from aspirations deeply rooted amongst most of the peoples throughout the world. It is therefore a good moment to throw light on the writings and on those who have spoken of help which should be given to those more unfortunate than oneself, and to whom one can today look upon as our guides in things of the spirit and in action.

We therefore have pleasure in publishing the summary of a study by Mr. M. K. Ereksoussi, Imam of the Islamic Community in Geneva, who shows how certain principles inspiring the humanitarian Conventions have already been accepted and expressed in the Koran¹. The dignity of man, respect for others and the duties which we have towards each other, friend and enemy alike, are so many ideas which the Islamic religion so clearly defines, thus giving encouragement to those who are fighting to defend human values (Editorial Note).

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The prophets of the great Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) teach that God gave preference to Man over all His other creatures; and we may say that it is this which gives Man his special dignity and responsibilities.

This is the principle underlying the Geneva Conventions.

¹ We would point out that this study has already appeared in the French edition of the *International Review* and has already been the subject of ICRC broadcasts in Arabic.

This idea of the special position enjoyed by Man is brought out on a number of occasions in the Holy Koran. Thus, in Chapter XCV ("The Fig"), we find verse 4: "Surely we created man of the best stature" (Mohammed Pickthall's version). Chapter XVII ("The Children of Israel"), verse 70 runs: "And surely we have honoured the children of Adam . . . and made them to excel highly most of those whom We have created" (Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation).

The Koran represents the angels as exemplary in their submission to the will of God. Nevertheless they, too, have to make an act of submission to Man. This is strikingly brought out in the story of Iblis. Chapter VII ("The Heights") depicts God as ordering the angels to make their submission to Adam. Iblis is alone in his refusal. He says (verse 12): "I am better than he; Thou hast created me of fire, while him Thou didst create of dust." As a result, Iblis is excluded from Paradise.

The Koran, then, and the Geneva Conventions are at one in recognizing the very special status of Man. They go further, by emphasizing the duties this special status implies.

The Koran teaches that Man has certain duties towards himself, and certain duties towards his neighbour.

Thus, in recognition of the special position he occupies in the eyes of God, the faithful Moslem will be scrupulous in self-discipline, avoiding excesses in food and drink, and ostentation in clothing. He will not accord to any man the reverence that should go to God alone. And while alive to the responsibilities which his special status as a man implies, he will at all times display a proper readiness to bow to the will of God.

As regards a man's duties towards his fellow-men, the Koran is at one with the Geneva Conventions. All men are God's creatures, even though they be our enemies; this is why the Geneva Conventions call on combatant powers to give just and equal treatment to all those over whom they may exercise *de facto* jurisdiction, without regard to sex, race, or religious conviction.

Here the Koran tells us (Chapter IV, verse 1): "O people, keep your duty to your Lord, Who created you from a single being, and created its mate of the same kind, and spread from these two many men and women."

There are numerous sayings ascribed to the Prophet, all in the same sense. "O Men, your Father is One, your God is One, you are all sons of Adam, and Adam was created from dust." He is also reported to have said that an Arab was no better than a non-Arab, a black man no better than a white, and the other way round, except in so far as he might be more virtuous. And most emphatically of all: "Men are all equal, like the teeth in a comb."

According to Islam, this basic equality is unaffected by differences in religious belief. In Chapter XVIII, verse 52, God is depicted as addressing the prophets of all the religions in the following terms: "And surely this your community is one community, and I am your Lord, so keep your duty to Me."

In Chapter XXVIII, Pharaoh is condemned for failing to mete out justice to his peoples: "Surely Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and made its peoples into parties, weakening one party from among them; he slaughtered their sons and let their women live. Surely he was one of the mischief-makers."

Specific rules are given whereby mutual respect between believers can be made manifest in everyday life. "O you who believe", says Chapter XLIX, "let not people laugh at people, perchance they may be better than they . . . Neither find fault with your own people . . . Avoid most of all suspicion, for surely suspicion in some cases is sin."

But the Geneva Conventions are more especially concerned with duties towards an enemy. The Koran enjoins justice to enemies in the following terms (Chapter V):

"O you who believe, be upright for Allah, bearers of witness with justice, and let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably. Be just; that is nearer to observance of duty."

Ties of kinship, and considerations of self-interest, must not be allowed to interfere with this obligation. Chapter IV ("The Women") says: "O you who believe, be maintainers of justice, bearers of witness for Allah, even though it be against your own selves or your parents or near relatives, whether the case concern a rich man or a poor man."

The Koran specifically enjoins respect for the beliefs of others, even though those beliefs may not concord with the strict monotheism of Islam. Chapter VI ("The Cattle"), while commanding the Faithful to "turn away" from idolaters, nevertheless goes on

to say : " Had Allah willed, they had not been idolatrous. We have not set thee as a keeper over them, nor art thou responsible for them." And further : " Abuse not those whom they call upon besides Allah."

There must be no attempt to impose a change of religious belief by force. Chapter II (" The Cow "), verse 256, flatly states that " there is no compulsion in religion."

The celebrated " History of Nations and Kings ", by El Tabari, quotes an undertaking entered into by the conqueror Omar Ben El Khattab in relation to the people of Jerusalem : Omar extended his protection to life and property, undertook not to destroy or sequestrate churches, and promised full freedom of worship. This strikingly prefigures Article 53 of the Geneva Convention, with its list of duties incumbent on an occupying Power.

The Koran is in harmony with the spirit of the Geneva Conventions in demanding not only justice, but charity. Chapter XVI, verse 90, says : " Lo ! Allah enjoineth justice *and kindness*." Revengefulness is condemned in Chapter LX, in which the Believer is reminded that " It may be that Allah will bring about friendship between you and those whom you hold as enemies " (verse 7). Chapter XLI, verse 34 : " The good deed and the evil deed are not alike. *Repel the evil deed with one which is better*, then lo ! he between whom and thee there was enmity will become as though he were a bosom friend."

Chapter XLII, verse 40, says : " And the recompense of evil is punishment like it ; *but whoever forgives and amends*, his reward is with Allah "

A tradition tells us that when pagans mutilated his uncle, the Prophet swore to pay back the injury twofold. But he at once received a revelation (Chapter XVI, verse 126) : " If ye punish, then punish with the like of that wherewith ye were afflicted. But if ye endure patiently, verily it were better for the patient." And he stayed his hand.

In spirit, therefore, the Koran and the Geneva Conventions are closely akin. In the practical application of the principles which inspire them, moreover, Koran and Conventions show some remarkable similarities.

1. The Conventions set out to protect such persons as are not directly involved in fighting : sick and wounded troops, medical personnel, the shipwrecked, prisoners of war, and civilians. The Koran, too, tells us that the struggle is to be waged only against those who are actually fighting. Chapter II, verse 190, says " And fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but be not aggressive. Surely Allah loves not aggressors."

2. The Geneva Conventions forbid the " improper use of Red Cross hospitals for purposes harmful to the enemy." Before Islam, hospitals were unknown to the Arabs, who had, however, agreed amongst themselves not to fight in certain sacred precincts. Chapter II, verse 191, says : " And fight not with them at the Sacred Mosque until they fight with you in it, so if they fight you in it, slay them "

3. The Conventions demand that prisoners of war shall be well treated. A tradition tells us that, according to the Prophet : " Prisoners are your brethren. It is by the grace of God that they are in your hands. Since they are at your mercy, treat them as you would treat yourself as regards food, clothing, and shelter. Do not demand of them a labour which exceeds their strength; help them rather in what they have to do."

These words are surely extraordinary, if it be remembered that the Prophet was preaching to the Arabs of the seventh century A.D.

The Islamic attitude to the treatment of prisoners is summed up in the following magnificent verses from Chapter LXXVI of the Koran :

" The righteous truly drink of a cup tempered with camphor, a fountain from which the servants of Allah drink, making it flow in abundance. They fulfil vows and fear a day, the evil of which is widespread. And they give food, out of love for Him, to the poor and the orphan and the captive."

There are plenty of examples in the history of the Moslem peoples to show that these generous precepts were applied in practice. The Khalifs were entitled to punish those who infringed the obligation to respect human dignity in oneself and in others,

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even if those others be enemies of the State. The son of Amr Ben El-Aas, conqueror of Egypt, had been convicted of such an offence towards an Egyptian. The Khalif Omar Ben El-Khattab pressed a whip into the hand of a Copt and encouraged him to strike the highly-placed offender, to whose father he wrote, saying " Before you enslaved these people their mothers had born them as free men."

A verse from the Koran (Chapter XLIX : 13) and a saying ascribed to the Prophet, will provide us with a suitable conclusion to this discussion.

The Koran says (and to Moslems, of course, it speaks with the voice of God Himself) : " O ye people, We created you from one man and one woman. And We made you into peoples and tribes, that you might know that the noblest of you in the eyes of God is he who is the most pious." And the Prophet explains what piety entails in the following saying : " All creatures are God's family, and the most beloved of God is he who best serves his family."
