

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Merciful

## Religion and Power

As Muslims we **surrender** – to the **will of God** and we call ourselves **servants**- of God – the question is – how can a servant be powerful? How can Surrender –to the will of God go hand in hand with exerting Power? Are religion and power contradictory? *What is power and who is powerful?*

We will try to explore these points today by looking into some of the sources and the history of Islam in order to draw inspiration and guidance for us today.

On the surface it may appear that religion and power are at opposite ends of the spectrum and mutually exclusive. But if we broaden our vision beyond the material world to include God, our accountability and standing before God as well as the life Hereafter which depends on how we fare here in this life - we will find solutions for the dichotomy.

One of his beautiful names of God is the **All Powerful- Al Aziz**. Anything that happens ultimately happens with the will of God. The following Qur’anic verse explains this point: *Ye slew them not, but God slew them. And thou (Muhammad) didst not throw when thou threwest, but God threw (VIII: 17)*. The last part of the verse refers to the Prophet’s throwing of a handful of dust in the direction of the enemy before a battle. But the verse as a whole alludes to the reality that the true, ontological agent of all actions/ of all POWER is God Himself. Man’s actions are good only as long as he is conscious of this, and insofar as he is effaced in this consciousness.

Even the most powerful person in the world knows - if he has faith- that he is only powerful by the grace of God. And God can take away his power at any moment in time. The more conscious he is of this fact the better for him- (and the people around him).

But most powerful people are not aware of the origin of their power and have often got into positions of power through ways and means that are less than honourable propelled by greed for more and more. We can see this everywhere in every business and every industry most of all in politics. These

people then become conceited and arrogant, especially when they are on top of the world, at the height of their career when everything is going well for them. They tend to believe all is actually their own doing. This was also the illusion that prompted Pharaoh to go so far as to claim that he is God. He was wealthy and healthy, he had an easy life, and his people obeyed him. He thought he was special and in the end claimed to be God himself. So we must be careful as power can be deceiving.

Power is a double edged sword because it comes with responsibility- in front of God and in front of people. Anyone in a powerful position needs to ask himself *how to exercise* his power; - in an unbridled self serving way- like a lot of leaders throughout time and especially today? Or with a view to be a force for the greater Good and to acquire the pleasure of God.

The Highest level of power is the power of wisdom - to be aware of God-to act with generosity and justice- linked with the power of self mastery- namely to be able to dominate and reign- in the lower aspects of one's soul that incite to all kinds of vices- laziness, greed, anger etc.

The Prophet Muhammad famously said:

*The most powerful among you is not the one who defeats his opponent by wrestling but the one who controls his anger.*

Controlling ones anger is an indicator of the strength of one's character. If a person can control his anger he will be able to control everything else.

One extraordinary example of the art of self mastery was given by Imam Ali the Prophet's cousin and the fourth Caliph of Islam.

During a one to one battle with a great enemy of Islam who was a powerful warrior, Ali was able to subdue his opponent and throw him to the ground. As a last act of hatred the enemy warrior spat in Ali's face. At that point Ali raised himself up – he had been sitting on the chest of his opponent – and sheathed his sword instead of finishing off his enemy. The warrior on the ground couldn't believe it and asked Ali why? So Ali explained that until then he was fighting for the Truth but as soon as he was spat at he became angry.

Recognizing this he ceased to battle because he did not want to fight on the basis of personal rage and anger. As Rumi put it in his famous work Mathnawi:

He spat on the face of Ali  
 The pride of every prophet and saint  
 And Ali responded,  
 He said, "I wield the sword for the sake of the Truth,  
 I am the servant of the Truth, not commanded by the body.  
 I am the Lion of the Truth, not the lion of passion.  
 My action is witness to my religion.."

Ali's refusal to kill on the basis of personal rage and anger when he had the power to do so led to a change of heart in his enemy. Even a warrior must exercise self mastery and be detached from the ego, so he fights wholly for God.

Another example involving Imam ALI illustrates **the importance of justice** especially when in a position of power.

When Ali was the Caliph he had a dispute with a Jewish person and went to the judge to get it resolved. The judge gave the opponent a chance to tell his side of the story and then he addressed the Caliph Ali: 'Oh father of Hasan what do you say to this'? Ali responded with displeasure, questioning the judge's impartiality and credibility when he calls the Jewish person by his ordinary name while addressing Ali with the honorary name – 'Father of Hasan'. This incident shows how important it is to be just at all times even if against ones' own self.

Other examples from the rightly guided Caliphs illustrate how power when exercised correctly comes with an **attitude of humility, magnanimity, servitude and care for all creation of God.**

The second Caliph for example Abu Bakr was seen leaving the mosque early after the morning prayers instead of waiting till sunrise as they used to do when the Prophet was around. Another companion of the Prophet, Umar Ibn

Al Khattab, a very strong and powerful man, was wondering what Abu Bakr got up to now that he was Caliph when he left the mosque early. So he decided to check up on him. He reached a tent and saw an old woman emerging. He stopped and asked her how she was and who was taking care of her? She responded that a strange man came every morning to cook and clean and then he left quickly. Umar was humbled realising it was none other than Abu Bakr the Caliph who personally looked after this old lady. The power Abu Bakr wielded as the ruler did not change him except to try and be the best man.

Abu Bakr was succeeded by Umar Ibn Al Khattab as the second Caliph who became one of the most influential of the early Muslim leaders. It was during his reign that the Islamic empire expanded to include non-Arabian countries, changing the face of Europe, Asia and Africa forever. When the Muslims conquered Jerusalem from Byzantium the Christian Patriarch Sophronius insisted that the Caliph himself come to accept surrender of the city. Because he did not want to give the key to just anyone but only someone who had certain special qualities. So the Caliph Umar travelled all the way from Madina to Jerusalem. Half the world was under his control at the time and he was at the peak of his power. Yet he didn't take a huge entourage with him, just one servant. Even the servant wondered why they were only two? Umar responded that no, they were three: Umar, the servant and the camel. He also advised that they will take turns on the journey- sometimes Umar would ride and the servant would lead and then the servant would ride and Umar would lead while sometimes no one would ride for the same amount of time so that the camel could rest. When they small group finally arrived in Jerusalem it was the servant's turn to ride but he refused to enter the city riding the camel. Umar insisted. It was the servant's turn to ride and they had to be fair because Justice was an essential part of religion. When the Patriarch saw them arriving with the powerful Caliph of the Islamic Empire who had conquered his city not only dressed in simple robes and indistinguishable from his servant but *walking* and leading the camel which the servant rode- he cried because he recognised that this was the man prophesized in his holy books.

Umar's conquest of Jerusalem in 637 was famously peaceful.

It is said that at the time of the lunch time prayers, Sophronius invited Umar to pray in the rebuilt Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Umar declined, fearing that accepting the invitation might endanger the church's status as a Christian

house of worship, and that Muslims might break the treaty and turn the church into a mosque.

As they did with all other cities they conquered, the Muslims presented a treaty detailing the rights and privileges regarding the conquered people and the Muslims in Jerusalem. This treaty was signed by Umar and Patriarch Sophronius, along with some of the generals of the Muslim armies. The text of the treaty read:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. This is the assurance of safety which the servant of God, Umar, the Commander of the Faithful, has given to the people of Jerusalem. He has given them an assurance of safety for themselves for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and healthy of the city and for all the rituals which belong to their religion. Their churches will not be inhabited by Muslims and won't be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their cross, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted... The people of Jerusalem must pay the taxes like the people of other cities. If they pay their taxes according to their obligations, then the conditions laid out in this letter are under the covenant of God, and are the responsibility of His Prophet, of the caliphs and of the faithful...

For the first time, after almost 500 years of oppressive Roman rule, also Jews were once again allowed to live and worship inside Jerusalem.

This Treaty of Umar allowed the Christians of Jerusalem the religious freedom, which the Quran and Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم commanded. It was one of the first and most significant guarantees of religious freedom in history.

I wished there would be the same kind of protection for the rights of Christians and other minorities Muslim countries today. Our political leaders would be well advised to go back to the sources and the history of Islam.

In comparison, just 23 years earlier when Jerusalem was conquered by the Persians from the Byzantines, a general massacre was ordered. Another massacre ensued when Jerusalem was conquered by the Crusaders from the Muslims in 1099.

During the reconquest of Jerusalem from the Crusades in 1187 by Saladin we see another example of chivalry and nobility of the highest order.

At the moment of his greatest triumph, Saladin exhibited **forbearance, mercy, and generosity**.

The Christian chronicler Ernoul describes the events as follows:

I shall tell you of the great courtesy which Saladin showed to the wives and daughters of knights, who had fled to Jerusalem when their lords were killed or made prisoners in battle. When these ladies were ransomed and had come forth from Jerusalem, they assembled and went before Saladin crying for mercy. When Saladin saw them he asked who they were and what they sought. And it was told him that they were the dames and damsels of knights who had been taken or killed in battle. Then he asked what they wished, and they answered for God's sake have pity on them; for the husbands of some were in prison, and of others were dead, and they had lost their lands, and in the name of God let him counsel and help them. When Saladin saw them weeping he had great compassion for them, and wept himself for pity. And he bade the ladies whose husbands were alive to tell him where they were captives, and as soon as he could go to the prisons he would set them free. And all were released wherever they were found. After that he commanded that to the dames and damsels whose lords were dead there should be handsomely distributed from his own treasure, to some more and others less, according to their estate. And he gave them so much that they gave praise to God and published abroad the kindness and honour which Saladin had done to them.<sup>1</sup>

Saladin's magnanimity at this defining moment of history will always be contrasted with the barbaric sacking of the city and indiscriminate murder of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Stanley Lane-Poole, *Saladin and the Fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem*, Beirut: Khayats Oriental Reprints, 1964, p.232-3. (Originally published in London, 1898.) It is not irrelevant to note here that, as Titus Burckhardt says, the Christian 'knightly attitude towards women is Islamic in origin' (*Moorish Culture in Spain*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1972, p.93). Simon de Sismondi, writing in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, asserts that Arabic literature was the source of 'that tenderness and delicacy of sentiment and that reverential awe of women ... which have operated so powerfully on our chivalrous feelings.' (*Histoire de la littérature du Midi de l'Europe*, quoted in R. Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love*, Manchester University Press, 1977, p.20.

its inhabitants by the Christian Crusaders. *in 1099. His lesson of mercy has been immortalised in the words of his biographer, Stanley Lane-Poole:*

*One recalls the savage conquest by the first Crusaders in 1099, when Godfrey and Tancred rode through streets choked with the dead and the dying, when defenceless Moslems were tortured, burnt, and shot down in cold blood on the towers and roof of the Temple, when the blood of wanton massacre defiled the honour of Christendom and stained the scene where once the gospel of love and mercy had been preached. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" was a forgotten beatitude when the Christians made shambles of the Holy City. Fortunate were the merciless, for they obtained mercy at the hands of the Moslem Sultan ... If the taking of Jerusalem were the only fact known about Saladin, it were enough to prove him the most chivalrous and great-hearted conqueror of his own, and perhaps of any, age.<sup>2</sup>*

I am indebted to my friend the scholar Reza Shah Kazemi for the passage on Saladin from a paper he wrote thirteen years ago or so against the modern phenomenon of *Jihadism*.

Saladin, though exceptional, was again expressing essentially Islamic principles of conduct, as laid down by the Qur'an and the Prophet.

Saladin's magnanimity during the reconquest of Jerusalem can be seen as an echo of Prophet Muhammad's conduct at his conquest of Mecca eight years after having been expelled to Medina where he had founded the first Muslim community.

When Prophet Muhammad marched into Mecca with a huge army the Quraysh who had persecuted and maltreated him and his followers previously stood before Muhammad expecting him to take **revenge**. Instead He entered the city with **humility** prostrating himself repeatedly before God, on the back of the camel he was riding.

Muhammad addressed the assembled citizens in the compound around the Kaaba, and reminded his enemies of what they had done to him and his fellow Muslims. He declared:

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<sup>2</sup> Lane-Poole, op. cit., p.233-4.

"The arrogance and racial pride of the heathen days has been **wiped out by God today**. All human beings are descended from Adam, and Adam was made of clay." He recited the following verse of the Quran: "*Oh human beings! We have indeed created you of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may **know** one another. Surely **the most noble of you in the sight of God are those of you who are most deeply conscious of Him**. Surely, God is omniscient, fully Aware.* (Quran, 49:13)

Instead of proudly showing the Meccans who the winner is, Muhammad Sws... declared in a spirit of **magnanimity and tolerance**: "I shall speak to you as Yusuf [Joseph] spoke unto his brothers: '*There is no reproach against you today; God will forgive. He is the most Merciful and the most Compassionate.*'" (You can see this quote towards the end of Surat Yusuf 12). Muhammad declared peace and a general *amnesty* for all, establishing a **paradigm for forgiveness in the moment of his utmost political power**.

**Mecca was transformed** instantaneously, and overnight practically the entire **population embraced Islam**. Erstwhile enemies were thereby converted into stalwart Muslims.

The noble conduct of Prophet Muhammad - embodied the spirit of the following verse of the Quran: *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.* (XLI: 34).

We have seen from the examples of some of the finest men in history how power must be imbued with ethical principles to be a force for the greater Good. And we have touched upon the evil that can come from power when it is devoid of morals and ethics. And all power ultimately belongs to Allah.

I'd like to end with a short excerpt of probably the most comprehensive and profound text on the ethics of governance in Islam which eloquently sums up and elaborates on the points mentioned. The letter was written by the fourth



Caliph Imam Ali, cousin of the Prophet (pbuh) and sent to Malik al Ashtar when Ali appointed him to be governor of Egypt.

Every leader and every aspiring leader should read and memorise this letter as inspiration.

### **The Letter of Imam Ali to Malik al-Ashtar \***

(Written when the Imam appointed him as governor of Egypt and its regions at a time when the rule of its governor, Muhammad b Abi Bakr, was unstable)

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Merciful

This is what the servant of God, Ali, Commander of the Faithful, enjoins upon Malik, b. Al-Harith al Ashtar, in his mandate (*ahd*) to him, appointing him as governor of Egypt: to collect its revenues; to fight its enemies; to establish the welfare of its inhabitants; and to bring prosperity to its lands.

He enjoins him to have fear of God; to prefer obedience to God (above all things); and to abide by what He has commanded in His Book- acts both obligatory and recommended- for no one prospers except thorough abiding by them, and no one is wretched except through repudiating and neglecting them. (He further enjoins him to) assist God with his heart, his hand and his tongue: for truly He- majestic is His Name- has undertaken to grant victory to him who assists Him, and to elevate him who exalts Him. He enjoins him to break the passionate desires of his soul, and to restrain it when it is beset with him and caprice, for truly the soul incites to evil, unless God has mercy.

And be aware, Malik, that I am directing you to a land which has been ruled by states- just and unjust- before you; and that the people will evaluate your conduct, just as you have evaluated the conduct of governors before you. They will speak about you just as you spoke about them; and the righteous are proven such only through what God has caused to flow from the tongues of His servants. So let your most beloved treasure be the treasure of virtuous acts. Dominate your inclinations, and exercise self-restraint in the face of that which is unlawful for you- for indeed self restraint engenders within the soul a proper balance as regards what it likes and what it dislikes.

Infuse your heart with mercy for the subjects, love for them and kindness towards them. Be not like a ravenous beast of prey above them, seeking to devour them. For they are of two types: either your brother in religion or your like in creation. Mistakes slip from them, defects emerge from them, deliberately or accidentally. So bestow upon them your forgiveness and your pardon, just as you would have God bestow upon you His forgiveness and pardon; for you are above them, and the one who has authority over you is above you, and God is above him who appointed you. He expects you to satisfy their needs; through them He tests you.

Do not set your soul up for war with God. For before His retribution you have no resistance, and in the face of His forgiveness and mercy, no independence. So feel no regret when you pardon, and do not rejoice when you punish. Do not let an impulse propel you rashly towards any course of action, if you can see an alternative to it. Do not say, 'I have been given authority, I order and am obeyed', for this leads to corruption in the heart and the erosion of religion; and it brings closer the adversities of fate. If the authority of your position engenders vanity and arrogance, then look at the grandeur of God's dominion above you, and at His power to do for you that which you have no power to do for yourself. This will calm your ambition, restrain you from your own vehemence, and restore to you what had strayed from your intellect...

Dominant the zeal of your pride, the vehemence of your castigation, the power of your hand, and the sharpness of your tongue. Guard against these vices by restraining all impulsiveness, and putting off all resort to force until your anger subsides, and you regain self-control. But you cannot attain such self-domination without increasing your pre-occupation with remembrance of your return to your Lord...

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