

Understanding Islam **Series Three: Building a Just Society**

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Part Twelve: Inviting others to the path

Imagine the scene: a doctor stands looking at her patient, who is terminally ill, and in the doctor's bag, she has the cure for his illness. What kind of a human being would she be if she did not offer it to the sick patient? Now broaden the picture: imagine that humanity was in terminal sickness and a group of people knew the cure; would they not be bound to share it? Even if the cure required a radical change in lifestyle and abandoning some practices to which people had become habituated; surely one would have to offer? Whether humanity agreed to take the remedy and change its ways or not would be for each individual to decide; once those who knew the cure had made it available and accessible, their job would be done. This is the way that Muslims think of inviting others to the path of Islam (*da'wa*).

As we have seen repeatedly, Islam understands itself to be the natural way for human beings and all creation to live (*din al-fitra*). It is the way of obedience to the creator's plan for the creatures. As it is a "natural fit" for human beings, it is not a burden to be imposed but a liberation for those who follow it, which will bring happiness in this life and in the life hereafter. Because it is the God-given straight path that leads through this life to Paradise, it is the birth-right of every human being; everyone has the right and the need to hear the message and be invited to follow it. Not to share it would mean that Muslims don't care about other human beings and they would also be neglecting a duty laid on them by God. This is the rationale of *da'wa*.

The underpinning logic

From the beginning of time, God has been sending guidance to human beings on how to live a fully human life. This has come in the form of many books of scripture and a long line of Prophets; according to a report from Prophet Muhammad, 124,000 of them. The Qur'an tells us that no people has been left without guidance; God has no favourites. The last of these books of guidance is the Qur'an, which is understood to be definitive for all subsequent time and all peoples. The last of the Prophets is Muhammad, who is the seal of prophecy [Q. 33:40]. Islam, the way of life based on the Qur'an and the *sunna* of Muhammad, is the perfect way of life (*din*) [Q. 5:3]. Muhammad was not sent to one group of people but is a mercy to all nations [Q. 21:107] and his message is universal [Q. 34:28]; therefore Islam is *the* way for all human beings [Q. 3:19], including those who still follow an earlier revelation, who, if they were truly following the way of their earlier Prophets, would recognise it as the confirmation of what they now follow. This leads to the conclusion that Islam should be made known to all human beings, who should be invited to follow it.

Da'wa is the invitation or call to follow the way of Islam and the one who issues the call is a *da'i*. "Invitation" is the key word here; it is not something that can be compelled but rather something that must be freely given and accepted with freedom and the use of human reason. The Qur'an tells us that "there is no compulsion in religion; truth stands out clear from error" [Q. 2:256]. People who hear the call are thus invited to examine it for themselves using their reason and see that it is true or reject it, if that is what they choose [Q. 18:29]. The idea of forcing someone to convert to Islam is abhorrent to this Qur'anic way of thinking. Again, we are told that some people will reject the message and decide not to follow it, in which case the Qur'anic attitude is "to you your religion and to me mine" [Q. 109:1-6]. Those who choose to follow the way of Islam, the way of truth, become agents of truth in the world and thus a beacon to others.

A Qur'anic methodology for *da'wa*

The Qur'an gives various pointers towards a methodology that should be adopted in giving the invitation to people to follow the way of Islam. Moses and Aaron are sent to the Pharaoh to ask him to release the Hebrew people from slavery and they are counselled to speak "in a soft manner" in order to win him over [Q. 20:43-44]. This use of a soft voice is also to be seen in the instruction to people not to raise their voices in the presence of the Prophet [Q. 49:2-3], who was also noted for the gentleness of his approach. Likewise, Muslims are counselled to use their reason to interrogate new material and also to check the veracity of what they hear from others [Q. 49:4-6]. This would indicate, for example, not accepting on hearsay what are the beliefs or attitudes of the people to whom they would make *da'wa* but rather to check this out with the people themselves so that there would be no cause for misunderstanding. The Qur'an is against ridicule in dealing with other people [Q. 49:11-12] and gives a firm instruction not to abuse the gods of the idolaters for fear that they might abuse God out of hostility [Q. 6:108]. Just as Muhammad prepared himself by prayer to bear "the weighty word" of the Qur'an [Q. 73:1-5], so Muslims are to prepare themselves for the task of inviting others. They are counselled against arrogance in thinking people are doing them a favour in embracing Islam, just as it was not a favour to Muhammad that people converted but rather the converts had been favoured by God, of whom the Prophet and the Muslims are but agents [Q. 49:17].

The key verse in a Qur'anic methodology of *da'wa* is Q. 16:125. This commands Muslims to invite people to the way of God with beautiful words, the best of arguments and wisdom. "Beautiful words" here obviously means without using coarse or aggressive tones, haranguing people. I am reminded of a scene that I witnessed in a pedestrian shopping area in a major British city, where a Muslim *da'i* and a Christian evangelist were literally standing nose to nose hurling verses from their respective scriptures at each other, and, not surprisingly, all the onlookers were giving them a wide berth and saying, "if that's religion, I want none of it." And again, in the same city, a Muslim *da'i* standing in a public square mounted on a step-ladder with two "minders" in big boots and dark glasses standing at the foot, hectoring passers-by, who certainly wanted nothing to do with his message! "The best of

arguments” rules out verbal “dirty tricks” and slanderous arguments that patently do not bear close examination. There are those who set out selective verses from another scripture and then proceed to attack them with an argument that is manifestly ridiculous to those who follow that faith... and then they wonder why only their supporters are impressed by them! “Wisdom” indicates that one should be sensitive to the audience and choose a time, place and manner that is likely to be productive. I am reminded again of a convert to Islam, who said that he wanted to “engage me in a dialogue” with a view to convincing me of the weight of his arguments as to why I should follow his example and embrace Islam too. He opened his discourse on the floor of a mosque at 2300 and did not let me get in a single word in this “dialogue” until 0300, by which time I was not well disposed to appreciate his methodology! Wisdom was in short supply!

The Prophetic model

As in all things Islamic, Muhammad is the model for the believers [Q. 33:21] and to obey him is to obey God [Q. 4:80]. The Muslim *da'i* should then follow the prophetic model. The Prophet was, of course, one of the utmost sincerity and strength of faith, so this must be the starting point for the *da'i*. Sincerity is an interesting term. It is derived from two Latin words meaning “without wax.” Sculptors and figure-carvers would cover up their mistakes and errors by applying molten wax to their works and smoothing it in so that the purchaser would be fooled into thinking that they were perfect. So to be “without wax” means that there is no covering up; everything is genuinely what it appears. Any lack of sincerity or weakness of faith in the one who would call others to Islam is likely to show up – just as the flaws in the waxed figure would if you placed it too close to the fireplace!

The Prophet was noted as having the best moral character, so that he was spoken of as the “Living Qur'an,” thus every action was a manifestation of the word of God. He was the living example to those who saw him and engaged with him. “Actions speak louder than words,” so says an oft-quoted saying, and the actions of the Prophet were essential parts of his invitation to others. There is an example recorded that on one occasion in Madina he stood up as a sign of respect when a dead Jew was being carried to his place of burial, thus sending a message to his followers and the funeral party. On another occasion, a woman who habitually threw refuse at him in the market place was taken ill, so Muhammad went to visit her out of concern; this changed her appraisal of the man and his teaching; she reformed her ways and embraced Islam there and then. I am reminded of a saying attributed to St Francis of Assisi, who was sending out some of his brothers as missionaries and told them, “Preach the Gospel of Jesus – use words only if you really have to!” The message that is lived out in actions speaks much louder than words.

During the first twelve years of his mission in Makka, Muhammad had limited success in winning people to his message. His community never amounted to more than a few hundred and they faced persecutions and hardship. In this situation, Muhammad showed perseverance and did not lose heart at the limited response.

Perseverance is a quality needed by any *da'i*. The message of Islam is for all humankind, irrespective of their wealth or station in life. Muhammad proclaimed his message to slaves and wrote to the rulers of nations inviting them to embrace Islam; no-one was too high or low to be beyond the reach of his mission but he adapted his methods to suit those that he addressed.

The Qur'an summarises five elements of the prophetic mission [Q. 33: 45-46]. He was a witness (to the truth of what he had received from God), a bearer of good news (the remedy for the ills of humankind in this world and the next), a warner (of the consequences of not following the divine guidance), one who summons to God (issuing the invitation to embrace Islam) and a guiding lamp (lighting the way to closeness to God by example). These five characterise the life and methods for those who would invite others to the way of Islam.

Means of issuing the invitation

Traditionally the means of making *da'wa* were by word and example through personal meeting either in groups or one-to-one. Since the coming of the printing press, many books and leaflets have been printed; often pious Muslims will pay the expense of printing such material in order to make the invitation more widely available. Such leaflets might be handed out in the street or made available at events. With the coming of electronic media, a new range of audio tapes was produced, followed by video tapes and then DVDs. Some of these were talks or structured presentations or debates with various non-Muslims. It was not uncommon in some of them that the Muslim speaker set the rules of debate in such a way that he always won! These were used for training purposes and given to people as a way of spreading around “convincing arguments.” Sometimes unfortunately, the arguments were more convincing to the speaker and his Muslim followers than they were to the non-Muslim target group but they served as a good boost to Muslim morale.

Since the development of the internet, there has been an explosion in sites conveying something of the message of Islam. Too often these sites have a narrow focus and want to push “their understanding of Islam” either ignoring or attacking other Muslim groups. It is hard for the enquirer to know just how authentic or mainstream these websites are and when they are being fed a particular propaganda. It is not difficult after all for a single person with modest means, sufficient technical ability and abundant time to run a number of websites simultaneously, each seeking to push a particular understanding of Islam. Enquirers need to know that there is little of this material that is neutral and presents the range of understandings held by different Muslim groups.

A final word to the recipient of *da'wa*

Anyone who wants to engage with Islam and Muslims in a serious way is bound, sooner or later, to encounter the invitation to embrace Islam and become a Muslim. It might occur to one's own intelligence whilst reading and studying or it may be posed

by a Muslim acquaintance. I regard it as a sign that people care about me and are genuinely concerned about my eternal welfare. It is a question that must be faced in stillness before God; after all, God might be calling a particular person to embrace Islam. On the other hand, “there is no compulsion in matters of religion” and one should feel free to follow one’s conscience and reason, and if it seems right decline the invitation: “To you your religion and to me mine.” In the ultimate tribunal, God alone is the judge and it is to God that we must all answer [Q. 88:21-26].