

Duties of Proximity: Towards a Theology of Neighbourliness

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In the Name of God, Compassionate, Kind.

Blessings upon the Prophet of God, his Kin, and his Companions

BEAUTIFUL MARDIN is indeed an abode of peace! May God keep Mardin peaceful! Yet like all worldly abodes, Mardin is a temporary and fleeting abode. The eternal and constant abode of peace is the hereafter Garden of Paradise, with its ultimate peace of joyfully seeing the divine manifestation of the Lord Himself, The Peace! It is to that hereafter peace that God invites us. The true hereafter abode of peace, '*dar al-salam*', is also the true abode of Islam, '*dar al-islam*'.

Yes, as we strive to gratefully respond to God's invitation to the eternal place of peace: *dar al-salam/dar al-islam*, we are called upon to construct, maintain, and grow environments of worldly peace, like Mardin. Such environments offer ecologies of peace, compassion, and blessing for a wounded humanity, and we are called upon to grow them with all our hearts, minds, and hands.

However, important as they are, such worldly abodes must never be mistaken for the ultimate, eternal one. If we ever get fixated on any worldly abode, we risk missing out on dwelling in the true eternal one. Yes, we must grow and inhabit such abodes because they offer the best environments for living in constant remembrance of God, and according to His divine normativity, and thereby prepare for the eternal peace. However, we must never reduce our goal to the worldly power-obsessed goals of mere political ideologies.

Yes, geographically carved-out abodes of peace were historically important, and will always be important. Islam always needs a strong worldly stronghold. However, Islam must never be conceived of merely geographically, because it is beyond geography. It pertains to the pure and constant worship and remembrance of the One True God, and to the longing-for-His-proximity in the Hereafter. We must never reduce the abode of peace to a worldly *dar al-islam*, conceived of as merely a geographically distinct empire or state.

We must remember that the true *dar al-islam* is the *dar al-salam* of the Hereafter. We must also remember that all worldly abodes make sense, and have value, only as places where we prepare for and strive towards our eternal abode. Key to the healthy and holy living within our worldly abodes is always remembering that it is the hearts of the dwellers

of such abodes that must themselves be indwellings of peace. Without an interiority of the remembrance of God, and an inner conviction in the normativity of His way, there can be no peace in hearts, and no peace in any abodes.

When a heart is alive and luminescent with God's remembrance, and is content to live according to His guidance, that heart is already an abode of peace—*dar salam*, and *dar islam*. It is the faithful heart that can already, in this world, link up with and live in, longing-for the eternal vision of The Peace. Such a heart is constantly drawing near towards that ultimate proximity that can only be achieved in the Hereafter.

The interior abodes of peace in the hearts of the faithful are the essential seeds from which worldly peaceful environments grow, and through which the eternal abode is prepared for. Such interior abodes can live and grow within a multiplicity of worldly situations, and need not be, and cannot really be, limited to geographically delimited zones of the world, '*dar islam*'. The 'Muslim World' is the entire cosmos, and is no mere worldly empire! Every human heart, and even every creaturely sign (*aya*), that adores, remembers, and glorifies the One True God, is already an abode of peace, and is already a 'Muslim world'!

The historical fact that Muslims did establish and grow empires must not blind us to the fact that Islam is beyond empire, and as a matter of fact, is originally and fundamentally a 'dispersed divine light', and not a mere worldly political force. It is said in several hadiths that, originally, God dispersed of His own light sparks of compassion and guidance. Wherever those sparks of light are, that is an abode of peace!

The astonishing phenomenon of cultural and religious diaspora that we clearly witness today must not be viewed negatively. We must not be obsessed with an Islam conceived of only geographically and politically, and must remember also an Islam conceived of luminescently and spiritually. Such a luminescent Islam can shine wherever and whenever it happens to be. Such an Islam is always oriented towards, and always conducive to the eternal abode of ultimate peace, *dar al-salam*, to which God invites us.

The scattered sparks of dispersed light are a source of guidance even in the darkest corners of the earth. It is very important to remember that the state of such sparks of light, as strange luminescent spots in what are often oceans of darkness, is not an abnormal or anomalous state to be in. 'Islam began a stranger and shall be a stranger, blessed are the strangers!' is a hadith that we often forget.

Being alienated, estranged, unsettled, and always on-the-way is not a pathological state to be in. Rather, it is the very state of healthy Islamic living! We must stop lamenting alienation, and begin to realize that such alienation is a sign of healthy and righteous living. If we ever feel at-home and settled in any worldly abode, even if it happens to be an abode-of-peace, we are very likely to be in a state of temptation that distracts us from striving towards our true eternal peace.

This is why living in diaspora is often more conducive to healthy and sincere Muslim

living! Empires and carved-out ‘Islamic states’ often make us complacent, and can actually become a hindrance rather than a help to sincere Muslim living.

Indeed, it is classical scholarly consensus that it is not permissible for a Muslim to live in a hostile disbelieving environment (*dar al-kufr*). However, it is a fact that today many liberal environments are actually more conducive to Muslim living and worshiping than many so-called ‘Muslim countries’. As a matter of fact many Muslims today are actually forced to move to non-Muslim countries because of political or economic insecurity. At least up to 9/11, and in many places, even after it, many ‘non-Muslim’ countries fare quite better than many so-called ‘Muslim countries’, and even ‘Muslim states’, in allowing Muslim living.

There is a very important lesson to learn from the often forgotten 1st Hijra. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) asked his persecuted early followers to seek refuge (*jiwar*) in the kingdom of Axum, ruled by a Christian king from Nagash (and hence the Arabic name: *Najashi*). King Najashi was a wise and noble host to his early Muslim guests. As a Companion of the Prophet (peace be upon him) put it: ‘When we resided in the land of Abyssinia we took refuge (*jawarna*) with a goodly and protective neighbour (*jar*), Najashi, he made us safe in our religion, and we were able to worship God without being harmed or hearing anything hurtful whatsoever.’

A liberal welcoming environment in which a Muslim can freely practice his religion in which he is neither persecuted nor humiliated, is an environment that offers a sort of abode of peace, even in the very midst of, and often because of, its liberal secularism.

Muslims today must remember that not all types of secularisms are anti-religious. Anglo-American common law secularisms that define secularism as separation of state and religion, but are also open to the free practice of all religions is not anti-Islamic. For example, it is precisely because Christianity is not allowed to be the ‘established religion’ of the United States of America that there is room for Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus to thrive there.

Yes, there are still in our world today forms of French-revolution-like secularisms that are anti-religious, and because they are anti-religious are often anti-Islamic. Historically, anti-religious secularism has often matured towards wiser and more generous and accommodating liberal forms. Muslims must dialogically and compassionately engage such secularisms to help them mature towards higher forms that are open to religiosity, and to Islam.

Muslims must remember that so long as the Catholic Church dominated Europe, Muslims, like Jews, did not stand a chance of comfortable living in Europe. It is only after liberal secular states managed to overcome the dominance of the Catholic Church that Muslims managed to live in Europe with more comfort and safety. We must not see secular liberalism as hostile to Islam. We must help secularisms mature to become more and more accepting of religious values in life. Much has been lost because of the lumping together of

all sorts of secularism under the negative generic rubric of ‘*almaniyya*’. A great deal of discernment and wisdom is called for in this regard.

The Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him, and may God be pleased with them) found it sufficient for Najashi to offer them freedom of religious practice for them to see him as a good neighbourly protector. Yes, many of them moved along to Madina when there was an environment in which they could live their religiosity more fully, at the political level. However, no one can claim that their religiosity under Najashi was in any way questionable or deficient.

Not only this, but they were encouraged by the Prophet (peace be upon him) to be loyal and supportive to the Christian king who offered them refuge. The Companions lived loyally under that king until Madina offered them a better place to live. To this day Nagash offers concrete evidence, in the form of a recently excavated ancient cemetery, to the fact that the early Muslim community continued to thrive in Nagash even after the Muslim community was well-established in Madina.

An Islamic state is not an end-in-itself, but is a means to establishing environments in which Muslims can freely and fully live their Islam. If non-Muslim states happen to offer such environments, and are welcoming of a Muslim diaspora, we must not belittle them or be hostile to them in any way, but live respectfully within them, loyally and supportively, as proactive, productive, and cooperative citizens.

Now, in such non-hostile conducive and accepting liberal environments, how is a Muslim supposed to live with others, and what duties does a Muslim have towards others?

For the discernment of proper conduct towards others, the traditional discourse of ‘abodes’ was indeed very helpful in the past, and may still be helpful under certain conditions and situation. However, I would like to suggest here, for scholarly reflection, discussion, correction, and expansion, the idea that a fresh discourse of ‘*neighbourliness*’ and ‘*duties of proximity*’ may be more helpful in many situations in our world of today. The rights and duties associated with neighbourliness, what can be called ‘rights and duties of proximity’, are very important, and can be very helpful to us.

No one questions that there are rights and duties of neighbourliness in Islam. The Qur’an, the Hadith, and the tradition are very rich sources of myriad gems of wisdom in this regard. However, some mistakenly think that such rights and duties are limited to neighbourliness within a Muslim community, and only amongst Muslims. This is simply not the case, and must be clarified from the very outset, if we are to make any progress.

The best Qur’anic evidence for the fact that the rights and duties of neighbourliness include non-Muslim is the Qur’anic phrase ‘*al-jar al-junub*’ (literally: ‘the distant neighbour’). Yes, there are scholarly differences of opinion as to how this phrase is to be understood. However, as the great exegete al-Qurtubi puts it: ‘The best opinion and most worthy of being correct, is the opinion that “*junub*”, in this context, means “the stranger and

distant”, be he Muslim, Polytheists, Jew or Christian.’

The best Hadith evidence that the duties of proximity extend to non-Muslim neighbours, is the Prophet’s (peace be upon him) instruction to his Companions (may God be pleased with them): ‘Get up! Let us go visit our ill Jewish neighbour.’

The best evidence that the Companions understood the Prophetic teachings regarding the duties of proximity to include non-Muslim neighbours are plenty, but it is sufficient to cite the fact that whenever the Companion Abdullah ibn Amr (may God be pleased with him), who had a Jewish neighbour, slaughtered a lamb, he would say to his household: ‘Take some of it to our neighbour, for I heard the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) saying: “[Angel] Jibril kept asking me to take care of the neighbour to the point where I thought that we would make him an inheritor [like close kin].” ’

There is also plenty of evidence that such generosity was also reciprocated by non-Muslim neighbours and accepted by the Companions with no hesitation. The story of Asma bint Abi Bakr (may God be pleased with them both) craving for, and receiving, a grilled piece of lamb from a Jewish neighbouring household suffices in this regard.

So, the limiting of duties of proximity to only Muslims has no basis in the Qur’an, Hadith, or the Tradition. Some Hadith teachings that may seem negative regarding the Jews of Madina must not be generalized, but must be read according to the specific hostile circumstances of the post-Al-Ahzab situation.

Now, that we got the limiting of the scope of the duties of proximity out of the way, let us actually look at what these duties are. There is an entire literature on the rights of neighbours and the duties of proximity, and we cannot possibly do them justice here.

However, there is a comprehensive Hadith that conveniently and authoritatively summarizes them for us and it can actually be written in the form of a list. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) says:

‘Do you know what the right of the neighbour is?

- If he seeks your help, help him.
- If he asks you for a loan, loan him.
- If he becomes poor, support him.
- If he falls ill, visit him.
- If he dies, participate in his funeral.
- If a calamity befalls him, comfort him.
- Do not build higher than his house, in a manner that blocks the fresh air, except with his permission.
- When you buy fruits, gift some to him. If you can’t, then take them into your home quietly, and do not let your child take [the fruits] out [of the house] so as to make his child envious.
- Do not bother him with the aroma of your cooking pot, unless you share some of it with him.

Do you really know the right of the neighbour? I swear by Him who possesses my soul; only a person blessed with God's compassion can truly realize the right of the neighbour!"

Such are the amazingly compassionate and comprehensive duties of proximity taught by our Prophet (peace be upon him). Such duties, if we actually live up to them, would bring healing and peace to Muslims living with all neighbours, Muslim or non-Muslim.

Yes, a Muslim may have additional duties towards another Muslim, and have yet more duties towards a Muslim neighbour who happens to also be a relative. However, the fundamental duties toward neighbours are universally normative, and must be lived up to in all environments in which Muslims live.

There is another important hadith that speaks of an even more basic duty than the duties listed above. This is the duty not to harm one's neighbours. Prophet Muhammad's judgement (peace be upon him), on a Muslim who harms his neighbour, be that neighbour Muslim or non-Muslim (as we saw above), is amazingly drastic. He says (peace be upon him):

'By God, he does not believe! By God, he does not believe! By God, he does not believe! [The Companions said:] "Who is that, Oh Messenger of God?" He said: "The neighbour whose neighbour is not safe from his mischief." They said: "Oh, Messenger of God: 'What is his mischief?' He said: "His evil-acts (*shar*)".'

Thus, the Prophet actually denies belief itself (*iman*) to a person who harms his neighbour! Our neighbours, then, wherever we happen to live, have a fundamental right to safety, and we have a fundamental duty not to harm them. What would happen to our world if we lived up to this fundamental normative *Sunnah* of the Prophet of God (peace be upon him)!

Being key to belief (*iman*) itself, the living-up-to-our-duties-of-proximity is actually nothing less than a 'Categorical Imperative'. As a matter of fact that kind of righteous living is indeed expressed by the Prophet (peace be upon him) as a Categorical Imperative: 'None of you will truly believe until he desires for his brother (or neighbour) what he desires for himself.'

It is according to this Prophetic Categorical Imperative that we are supposed to live with all our neighbours, be they Muslim or non-Muslim. Such wholeness living would be true Muslim compassionate living: what the Qu'ran and Sunnah call '*marhama*' and '*tarahum*'. This compassionate living flows from the very font of Islam.

Islam is the religion taught to us by The Compassionate (*Al-Rahman*), through a Prophet who is a 'gentle and compassionate' (*Ra'uf, Rahim*) 'gifted-compassion' (*rahama-tun muhdat*), who came with a book that is 'a guidance and a compassion' (*hudan wa rahma*), and who basically taught us a lesson, which is transmitted to us by our teachers

in unbroken chains: “The exercisers of compassion (*al-rahimun*) shall be shown compassion by The Compassionate (*Al-Rahman*). Exercise compassion towards the earthly, and you shall receive compassion from the Heavenly One!

It is through the living in mutual-compassion (*tarahum*) that we build ‘abodes of compassion and peace’, like Mardin, wherever we happen to live in God’s wide land (*ardullahi al-wasi’a*). May God keep the peace in Mardin, and grant our brothers and sisters in Islam and in humanity, especially in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and the Philippines, peace.

God knows best!

God’s peace, compassion and blessing upon you all.

Thank you.