

## **Islam's teaching on response to abuse and mockery**

*Show patience under provocation, disregard abuse and  
politely turn away from abusers. Violence not allowed.*

**by Dr. Zahid Aziz**

According to the religion of Islam, Muslims can only respond to verbal abuse, mockery and lampooning of their faith and its sacred figures in the following forms.

1. Any criticism of Islam, or allegations against it, which underlie the abuse must be refuted and answered by means of words and speech.
2. Apart from answering specific criticism, all possible efforts must be made to present the true and accurate picture of Islam in general. With more enlightenment and less ignorance prevailing about Islam and its Holy Prophet Muhammad, the instances of abuse, vituperation and mockery will decrease.
3. As regards the offence or hurt that Muslims naturally feel as a result of such abuse, they are taught to respond by:
  - a) bearing the provocation with resolute patience,
  - b) ignoring the abuse,
  - c) separating themselves temporarily from the company of the abusers while the abuse continues,
  - d) exercising forgiveness in view of the ignorance of the abusers.

All this is stated plainly and categorically in the Holy Quran and is evident from the actions of the Holy Prophet Muhammad. It is not allowed by Islam to respond intemperately with fury and rage, call for physical retribution and punishment, or threaten or attack anyone with physical violence.

It is entirely false and totally unfounded to allege that Islam teaches Muslims to attack or seek to murder anyone who verbally abuses their religion, mocks it, or offends their feelings towards their faith.

Below we give arguments from the Holy Quran and incidents from the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad to prove the above points. We are confident that no one can cite any text from the Holy Quran which contradicts the position set out below.

We may preface our discussion with the following saying of the Holy Prophet Muhammad:

“The Muslim who mixes with the people and bears patiently their hurtful words, is better than one who does not mix with people and does not show patience under their abuse.”<sup>1</sup>

What a noble and wonderful piece of guidance, which is so applicable in the modern world in which people of widely differing faiths and opposing views have to mix and come into contact so much!

### **Teachings of the Holy Quran**

As a general point, it may first be noted that the Holy Quran itself records the many accusations made against, and the insults heaped upon, the Holy Prophet Muhammad by his opponents during his life (for example, that he was insane, or that he fabricated his revelation), and it answers these charges, but nowhere does it require Muslims to inflict any kind of punishment on the accusers. If such abuse or criticism requires to be silenced by force, then why should the Quran itself have quoted so much of it from its opponents' mouths and thus preserved it forever?

The Holy Quran tells Muslims:

1. “You will certainly hear much abuse from the followers of previous books and from the idol-worshipping people. And if you are patient and keep your duty — this is surely a matter of great resolution.” — 3:186
2. “Many of the followers of previous books wish that they could turn you back into disbelievers after you have believed, but you should pardon and forgive.” — 2:109

In connection with these verses, it is recorded in the Hadith collection Bukhari:

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<sup>1</sup> *Mishkat*, Book: Ethics, chapter: ‘Gentleness, modesty and good behaviour’.

“The Messenger of Allah and his Companions used to forgive the idolators and the followers of previous books, as Allah had commanded them, and they used to show patience on hearing hurtful words.”<sup>2</sup>

Addressing the Holy Prophet, God says in the Quran:

1. “Bear patiently what they say.” — 20:130 and 50:39.
2. “And bear patiently what they say and forsake them with a becoming withdrawal.” — 73:10.
3. “Obey not the disbelievers and the hypocrites, and disregard their hurtful talk.” — 33:48

In the verses quoted above, Muslims are taught to bear their feelings of hurt and anger with patience, and to ignore the abuse.

Another verse having some bearing on this subject is as follows:

“And if you invite them to guidance, they hear not; and you see them looking towards you, yet they see not. Hold fast to forgiveness and enjoin goodness and turn away from the ignorant.” — 7:198-199

This directs us that when we have to deal with people who are blindly prejudiced and ignorant, and therefore fail to understand the guidance, we must not give vent to anger, fury and violence against them. We should treat them with forgiveness, do our duty of enjoining simple acts of goodness that everyone recognises as good, and then turn away from them, leaving the matter in the hands of Allah.

### **Withdrawing from company**

Muslims are told:

“When you hear Allah’s messages disbelieved in and mocked at, sit not with them until they enter into some other discourse.”  
— 4:140; see also 6:68.

These passages deal with the case when the religion is being mocked and derided (as distinct from being criticised). A Muslim is required to

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<sup>2</sup> Bukhari, Book: ‘Commentary on the Quran’, ch. 16 under *Sura* 3. In the Muhsin Khan translation see the report 6:60:89.

do no more than to withdraw from such a company, and even that only while the mocking continues, and actually to rejoin the same company when they have changed the subject! How far from ordering Muslims to kill such people! Muslims are instructed to part company with them for the duration of their gratuitous abuse but still maintain other aspects of their relationship with those very offenders. Can any teaching be nobler and more uplifting?

Any criticism underlying the abuse must, of course, be answered. But the response to any sheer abuse, ridicule or mockery is withdrawal of oneself from the company of the abusers. The following verse, addressed to the Prophet Muhammad, has already been quoted above:

“And bear patiently what they say and forsake them with *a becoming withdrawal.*” — 73:10.

The word for “becoming” here means literally ‘beautiful’. The ‘withdrawal’ therefore is to be done in a dignified, well-mannered way, not by descending to their level of misbehaviour and abuse.

### **Some incidents from the Holy Prophet Muhammad’s life**

1. Suhayl ibn Amr was a prominent man among the opponents of the Holy Prophet Muhammad at Makka. He was a spokesman and skilled orator of the Quraish tribe, and used to employ his oratory in making speeches against the Holy Prophet. He was captured by the Muslims at the battle of Badr and brought before the Holy Prophet. Umar ibn al-Khattab suggested that the following punishment should be applied to him before releasing him:

“O Prophet of God, let me pull out Suhayl’s front teeth so that he would never be able to exercise his oratory against you.”

The Holy Prophet replied without hesitation:

“Certainly not. I will not mutilate anyone, for God would mutilate me even though I am His Prophet.”

The Holy Prophet also made this prediction about Suhayl: “Perhaps one day he will say something which will make you happy.” Some six years later when Makka was conquered by the Holy Prophet, he declared a pardon for all his former enemies including Suhayl. Deeply moved by this compassionate treatment, Suhayl embraced Islam. Two years later when the Holy Prophet died and the Muslims were plunged

into confusion and uncertainty, then just as in Madina Abu Bakr made a speech that restored their faith and composure, likewise in Makka it fell to Suhayl to make a similar speech that reinforced the confidence of the Muslims of that city too that Islam would continue to exist despite the Holy Prophet's death. Thus was fulfilled the Holy Prophet's prophecy that the man who was making speeches attacking Islam would one day make a speech that would bring Muslims great joy.<sup>3</sup>

2. Once when the Holy Prophet divided some wealth among his followers, a man accused him to his face of being unfair and insulted him by telling him:

“Fear God, O Muhammad.”

After the man had left, a Muslim asked the Holy Prophet's permission to go and kill him. The Holy Prophet refused to allow it and actually tried to find some good in the man by saying:

“Perhaps he says his prayers.”

That Muslim replied:

“There are many people who pray, but what they say with their tongues is not what is in their hearts.”

He meant that the man might not be a Muslim at heart. The Holy Prophet replied:

“I have not been commanded by God to look inside people's hearts or cut open their insides.”<sup>4</sup>

3. Once some Jews accosted the Holy Prophet Muhammad by distorting the greeting *as-salamu alaikum* (“peace be upon you”) and saying it as *as-samu alaikum*, which means “death be upon you”. His wife Aisha retorted: “And upon you be death and curse”. The Holy Prophet told her:

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<sup>3</sup> Compiled from: (1) Muhammad Husein Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, ch. The Great Battle of Badr, p. 239 of the 8th edition's translation, 1983. (2) The biography of Suhayl Ibn Amr at the University of Southern California Muslim Texts website: [www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/history/biographies/sahaabah/bio.SUHAYL\\_IBN\\_AMR.html](http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/history/biographies/sahaabah/bio.SUHAYL_IBN_AMR.html)

<sup>4</sup> *Bukhari*, Book *Maghazi*, ch. 63, and Book *Al-Anbiya*, ch. 6. In the Muhsin Khan translation see the reports 4:55:558 and 5:59:638.

“Be calm, Aisha, Allah loves that one should be kind and lenient in all matters”,

or according to another version he said:

“Be calm, Aisha. You should be kind and lenient, and beware of using harsh and bad language.”

The Holy Prophet said that he had heard their greeting and had given them a sufficient reply by simply saying: “and upon you too”. Thus the utmost extent of the retaliation, far from being to attack them physically, was not even to repeat the same words against them but to reply that whatever they wished him, he wished them the same.<sup>5</sup>

4. Once there were four men who spread an accusation of immoral conduct against the Holy Prophet’s wife Aisha. Their allegation was ultimately proved to be false. One of them, called Mistah, who was poor, used to receive financial assistance from Aisha’s father, Abu Bakr (the foremost follower of the Holy Prophet Muhammad and later the first Caliph of Islam). After this incident, Abu Bakr swore never again to help Mistah. The following verse was revealed to the Holy Prophet on this occasion:

“Let not the possessors of grace and means among you swear against giving to the near relatives and the poor and those who had to flee in God’s way. Pardon and overlook. Do you not love that God should forgive you?” (24:22)

Hearing this, Abu Bakr exclaimed:

“Indeed, I certainly love that God should forgive me.”

He then resumed providing assistance to Mistah, as before.<sup>6</sup>

Note that this allegation was not made against just an ordinary Muslim woman, but the wife of the Holy Prophet, and therefore it struck at the holy household at the centre of the religion of Islam, which was required to be a model of purity for all Muslims. In view of this, the forgiveness taught in the above verse, and put into practice by

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<sup>5</sup> Bukhari, Book *Al-Adab*, ch. 35 and ch. 38. In Muhsin Khan translation see the reports 8:73:53 and 57.

<sup>6</sup> Bukhari, Book *Ash-Shahadat*, ch. 15. In Muhsin Khan translation see the report 3:48:829.

Abu Bakr, the greatest of Muslims after the Holy Prophet, becomes all the more generous and magnanimous.

In incidents number (1) and (2) above, the Holy Prophet Muhammad *protected* from any harm those who had insulted and abused him. In number (2), *he did not even want to think ill* of his slanderer. In incident number (4), the Holy Prophet Muhammad received revelation from God asking Muslims *not only to pardon* a man who had slandered his wife with an accusation of immoral conduct but also *to continue providing financial help* to him. Obeying this, Hazrat Abu Bakr continued to financially assist a man who had stigmatised his daughter. One cannot imagine that anyone, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, faced with the same situation whether in those days or now, would ever forgive such a man.