

12 Peace

Summary 12.1 Health and Salvation. – 12.2 Greetings and Farewells. – 12.3 The Ways of Peace.

The sura ‘The Gathering’ closes with a passage that has had a profound influence on Muslim piety:

He is God; there is no other god but He. He is the knower of the unseen and the seen; He is the All-merciful, the All-compassionate. He is God, there is no other god but He, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Peace [*al-salām* السلام], the Bestower of Faith, the Overseer, the Exalted in Might, the Compeller, the Supreme. Exalted is God above whatever they associate with Him. He is God, the Creator, the Inventor of all things, the Bestower of forms. To Him belong the Beautiful Names, and everything that is in the heavens and on the earth glorifies Him. And He is the All-Mighty, the All-Wise. (Qur’ān LIX, 22-4)

On this passage, and others like it, is based the doctrine of the Beautiful Names, and the list it proposes includes ‘the Peace’ (*al-salām*), the definite article being a way of insisting on divine absoluteness.

As in the case of other Names and the corresponding Islamic virtues, it is worth asking to what extent the contents of the Arabic *salām* correspond to those of the English ‘peace’. We can turn once again to the great medieval dictionaries, and note that the contents of *salām* include first of all salvation and safety, and then immunity or freedom from faults, defects and vices. The English ‘peace’, on the other hand, deriving from the Latin *pax* via the Old French *pais*, refers to ideas of binding, connecting and welding; and then too, *pax* is akin to *pactum*. Thus, in its most immediate contents – which are the absence of war and conflict, concord and harmony of purpose – ‘peace’ is not entirely superimposable on *salām*; the latter is

closer to the Latin *salus*, meaning soundness and wellbeing. The Qur'ānic commentators teach, in fact, that God is *al-salām* not because He possesses or bestows peace in the usual sense of the word, but because of His perfection – because He is healthy and free of vices, deficiencies, and infirmities,¹ and therefore the Perfect One; but also because He takes care that His creatures are unharmed by any injustice on His part; and, again, because He is the One who greets the blessed in paradise.

The sura *Yā-Sīn* puts it thus:

Those who merit paradise on that day will be happily employed, they and their spouses, reclining upon couches, in the shade. They will have therein fruits, and all that they ask for. And 'Peace!' – such will be the greeting from an All-compassionate Lord. (Qur'ān XXXVI,55-8)

God is thus the Peace, but He is also 'the One who greets' (*al-musallim* المسلم) wishing, or rather confirming, the salvation earned by the obedient.

In agreement with his colleagues before and since, Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī explains in his book on the Names that God is *al-salām* in the sense that He is, in His essence, sound (*sālim* سالم), being free from every imperfection, and free in His attributes from every deficiency, and in deeds from any baseness; and he teaches that all existing soundness (*salāma* سلامة) must necessarily be ascribed to Him because it can only derive from Him. In the firm conviction that the Names are reflected in His creatures in the form of virtues, al-Ghazālī declares that there exist among men some who come close to this authentic healthfulness that is without equal or peer, and these are those who are sound in heart from all deceit, hatred, envy or evil intentions, sound in body from all sin or iniquity, and sound enough in their characters that they will not change by allowing their intellect to succumb to desire and anger, making them the opposite of what they are.²

The idea of peace is also for al-Ghazālī essentially an idea of adequacy and perfection, since its opposite is not exactly the violence of confrontation but rather disease, that risks becoming virulent, or imperfection understood as vice or inadequacy, even in a physical sense. From this perspective, the man at peace – or the community or society, for it is clear that peace as a divine gift is inseparable from peace as a political objective – is close to God in the sense of having some degree of likeness to Him, but at the same time is in the most ordinary and natural condition, one of soundness. The idea that follows from this is a remarkable one: to the Islamic mentality, reconciliation does not only mean reaching and observing an agreement, as in the Western tradition that associates peace with relations under the law, and connects *pax* to *iustitia*; but also, and most importantly, healing from a sickness in the heart and in behaviour. Western 'peace' and Islamic *salām* imply, then, almost opposite visions of man and the world: *salām* is normality, interrupted by pathology, while *pax* is a happy eventuality, brought about by contract.

¹ On the meanings of *salām*, cf. also Larcher 2012, 68-72.

² Al-Ghazālī 1971, 69-70.

12.1 Health and Salvation

The term *salām* occurs in the dozens of times; and to these we should add the less numerous but by no means insignificant recurrences of the quasi-synonyms *silṁ* سِلْم, *salm* سَلْم and *salām* سَلَام. But unlike the latter, which can readily appear in a context of belligerence, making peace the immediate correlative of war, *salām* embraces a much wider and more significant content.

Bearing in mind the internal chronology of the Book of Islam, whose revelation was spread over more than two decades – from 610 to 632 CE – the oldest reference to peace we find in the sura ‘The Night of Destiny’ – or ‘of the Decree’, or ‘of Power’ (*laylat al-Qadr* ليلة القدر) –, when, according to classical exegesis, the Qur’ān was revealed:

We revealed it on the Night of Destiny. Would that you knew what the Night of Destiny is! The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months. It is when the angels and the Spirit [*rūḥ* روح] descend, by the leave of their Lord, upon every command. That Night is peace [*salām*] until the break of dawn. (Qur’ān XCVII,1-5)

Here, the commentators read *salām* not as the absence of conflict but as wide-ranging healthfulness or integrity: this was a night free from evil, they explain, a night of goodness, where the good is of course the Qur’ānic revelation and the salvation it brought with it.

An interesting suggestion, and not an isolated one, is that of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in *The Keys to the Unknown*: the ‘night of peace’ means that the angels, on that precise night of the year, descend from the heavens in ranks and ceaselessly greet the believers; the author recalls the greeting (*salām*) addressed by the angels to Abraham when they asked him for hospitality (XI, 60; XV,52; LI,25), which procured that patriarch happiness and God’s favour – and the same, declares al-Rāzī, is what happens to believers on the Night of Destiny.³

In fact, the most frequent Qur’ānic occurrences of *salām* are found in the context of greetings, corresponding to ‘best wishes for salvation’. Consequently, the Islamic greeting *par excellence*, *al-salām* ‘alay-kum (normally translated ‘peace be upon you’), is in fact a far more powerful wish for good in general, with not only immediate but also eschatological relevance; it is not simply an offer of peaceful relations, with the promise of eschewing any hostility, but is a wish for salvation from all evil now and forever. This aspect is found in the many greetings that, still according to the Qur’ān, believers are expected to address to one another. An example from the sura ‘The Cattle’ combines the peace greeting with an invocation to God to grant the other Mercy and Forgiveness:

And when those who believe in Our revelations come to you, say ‘Peace be upon you’. Your Lord has prescribed for Himself mercy. To whosoever of you does evil in ignorance, and thereafter repents and makes amends, He is All-forgiving, All-compassionate. (Qur’ān VI,54)

The many heavenly greetings, whether between the angels and the blessed or between the blessed and one another (which, added to the greetings that

³ Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur’ān XCVII,5.

God himself pronounces, resound up above everywhere and continuously) are to be understood precisely in the sense of confirming the attainment of salvation from eschatological punishment. That is why Paradise is called *dār al-salām* دار السلام (VI,127; X,25), that is, the abode of peace, or of salvation, or, no doubt, the abode of greeting.

We can also read in a similar fashion the many greetings that God addresses to the prophets in the Qur'ān, whether as a group (XXXVII,181), or individually to Noah, Abraham, Moses and Aaron, Elijah (XXXVII,79 ff.), to the Prophet Muḥammad (XXXVI,56), of course, and also to Jesus son of Mary, the only one in the Qur'ān who openly addresses the greeting to himself:

He said: – I am God's servant; God has given me the Book, and made me a Prophet. And He has made me blessed wheresoever I be, and has enjoined on me Prayer and Charity as long as I live. And He has made me dutiful toward her who bore me, and has not made me arrogant or unblest. Peace on me [*al-salām 'alayya*] the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive. (XIX,30-3)

Another remarkable passage on greeting and wishing for peace is found in the sura *Ṭā-Hā*, where God commands Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh to convert him and convince him to let the Israelites go free:

– Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, for he has indeed transgressed, and speak to him with gentle speech, perhaps he may accept admonition or fear God.

The replied: – Our Lord, indeed we are afraid that he will hasten to do evil to us or that he will transgress further.

And God said: – Fear not, surely I shall be with you, Hearing and Seeing. So go you both to Pharaoh, and say 'We are the Messengers of your Lord, so send forth with us the Children of Israel and do torment them; we have brought you a sign from your Lord; and peace be upon him who follows the Guidance. (XX,43-7)

Since the salutation refers first of all to eternal salvation, it must be subordinate to Guidance (*hudā*), to conformity to the divine precepts; and this is not the case with Pharaoh. This is why Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, recalling the opinion of some ancient commentator, goes so far as to suggest that the invocation for peace or salvation uttered by Moses was not at all addressed to the unbelieving and rebellious Egyptian, but by Moses to himself, and was the particular way in which the prophet of the Hebrews declared himself to be guided by the Lord and therefore upright and virtuous.⁴ Al-Qurṭubī, too, in *The Compendium of the Judgements of the Qur'ān* teaches that only those who follow His Guide are saved from God's wrath; consequently, in his view, the greeting from Moses and Aaron was by no means meant to be such, nor can it be understood as a mere formula of the kind used when meeting or when addressing a letter; on the contrary, it was a warning, no less.⁵

⁴ Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XX,47.

⁵ Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qur'ān XX,47.

12.2 Greetings and Farewells

Be that as it may, the Qur'ān teaches that the greeting should be extended even to those who do not believe, as Abraham did to his father according to the sura 'Mary'; when his father threatened to stone him and cast him out because he refused to worship his gods, Moses replied: "Peace be upon you, I will ask forgiveness for you from my Lord who has always been benevolent towards me" (Qur'ān XIX,46-7).

In other cases, the *salām* salutation appears to be instead a manifestation of indifference, and may even adopt an impatient tone or one close to an ultimatum, in the end having more to do with hoping of preserving one's own wellbeing against the evil of others – a wellbeing that requires a certain distancing. This is the sense, for example, of a verse in the sura *al-Zukhruf* 'The Ornaments': "And the Prophet said: – O my Lord! These are a folk who believe not. Then turn away from them, and say 'Peace!'. Soon shall they know" (XLIII,88-9). And, again, in the sura 'The Stories': "And when they hear vain talk, they withdraw from it and say: – To us our deeds, and to you your deeds. Peace be upon you. We seek not the ignorant" (XXVIII,55).

Along similar lines to the previous passages there is a verse in the sura *al-Furqān* 'The Criterion': "The servants of the Beneficent God are those who walk humbly on the earth and when addressed by the ignorant ones, their only response is 'Peace be upon you'" (XXV,63). The meaning is perfectly clear here and implies no restrictions. In fact, al-Ṭabarī explains that the answer '*salām*' is characteristic of believers, who, unlike the ignorant, are 'judicious', an observation that is all the more telling when we remember that in the Islamic perception a judicious (*ḥalīm*) man is one who responds to evil with good.⁶ But this is not the only possible viewpoint. Al-Zamakhsharī, in *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths*, for example, takes a more neutral stance: that *salām* implies neither friendship nor enmity, neither good nor bad, existing between the greeter and the greeted.⁷

And little more than a century later, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī makes a clear distinction between *salām* understood as good wishes for health and salvation and *salām* as a final farewell, and teaches that in the above verse from the sura 'The Criterion' (XXV,63), 'Peace be upon you' is evidently an example of the latter. Furthermore, al-Rāzī notes that according to some, this verse was abrogated (*mansūkh*) by the 'verse of combat' (*āyat al-qitāl* أية القتال), a passage in the sura 'The Repentance' (IX,29) that decrees war against the infidels.⁸ However, the distinguished theologian dissociates himself from such a reading: in his view, showing indifference and not responding in kind to the stupidity of others is more in line with the Law, good sense, and also the integrity (*salām*) of honour and the fear of God.⁹

6 Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur'ān XXV,63.

7 Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qur'ān XXV,63.

8 Cf. Qatāda Ibn Dī'āma according to the Hanbali Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200): "Everything in the Qur'ān advising avoidance of conflict with the disbelievers is abrogated by the *āyat al-sayf* [the 'verse of the sword', Qur'ān IX,5] and *āyat al-qitāl* [IX,29]".

9 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XXV,63.

12.3 The Ways of Peace

The sura ‘The Table Spread with Food’ contains a powerful call for the conversion of those who have received their own heavenly Book:

People of the Book [...], there has come to you from God a light, and a clarifying Book wherewith God guides whosoever follows His pleasure in the ways of peace, and brings them forth from the shadows into the light by His leave; and He guides them to a straight path. (Qur’ān V,15-16)

In this passage, we find a concomitance between “the ways of peace” (or ‘of salvation’, *subul al-salām* سبيل السلام), and a “straight path” (*ṣirāṭ mustaqīm* صراط مستقيم), a coincidence that takes on its proper significance when we remember that the straight path *par excellence* is the one indicated by the Qur’ān, as stated in the sura *al-Fātiḥa* ‘The Opening’, the short invocation that opens the sacred Book (I,6). Thus, it comes as no surprise when the commentators read peace or salvation, in this world and the next, as a condition of grace reserved exclusively for those who answer the call of Islam.

Another authoritative example is provided by al-Ṭabarī. When he reads “the ways of peace”, the early exegete thinks of the doctrine of the Beautiful Names and, since *al-salām* is a Name of God, he explains the ways of peace as the ways of God; but he specifies that these are for Islam alone, to the exclusion of Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. The idea that salvation (*salāma*) can be achieved only through the Islamic religion is found, with varying degrees of emphasis, in almost all the medieval commentaries. But let us fast forward over eleven centuries of history, and look at the Islamic thought of our time; we might start by looking at Muḥammad Rātib al-Nābulusī’s *Mawsū‘at al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā* ‘Encyclopaedia of the Beautiful Names of God’, under the entry ‘*al-salām*’.¹⁰

In accordance with the exegetical tradition, al-Nābulusī thinks of the paths of peace in the sura ‘The Table Spread with Food’ and reads peace (*salām*) as salvation (*salāma*) but also as the natural wellbeing (*salāma* again) of the person. He explains that this peace or salvation or wellbeing is a characteristic of the ‘first nature’, *fiṭra* (cf. Qur’ān XXX,30), that genuine form of submission to God (*islām*) that transcends all historical religions because it precedes their formulation; peace is therefore an inherent element of man in general (*insān*), and not just the Muslim. Turning to the possible impact of the Name *al-salām* on the believer’s actions and his inner being, al-Nābulusī teaches that to first of all follow the original nature in the ‘peace’ element of it is to adopt ‘God’s method’ (*manhaj Allāh* منهج الله), that is, to proceed on the path exemplified by Him. This method involves in the first instance peace with oneself:

if you adopt God’s method you will be at peace with yourself. If instead a man ignores his original nature, he will bring on himself a harsh retribution: he will live in a state of self-loathing, guilt and inner degeneration.¹¹

¹⁰ Al-Nābulusī 2002b, *Ism Allāh al-salām*, lesson no. 06, 2005; cf. <https://nabulsi.com/web/article/784>.

¹¹ Al-Nābulusī 2002b, *Ism Allāh al-salām*, lesson no. 06, 2005.

At the same time, 'God's method' will bring you peace with others:

if, on the other hand, you build your glory on the wreck of others', and your wealth on their poverty, and your security on their fear, and your life on their death [...], you will find yourself in the condition that is called self-loathing, and inward imbalance. On the contrary, the observance of the method of the Most High and Exalted God will bring you peace with yourself, peace with your Lord, and also peace with those around you [...].

Dear brothers, if the original nature of the human being were not wholesome and intact [*salīma* سَلِيمَة], man would not suffer, but instead he suffers because God has given him a wholesome and unblemished nature, and when he betrays those foundations, or when he harms the creatures of the Most High and Exalted God, he punishes himself, it is his own soul that chastises him.¹²

As proof of the concomitance of peace with natural submission to God (*islām*), al-Nābulusī coins the expression 'the pillars of peace' (*arkān al-salām* أركان السلام), which plays on the near homophony with 'the pillars of Islam' (*arkān al-islām*) – which are the five fundamental obligations of the believer. In this author's teaching, the reference to universal peace is very clear: for example, when he declares that the inner peace resulting from adopting God's method is nothing other than the feeling of being loved by Him for the good one does to His creatures: "the whole of creation is God's family", he declares, recalling, but also slightly recasting, a well-known saying of the Prophet: "And he whom God loves the most is the one who does best to His family".¹³

As we have seen with the classical exegesis, the voices of contemporary Islam are many and not always in agreement, and it has to be said that al-Nābulusī's, though remarkable, would seem to be among the least followed. A good reason, then, to give it a little more space with the following quotations, aimed particularly at those looking at Islam from a Western perspective:

The Prophet said that the Muslim is he by whose tongue and hand Muslims are preserved [*salima*]. This evidently means that the Muslim does not harm other Muslims, but the meaning goes deeper than that; it also suggests that the authentic Muslim is one by whose tongue and hand the reputation of Muslims is preserved. Now, if a Muslim harms another Muslim, the latter will say that someone did this and that; but if a Muslim harms a non-Muslim, the other will say that Muslims did this and that and, ignoring who personally harmed him, he will discredit the religion of Islam [...]. In truth, Islam is often tarnished by its own followers [...].

If you harm a non-Muslim and live in a Western country, if you sign a false declaration, if you cheat, if you take what does not belong to you, this behaviour not only harms yourself, but all Muslims, and brings Islam into disrepute; instead, every Muslim must be ready to be an ambassador for all Muslims [...].

¹² Al-Nābulusī 2002b, *Ism Allāh al-salām*, lesson no. 06, 2005.

¹³ In fact, the saying in question, which is recorded in various versions, including one by al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, *kitāb al-da'wāt*, no. 3859, talks of the goodness of those who do best by their own families, rather than 'God's family'.

Before you speak, before you sign a declaration, before you do anything with a non-Muslim, think twice: you are an ambassador of the Muslims, and the ambassador must hold himself to the highest standards. If you believe in the Name *al-salām*, you must yourself be a source of peace for those around you [...].

The Most High and Exalted God has spoken of a clarifying book with which He “guides [...] in the ways of peace” [Qur’ān V,16]. So, you are at peace. Peace is one of the most critical Names, and one of the dearest to the Muslim believer; but then there is no man in the world who does not seek peace.¹⁴

¹⁴ Al-Nābulusī 2002b, lesson no. 06, 2005.