

Community Building, Part VIII¹

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ABSTRACT: Having a shared identity that works towards a collective cause is vital for a healthy community, and in doing so, a community must share specific qualities to be successful. This series of papers offers a glimpse into the importance of community-building and Prophet Muhammad's efforts to implement it. Character traits such as truthfulness, trustworthiness, justice, and unity were illustrated. The previous article touched upon the concept of peace in Islam—as the term Islam is derived from the Arabic root word *silm* (peace)—and the importance of submission to God to achieve peace for ourselves and the entire society. This article expands on several qualities, such as respect for others' reputation, refraining from suspicion, thinking the best of others, controlling one's anger, and being forgiving, trustworthy, and fair.

Summary of previous sessions

In the previous sessions, we discussed the significance of community life in Islam and how—from the beginning of their missions—all prophets envisioned two aspects: first, helping people in their spiritual journey towards God; and second, forming a community or further developing an already established community according to the values endorsed by God.

¹ This series is based on a nine-session course conducted by the author on Community Building at the Islamic Centre of England in London in 2009.

Some prophets initiated these features, while others were sent within an already established community with opportunities to further develop it.

We then discussed the qualities of an Islamic community. For example, an Islamic community should be moderate: any one-sidedness, short-sightedness, or extremism has no place in it. We referred to an interpretation by renowned contemporaries such as Allamah Tabataba'i and others, and included references, such as verse 2:143:

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا

Thus we have made you a middle nation that you may be witnesses to the people and that the Apostle may be a witness to you..."

Qualities such as commitment to the truth, justice, rational decision-making, considering scientific discoveries in compliance with Islamic values, safeguarding family life, being charitable on a financial and practical basis, establishing internal peace with remembrance of God, and having healthy and secure interpersonal relations were also discussed.

A secure Islamic community

To continue the discussion on peace, we will talk about having a community in which people feel safe and secure. It should be emphasised that these two need to be studied together to have a complete picture of the issue.

People of all walks of life must feel secure to concentrate on their work and services to the community, as well as their spiritual development. This depends on peace relations on a macro level, and how we treat one another on a micro level. We cannot feel safe if other members have no

regard for our comfort or reputation and can easily, God forbid, damage it. When our properties, jobs, and dignity are at risk, we cannot feel safe.

Islam includes principles, rules, and ethics that render people safe and secure in a community organised according to its decrees.

Respect for people's reputation

Unfortunately, in all civilizations, including some Muslim ones, at times people accuse, develop suspicion, and backbite one another. This is detrimental, because people want to focus on their responsibilities, and if they continuously feel under threat—that someone may betray them and spread rumours—then it is difficult to concentrate on their duties.

In the Qur'an, Allah has given us instructions that were instrumental in helping the Prophet form—in a short time—a community that was then able to establish a civilisation to which humanity is indebted.

Control and suppression of anger

Islam instructs us to control and suppress our anger. When we become angry, we lose our self-control: we no longer understand what we are saying and doing. This is an incredibly important quality which we are in need of whether it is in the family, workplace, masjid, or the community. Allah says:

وَسَارِعُوا إِلَىٰ مَغْفِرَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَجَنَّةٍ عَرْضُهَا السَّمَاوَاتُ وَالْأَرْضُ أُعِدَّتْ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ
الَّذِينَ يُنْفِقُونَ فِي السَّرَّاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ وَالْكَاطِمِينَ الْغَيْظَ وَالْعَافِينَ عَنِ النَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ
يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

And hasten towards your Lord's forgiveness and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for the Godwary—those who spend in ease and adversity,

and suppress their anger, and excuse [the faults of] the people, and Allah loves the virtuous; (3:133-134)

We need to be able to control our anger if we want to go to heaven. To suppress one's anger is called '*kazm al-ghayz*.' The seventh Imam is called 'al-Kazim' because he possessed the ability to suppress his anger. In one anecdote, one of his servants did not listen to him, perhaps because the Imams were so gentle and kind that sometimes the servants took advantage and knew they would not be punished or treated badly. When the Imam asked him why he had not listened to him, the servant replied, "I felt safe."

In another anecdote, a servant did something wrong and when Imam discovered it, the servant recited from the verse, *وَالكَاطِمِينَ الْغَيْظَ* meaning "*and suppress their anger*." The Imam said, "I suppressed my anger." The servant then continued, "*and excuse [the faults of] the people*". The Imam replied, "Very well, I release you. Now you are free." To which the servant said, "*and Allah loves the virtuous*." Then Imam replied, "Very well, I now give you some capital [money or land] so that you are free and able to live independently."¹

This is the way in which the Ahlul Bayt had control over their anger and over themselves.

When we become angry, many of us do not realise what we are doing, and as a result, we satisfy our feelings and say and do wrong no matter what the consequences may be. This is when the Satan (*Shaytan*) has the greatest control over us. An Islamic community includes people who are calm and level-headed rather than angry and aggressive.

¹ *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 43, p. 352.

Refrain from suspicion

It is important that we refrain from being suspicious about others. Sometimes wrong thoughts about others occur to our minds whether we like it or not, because someone has said or done something that causes suspicion. It may not be possible for us to keep the thoughts under control; but what is important is what *not* to do with those thoughts, such as jumping to conclusions or agreeing to mistaken judgments. For example, we may witness a friend come out of a bar, but we should not immediately assume that they must have been buying or drinking alcohol as a result. Our responsibility is to make excuses for anyone in a suspicious situation. It could be possible that the friend could not find an address and went inside the bar to ask. We must not easily make snap judgements about people based on mere possibilities, probabilities, and unfounded assumptions.

There are many traditions in Islamic hadith corpus that emphasize on refraining from suspecting our brothers and sisters in faith.

أَحْسِنُوا ظُنُوكُمْ بِإِخْوَانِكُمْ

“Always have good estimation about your brothers [in faith].”¹

Another hadith says:

كَذِّبْ سَمْعَكَ وَبَصَرَكَ عَنْ أَخِيكَ فَإِنْ شَهِدَ عِنْدَكَ حَمْسُونَ قَسَامَةً وَقَالَ لَكَ
قَوْلًا فَصَدِّقْهُ وَكَذِّبْهُمْ

“Belie your sight and hearing with respect to your brother. [Even] if fifty [people] testified and swore before

¹ *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 72, p. 196

you [against him] and he said something [else], then believe your brother and belie them.’¹

There are times we are expected to ignore uncertain tales because some people do not have accurate perceptions. Though they play out their statements as a matter of fact, it is merely their own analysis and conclusions rather than the actual truth.

Bearing witness based on personal observation

In Islam, people can only bear witness when their knowledge about an event is from a personal observation through seeing or hearing. For example, if a policeman or a lawyer base their investigations on 100% proof that someone is a criminal, they cannot bear witness to this in an Islamic court. In Islam, bearing witness (*shahadah*) is accepted only when a person has seen or heard something. It has been said that if something is as obvious as seeing the sun on a clear day then we can bear witness about it. For example, seeing a mere photograph of an event does not qualify one to go to court and bear witness that the event took place because the photograph may not be genuine. This behaviour brings safety and security to the community because it is then difficult to accuse someone, make a case against them, and take them to court.

Do not heed unverified reports

When critical or unfavourable things are said about our brothers and sisters in faith, we should disregard them unless it is about a serious matter that is verifiable, and if ignored, it may snowball into a bigger problem. However, if someone informs us of someone who is backbiting us, we should a) reply that we do not think that person said such a thing

¹ *Al-Kafi*, vol. 8, p. 147

and b) even if they did, we should mention it was not right to share it. We should ask their reason for revealing the information because if they cared for us, they would refrain from doing so. Unfortunately, instead we often thank the person who revealed this information, and choose to never forget it, as if a favour has been done to us. However, we should not thank them as this will encourage them to continue. Instead, we should tell them they should not have shared the information and that we do not believe it, and discourage them from repeating the act, with hopes that they dare not to reveal the same information to others.

Some suspicions are sins

In verse 12 of the chapter *al-Hujurat*, Allah says:

O you who have faith! Avoid much suspicion. Indeed some suspicions are sins...

This verse instructs us to avoid most suspicions because they are sins due to their falsity. If out of a hundred suspicions only a few are sins because they are not a reality, then this is enough *not* to take most of them seriously—just as we’d avoid drinking one cup of water from several that are assumed to be poisonous.

Avicenna says, “Whoever is used to accepting things without reason is no longer a human being.” If people are accustomed to accepting information, not just on one or two occasions but as a regular habit, merely because they heard from an individual or the media, and then without reason they accept it, then Avicenna believes that they have lost their humanity as rationality is very much part of being a human.

Thinking the best of others

Imam Ali says:

وَلَا تَنْظُنَّ بِكَلِمَةٍ خَرَجَتْ مِنْ أَخِيكَ سُوءًا وَأَنْتَ تَجِدُ لَهَا فِي الْخَيْرِ مَحْمِلًا

“Do not regard an utterance by your brother as evil if you find it capable of bearing some good.”¹

If we can interpret others' statements optimistically, then we should avoid taking it negatively, or believing our suspicions or jumping to conclusions, and immediately imagining that others have bad intentions or are attempting to humiliate us. If there is a possibility of taking it positively, then we must not be quick to take offence.

If we could have this much control over our negative emotions, then life would become easy. For example, sometimes if our children are angered and say something bad about us, or bosses or employees may make a negative statement, we should simply ignore it.

Thus, if there is a possibility of interpreting what has been said in an alternative or positive way, then we should not take offence.

Refrain from reacting in the heat of the moment

People who do not take the benefit of the doubt become angry or upset straightaway. They may even further endanger their dignity as anything harsh or just strong may trigger the other party to say even more in addition to what has already been said. Therefore, it is often better to ignore what they say and leave it for the time being.

It's wisest not to react immediately. We should give ourselves and others time for reflection because when we are angry or upset, we usually regret what we said or did. Moreover, later people often regret what they said and feel ashamed, ignoring their mistakes is the wisest approach, rather

¹ *Al-Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 362.

than escalating the exchange into an argument. They may appreciate that their mistake has been overlooked by us and did not develop into something worse.

Sometimes we tell ourselves that we must act right away before it is too late. However, this is a mistake. Whenever we are angry, we do not have control over our minds; in reality, we do not know what the best approach is, and hence it is better to calm ourselves before acting. When we are angry, it is almost impossible to understand the boundaries of good behaviour. If, for example, we need to talk to our children regarding a serious issue or event, it is better to wait until we have cooled down beforehand. In many cases what happens is that when people wrong us, and we are therefore oppressed, we mistakenly overreact. We do something worse in retaliation, and we thus become the oppressor. If we are oppressed, we have Allah (swt) on our side, but if we overreact and become unjust we will lose this position and may actually make Him against us as the other party is not oppressed.

Avoid prying into people's lives

Another thing that we must avoid is undue investigation into people's lives. If the members of our community are not overly inquisitive and do not try to discover what other people are like and what they're up to, then life becomes tranquil. Unfortunately, there are the overly inquisitive ones who can't rest until they discover every detail about other people's lives. They will ask what we did last night, where we went for our holidays, how much money we earn, how much our house costs, and so on. It is unnecessary to know all these things.

وَلَا تَجَسَّسُوا وَلَا يَغْتَبِ بَعْضُكُمْ بَعْضًا

And do not spy on or backbite one another (49:12)

Thus, we should not try to discover private information about others. If they want to tell us something, then we can listen; and if they do not tell us, then we do not need to know it.

Forgiving others

Forgiving others is one factor in bringing peace and security to society. The ability to forgive and pardon is a very important gift:

وَالكَاطِمِينَ الْغَيْظَ وَالْعَافِينَ عَنِ النَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

“...and suppress their anger and excuse (the faults) of people. And Allah loves the doers of good.” (3:134)

وَلْيَعْفُوا وَلْيَصْفَحُوا أَلَا تُحِبُّونَ أَنْ يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ عَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

“...and let them excuse and forbear. Do you not love that Allah should forgive you? And Allah is all-Forgiving, all-Merciful.” (24:22)

If we want to be treated mercifully by Allah and want Him to forgive us, then we should show mercy to others and forgive them. If forgiveness is a quality we want to benefit from, then we should forgive others. If it is not a good characteristic, then why do we expect Allah to forgive us? We should easily forgive each other.

Of course, if someone consistently and deliberately harms us and our forgiving nature will dare them to do more, then that is a different situation. If there is a systematic violation of a person's rights, that is another issue. The topic at hand is regarding day-to-day examples within our circle of family, friends, neighbours, and co-workers.

Prophet Muhammad was known for his forgiving nature. He even forgave the killer of his uncle, Hamzah. He also granted peace and immunity to

the people of Makkah, most of whom had taken part in battles against Islam or had supported the soldiers of the Quraysh. However, when the Prophet and his followers captured Makkah, they gave the inhabitants immunity. When some of the Muslims said that it was the day of vengeance the Prophet corrected them by said that it was indeed that day for showing mercy. Furthermore, he said whoever remains inside their house or goes to the house of Abu Sufyan—the leader of the pagans—would be safe. The Prophet still gave immunity to him and his people.

Reciprocate wrong with right

The Holy Prophet (s) said:

أَلَا أُخْبِرُكُمْ بِخَيْرِ خَلَائِقِ الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ الْعَفْوُ عَمَّنْ ظَلَمَكَ وَتَصِلُ مَنْ قَطَعَكَ
وَالْإِحْسَانُ إِلَى مَنْ أَسَاءَ إِلَيْكَ وَإِعْطَاءُ مَنْ حَرَمَكَ

May I lead you to the best moralities of this world and the life to come? To pardon him who wrongs you, connect with those who disconnected from you, doing good to those who wronged you, and giving to those who deprived you.¹

He offered something that can help us both in this life and in the Hereafter. We should give to those who deprive us. If we needed help, and a certain person did not help us, we should not wait until they are in need so as to take revenge by doing the same thing to them. On the contrary, if that person is now in need, we should give them something before they ask for help. If we are doing such things for the sake of Allah, then we should help those who did not help us when we were in need.

¹ *Al-Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 107.

A great quality of a believer is pardoning others. A mu'min does not only reciprocate good for good. Many people reciprocate love, support, respect and help after good has been shown to them, which is fine. But a mu'min does not just reciprocate; he or she goes one step further and helps someone in need regardless of whether that person was helpful or not. Imam Ali said:

إِذَا قَدَرْتَ عَلَى عَدُوِّكَ فَاجْعَلِ الْعَفْوَ عَنْهُ شُكْرًا لِلْقُدْرَةِ عَلَيْهِ

“When you gain power over your adversary, pardon him by way of thanks for being able to overpower him.”¹

Therefore, if we want to show thankfulness to Allah for having been able to overcome an adversary, we should forgive them rather than taking advantage of our power and destroying them instead.

Trustworthiness

Another quality that brings a sense of safety and security to people's lives is trustworthiness. Life becomes bitter when we can't trust one another. For example, when we are not sure whether what people tell us is true or not; or when we invite someone to our house and they are not sure whether we mean it or not; or we tell someone that we are available if they need help but they are not sure whether this is true or not. It makes life complicated and difficult when people are not telling the truth or are not serious about what they say because, for example, although they do not mean to lie, but they exaggerate or say something without meaning it or when they do not keep their promises. In these situations, we end up not knowing who to trust.

¹ *Nahj al-Balaghah*, saying no. 11.

Two important qualities of a believer by which actually they can be evaluated are trustworthiness and telling the truth.¹ True believers tell the truth and return that which has been entrusted to them. Imam al-Sajjad said:

فَوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ مُحَمَّدًا بِالْحَقِّ نَبِيًّا لَوْ أَنَّ قَاتِلَ أَبِي الْحُسَيْنِ بْنِ عَلِيٍّ عِثَّمَنِي عَلَى
السَّيْفِ الَّذِي قَتَلَهُ بِهِ لَأَدْبَيْتُهُ إِلَيْهِ

“If I was entrusted with the sword with which they killed my father, Husayn ibn Ali, I would give back that sword.”²

Prophet Muhammad was so trustworthy that even 13 years after the advent of Islam, during the time many people opposed him, fighting against him and even plotting to kill him, these same people entrusted him with their valuables. Indeed, one of Imam Ali's responsibilities after the Prophet left Makkah was to give back these trusts to the people of Makkah. It is truly amazing that people trusted someone so much and yet they still wanted to kill him, and moreover, that the Prophet tried to return those things entrusted to him even though his own life and Imam Ali's life were in danger.

If we carry out a job or make a contract with someone, that person must be 100% sure that we will do our best to keep our promise. Unfortunately, in some societies, people prefer not to do business with their brothers and sisters in faith because they think that they are not trustworthy and honest. We must not behave in such a way that people in our own

¹ For example, Imam Sadiq (a) is quoted as saying:

لَا تَنْظُرُوا إِلَيَّ طُولَ رُكُوعِ الرَّجُلِ وَ سُجُودِهِ فَإِنَّ ذَلِكَ شَيْءٌ اِعْتَادَهُ فَلَوْ تَرَكَهُ اسْتَوْحَشَ
لِذَلِكَ وَ لَكِنْ اَنْظُرُوا إِلَيَّ صِدْقَ حَدِيثِهِ وَ اَدَاءَ أَمَانَتِهِ
[Al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 105]

² Wasa'il al-Shi'a, vol. 19, p. 75.

community are reluctant to trust us so much so that if they want to build or improve a house or if they need a repair man, they prefer to bring someone from another community or from a faithless community to carry out the job. This is not good. We must be so honest and trustworthy that even people from other communities trust us enough to cooperate and work with us. Therefore, two important qualities of a faithful community are telling the truth and honouring that which is entrusted to us whether they be material objects, promises, or contracts.

Treat others with justice and fairness

It is very important that we do not do even a little injustice. To have a sense of security and to feel safe, people should be sure that they will be treated with justice and fairness.

Promote people's talents

In a good Muslim community, if someone is talented within a given field, we must offer them ample and appropriate opportunities to flourish and develop. We must not use people without regard merely for their needs and potentialities. Sometimes we are in desperate need of something and then we use people to fulfil our own needs. However, it is not good to consume the talents, energy, or time of people simply for our own benefit. We should decide what is needed and who is best suited to fulfilling each need in our community and then when we discover someone's potential, we should help them realise this potential and flourish.

For example, for long term development, we need people to work in the media. Without this we will never be able to succeed as a community because the media is powerful in modern societies. The media has potential to influence and control many areas of life, including the way in which people think about ideas, events, and the world about them, so

much so that even politicians may fear the. Therefore, we need to have people who are capable of interacting with the media or who are already involved in it. We should find people, particularly youth, who are talented in this field and then we should support them by, for example, giving them scholarships or loans so they can study, and then by employing them once they graduate because it is important to continue to support them afterwards; otherwise they will start working for other people outside our community and we will thus lose their talents. This support should help them so that they do not need to produce work just to get money to survive but so that they can develop and expand their talents.

When we have talented people, we should allow them to develop within a specific field and to move in that direction. It is not right, just, or sensible to direct them to a narrow selection of careers and do not support them in all areas of study or employment because then their talents are wasted. We must let people flourish in whatever they are good at and have potential to succeed in and which will be useful for our community.

Give priority to the most qualified

When there are positions available, we must find the most qualified people and appoint them for the task. Unfortunately, in many of our masjids, centres and communities, when they are run by individuals or committees, there can be competition and rivalry about, for example, who is to become the President or the Secretary. Sometimes people even regard running a masjid or centre as material gain rather as a service to the community. Often, the people who are very qualified to fill positions of responsibility are either not supported or they themselves do not show interest. This is not how a community can progress.

Prophet Muhammad (s) is quoted as saying:

من تولّى شيئاً من أمور المسلمين فولّى رجلاً شيئاً من أمورهم و هو يعلم مكان
رجل هو أعلم منه فقد خان الله و رسوله و المؤمنين

Whoever undertakes one of the affairs of the Muslims and then appoints someone for a job while he knows instead of someone that he knows is more knowledgeable [than that one he is appointing] has betrayed Allah, His messenger and the believers.¹

It is probable that if our community observes the above-mentioned hadith where priority is given to the most qualified when distributing tasks with everyone's support, and moreover, people who are suitably qualified also accept and undertake the responsibility, most of our problems would be solved.

Sometimes it is the qualified who avoid taking responsibility. This is also problematic because in a community where the most qualified are irresponsible, then those who are unqualified put themselves in high positions, and after the people are busy hindering them and removing them from their posts. This wastes time and energy.

Therefore, an important aspect of justice is to give each job to the most qualified. Moreover, we should have a long-term plan that enables people to become qualified through education, training, and experience so that in the long term there would be qualified people available in our own communities. We should not borrow our leaders from other communities. If we face a shortage of medical doctors, for example, we can benefit from other communities and societies, but we cannot borrow our leaders,

¹ *Kanz al-Fawa'id*, vol. 2, p. 283.

teachers, and writers from other communities. It is very important that these people come from within our own communities.

Importance of patience in long-term vision and planning

Finally, we have a great need for achieving the vital quality of patience. It is extremely important to be patient, to be able to cope with difficulties, not to lose our temper, not to lose our hope and not to easily feel distracted, disturbed and disappointed.

Unfortunately, we are usually hasty and in a constant rush. As Allah says in the Qur'an, "Man is a creature of haste." (21:37)

We have a tendency to be hasty, but it is only a tendency and so we can control it. We need to educate and train ourselves to become patient. Most of us have it deeply ingrained in our minds that we should do that which bears fruit quickly. People often want to do something that achieves results within the next two or three years. We think that everything should be done so that we ourselves can see the results. Rarely people think about what their community may face 50 years later due to lack of long-term planning and foresight.

However, sometimes we must act as a community even if the good deed will bear results after generations. It is not correct that we act only if we can see the results ourselves, when instead we should have the patience, vision, and long-term planning, even if the results show after 50 years.

Being patient is not merely about being just when we are, for example, ill or poor. As a community, we also need to practice patience and be able to remain persistent and strong and face any challenges that arise and come out of them with hope and vision for the future.

This is what great leaders can do. They can give hope to people for a better and brighter future and thus can motivate them to act when asking them to mobilise their efforts for something which is in the long-term interest of the community.

We need to have a far-sighted vision of the future along with patience. We cannot necessarily solve things immediately, but we must ensure that we have a strategic plan and that every person and every executive committee in every generation contributes to at least part of the planning. Of course, they will not be able to complete the entire plan at one time, but should gradually build upon what other people have done before them.

However, unfortunately, what we sometimes witness at present is that as soon as a new committee is formed, they seem to think that their first responsibility is to destroy what previous people have done and start thinking and planning all over again. By the time they devise their plan and spend money on it, another committee is elected. This absurd practice may occur time and time again over the years, just like the Bani Israel were wandering around in the desert for 40 years and could not find the Promised Land.

May Allah enable the leaders of our communities and the members of our communities to understand what the right course of action is for the future of the community and may our communities become role models and examples in which other communities witness the reality of an Islamic community. And may Allah protect all of us from that which is disliked.