Migration, Feelings of Belonging to a Land, and the Universality of Islam

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According to Islamic theology, human beings are natural immigrants and migration is viewed positively in a variety of circumstances. There are many verses in the Qur'an praising those who migrate. Qur'an 2: 218 says, "Those who believed and migrated and struggled in the way of God are those who are hopeful of the mercy of God. God is Forgiving and Merciful." Another verse says, "Those who have migrated…surely I will forgive their sins" (Qur'an, 3:195). A common element in these verses is the combining of faith and migration. One verse asks those who were persecuted yet did not migrate: "Wasn't the land of God large enough that you could have migrated?" (Qur'an, 4:97). As part of the same narrative, the Qur'an actually encourages believers to migrate and states that those who chose to migrate when they are oppressed will find success: "Those who are migrating in the way of God will find refuge and prosperity" (Qur'an, 4:100).

Migration was an important aspect of the early development of Islam and some scholars argue that this is an important example of Islamic non-violence. From the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'an, the Prophet and his community faced persecution from the other residents of Mecca. In approximately 617 CE, the sixth year of his prophethood, about eighty-three members of Muhammad's community, both male and female, under the leadership of the Prophet's cousin Ja'far bin Abu Talib, left the city of Mecca for Abyssinia. Though the Prophet himself remained in Mecca, he asked his cousin to lead this group of new converts because they came from marginalized social classes and thus faced severe persecution. In addition to being the first major Muslim migration, this is also one of the earliest encounters between Muslims and Christians and many important

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contemporary lessons are drawn from it.[1] Abyssinia was a Christian kingdom, which Muhammad thought would be a safe refuge for his followers. The Abyssinian king received the Muslim immigrants and although he also received a delegation of Meccan leaders who wished him to return the migrants, the King and the Abyssinian religious hierarchy were convinced that the Muslim immigrants were innocent and thus the King did not return them to Mecca.[2] In the Qur'an, we find references to this event and upon the death of the Abyssinian king, known as the Negus, the Prophet performed a funeral prayer in absentia for him.

The persecution of the infant Muslim community did not stop with this migration, and soon the Prophet himself felt threatened. Hence, several years after the first migration, the largest and most important migration in the history of Islam, the migration of the Prophet from the city of Mecca to the town of Yathrib, which later will be called Medina or the City of the Prophet, took place. This migration is called the Hijra, simply the Arabic word for migration, and marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.[3] Prior to the Hijra, the Prophet and the Muslims were singled out for persecution by the elite in the city of Mecca. The wealthy merchants of Mecca imposed a severe economic boycott against the Prophet and his followers for three years. It is believed that the boycott caused starvation within the Muslim community including the death of the Prophet's wife, Khadija. The Prophet called the year of her death "the year of grief (*huzn*)." Despite the terrible conditions facing the Muslim community, migration was not an easy choice. The Prophet loved his hometown and when he needed to leave, he turned back to the city of Mecca and said, "O Mecca! I know you are the most blessed (*khayr*) of the lands of God and the most beloved land of God to me. If I were not forced to leave,

1 For an examination of this event in light of Christian-Muslim relations see, Zeki Saritoprak, "Said Nursi on Muslim–Christian Relations Leading to World Peace," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (January 2008) (25–37).

2 The famous Muslim historian and Qur'an commentator Ibn Kathir gives the fullest known narration of this story noting important individuals who participated in this migration including the third caliph, Uthman bin Affan. According to Ibn Kathir, the Abyssinian King, the Negus, listened to Muslim delegation and said, "You are welcome and the one from whom you came is also welcome. I believe that he is God's messenger. He is the one that I found in the Gospel. Jesus gave good news of him. Live in Abyssinia wherever you want. If I was not the King, I would be willing to carry the sandals of the Prophet." When he died, the Prophet was in Medina and he said to his companions, "Your brother Ashama (Negus) died in Abyssinia" and he asked them to have a funeral prayer for him. (See Ismail Ibn Kathir, *Al-Sira al-Nabawiyya,* Volume 2, ed. Mustafa Abd al-Wahid, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1976, 5-60)

3 A year in the Islamic calendar is noted as xx AH or x years after the Hijra. 1 AH corresponds to 622/3 CE.

I would never have left you" (Ibn Kathir, 1976, 285). It is also narrated that the Prophet said the following prayer while he migrated: "Lord, you have taken me away from the most beloved city to me. Take me to the most beloved city to You" (Ibn Kathir, 1976, 284).

Migrating to Yathrib was not the Prophet's first choice, but in what is considered a miracle, the people of Yathrib came to him to request that he migrate to their town. They wanted the Prophet to come to their town in order to stop its ongoing tribal warfare. Muhammad's peace-making skills prompted the people of this city to go to him with such a request. To avoid the watchful eye of their persecutors, the Prophet asked his companions to migrate surreptitiously. Eventually he and Abu Bakr, his close friend who would later become the first caliph in Islam, migrated under great risk of being attacked or killed. A skilled tracker was offered one hundred camels if he could find Muhammad and his friend and lead the Meccan leaders to them, but this failed.

This painful migration was in the month of July under the full heat of the Arabian sun. After arriving in the multicultural and multi-religious city of Yathrib, the first thing the Prophet did was to establish the foundations for an interconnected society where people could live peacefully with one another, including developing a constitution, known as the Medina Charter, which gave protections to all inhabitants no matter what their religious affiliation. It is worth noting, the population of the city was primarily made up of Arab polytheists and members of Jewish tribes, with the Muslim arrivals making up no more fifteen percent of the newly renamed city of Medina's population.

Because of the haste of their migration from Mecca, the Muslim migrants, or *Muhajirun* (s. *muhajir*), were financially weak and devoid of possessions. The wisdom of the Prophet was used to solve the problems of poverty and weakness. Though small in number, there were Muslim citizens in Medina prior to the coming of the immigrants. In order to integrate the immigrants with the local Muslims, the Prophet declared a relationship of "brotherhood" to exist between each immigrant and a local Muslim. These Medinan Muslims are called the *Ansar*, or "helpers" and he asked the local Muslims to help the immigrants such that according to Muslim tradition, the Prophet named one person from the *Ansar* and one from the *Muhajirun* and declared them to be brothers and sisters. This historical tie of symbolic brotherhood in Islam is called *muakhat*. Both groups of Muslims, the *Muhajirun* and the *Ansar* are the subjects of praise in the Qur'an. In speaking of these people, the Qur'an says the following:

> The men who stayed in their own city (Medina) and embraced Islam before them loved those who have sought refuge with them. They do not covet what they are given but rather prefer (their brothers and sisters) above themselves although they are in need. Those who preserve themselves from their own greed shall surely prosper. (Qur'an, 59:9)

The *Ansar* shared their money and their farms with their brothers and sisters to such an extent that the immigrant Muslims received legal rights from the inheritance of their *Ansar* brothers. When one of the *Ansar* died, his *Muhajirun* brother would be among his heirs. Some of the immigrants were very honorable and did not want to ask for help. Instead of asking for assistance they would say, "show me the way to the marketplace." It is believed that one of the prominent companions of the Prophet, Abd al-Rahman bin 'Awf, who asked his *Ansar* brother, Sa'd bin al-Rabi, to show him the way to the market, became one of the wealthiest inhabitants of the city of Medina (Ibn Kathir, 1967, 224).

The brotherhood that the Prophet declared brought prosperity and solidarity to the entire community, (only) not; despite the challenges he faced in integrating the two groups. Prior to the migration, the Muslims had come from warring factions, particularly from the '*Aws* and *Khazraj* tribes. There is a reference to this in the Qur'an when it says: "Remember when you were enemies. God has united your hearts and through His grace you have become brothers" (Qur'an, 3:103). After the migration, it took five months for the Prophet to get to know the whole community and the declaration of brotherhood between the members of the new community was not done randomly. The Prophet looked at their characteristics, their spiritual compatibilities and even their tastes and then declared brotherhood between individual *Ansar* and *Muhajirun*. The cooperation between the *Ansar* and the *Muhajirun* was not limited to the material; it was also spiritual. For example, the Companions from each group would listen to the Prophet in turn so that no one would miss what the Prophet said. This also helped to create a warm environment for the immigrants and strengthened Muslim society. Despite the hierarchical nature of Arab society, the Prophet was able to create a fully inclusive community, into which even marginalized groups such as blacks and women were integrated.

There are also important hadiths that relate to the Hijra specifically and the concept of migration more broadly. One is of particular note and it explains that intention is most important when someone migrates: "For the one whose (intent in) migration was for Allah and His Messenger, his migration was for Allah and His Messenger; and for the one whose migration was to achieve some worldly benefit or to take a woman in marriage, his migration was for that for which he

migrated" (al-Bukhari, 1990, 41). The Prophet indicates that migration for worldly things is not as ideal as migration for the sake of God and His Messenger and suggests that the intent of the immigrant should be pure.

Migrating, leaving the original land in which a person grew up and relocating to another land, can be emotionally difficult. Therefore, balancing love of the old and the new lands is important. While there are people who migrate to a new land and consider the new land as their home, it is more likely that people who migrate will throughout their lives long for their original homeland. For Muslims, this emotional difficulty can be overcome by examining the theological and mystical dimensions of their faith.

To begin with, it is important to examine a well-known tradition which says that "love of country is part of faith" [4] which is often used today to argue that all Muslim believers must love their native country. How are we to understand this tradition in light of Islamic support for migration? The simplest answer is that in Islamic teaching, the real country is the country of the afterlife; a country with no end or borders. Additionally, when Muslims consider this idea, they should not see a contradiction since loving one (country) does not imply hatred for another (country). One Muslim scholar interpreted this statement by saying that a true believer should build his country with wholesome actions and beautiful things (al-Shafi'i, 2004, 37). Some people have even argued that the country in question is the original country of human beings in which Adam and Eve lived, paradise. However it is interpreted, this "hadith" should not be considered to be in conflict with the Prophetic encouragement to migration.

In Islam, the entire world belongs to God. A hadith says, "God has made the entire face of the earth as a mosque for me and its soil as pure."[5] Every part of earth is the property of God and is beautiful. Because of this, early Muslims did not hesitate to migrate from their own lands to other lands. Although some Islamic legal scholars divided the world into the land of faith or Islam and the land of disbelief, in today's conditions that categorization seems no longer to be valid. Arguably, if Muslims are able to practice their religion in Western countries where they are a small minority, and are unable to practice their religion in the country of their birth, then the former is much more the land of Islam than the latter. Islam looks

4 It is debatable whether or not this is a reliable hadith, but even those who find it unreliable as a hadith still consider the meaning to be true. See, 'Ali bin Sutlan Muhammad al-Qari, *Mirqat al-Mafatih Sharh Mishkat al-Masabih*, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2002, vol 3, 1158.

5 An additional understanding of this hadith is that the whole face of the earth was made ritually pure and available as a place of worship or as a mosque. Al-Bukhari, *al-Sahih*, "al-Tayammum," 1.

at the land from a universal perspective and does not discriminate on the basis of location. A story from my own immigrant experience, I feel, sheds light on what I have said about the universality of Islam.

While I was a professor in a small town in the American state of Georgia, one of my students asked me if I felt I was in a foreign land and missed my native country of Turkey. I told him that initially I had felt this way, until one night when I looked at the sky and saw that the same stars I was seeing there, I had seen in Turkey; I saw the same moon and sun as well. In the morning, as the sun rose, I noticed that it had the same beauty as when I would watch the sun come over the hill near my house in Istanbul. Then I looked at my students and realized that they were just like my students in Turkey. They had come from different places to this one place for the sake of learning. After that, I looked at our planet in a more holistic way.

Of course feelings of belonging to the land where you are born or where you grew up are important, but these are not an essential part of the Islamic faith. Shortly after the establishment of the Turkish Republic, an exiled Turkish Islamic scholar said: "If the mercy of the Most Merciful (God) is your companion, everyone is friendly and everything is good. If the mercy of God is not your companion, everything is a burden on the heart and everyone becomes like an enemy" (Nursi, 1976, 477).

Because the Prophet Muhammad, the greatest example for Muslims, migrated and he followed all earlier prophets in this tradition of migration, Muslims should find no difficulty migrating from one place to another. The Qur'an features many stories of the migrations of the prophets, the first of which was Adam's migration from heaven to earth. According to the Qur'anic narrative Adam was in paradise and due to the Divine will, he was expelled from paradise and sent to the earth where he became the first immigrant. It should be noted that Adam sought God's forgiveness which was granted. Further, this was God's plan for had Adam not immigrated to earth, there would have been no chain of prophets, including the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad. The Qur'anic narratives of Abraham, Lot, Jonah, Jacob and Moses all contain migrations. By considering this encompassing picture of migration one can see the universal dimension of the Islamic understanding of migration.

In the Islamic tradition, life on earth is but one stage in every human's journey. There is a famous hadith in which the Prophet encapsulates this idea. In it, he compares himself to a traveler resting under the shade of a tree before continuing on his journey. The hadith goes as a follows. While the Prophet was sitting on a mat, Umar visited him and said to the Prophet that the Prophet should have a comfortable bed, instead of sleeping on a mat. The Prophet responded: "I don't

have anything to do with this world. My story is like a rider in a desert who takes shade under a tree for a certain moment and then departs from there" (al-Tirmidhi, 1975, 44).

The permanence of migration is echoed in another hadith that mentions how "migration will never come to end until repentance comes to an end. Repentance will never come to an end until the end of the world" (al-Tayalisi, n.d. 2). This hadith indicates that migration is a part of every human's journey on earth and will continue as long as life on earth continues. In other words, migration will never come to an end until the end of time. As migration is a part of human nature, people should develop institutions to deal with this. From a religious perspective, there will be religious migration throughout human history. This migration can be undertaken to escape religious persecution or to spread the Divine message. The other aspect of the hadith is that migration is a human phenomenon and will continue and therefore humanity should be aware of this and make all efforts to prevent possible calamities and to help with the difficult situations faced by immigrants. [6]

The encouragement that Islam gives to Muslims to offer charity constitutes a remarkable resource for modern aid organizations who deal with the problems of immigrants. The Qur'anic language of charity encompasses every aspect of life, from financial support and education to simple kindness and portions of *zakat*, the compulsory charity that is one of the five pillars of Islam, are given to those who are in poverty as well as travellers who are unable to pay their expenses. The reward that the Qur'an promises for those who help travellers is not limited to this world, but includes the afterlife as well. A prominent saying of the Prophet articulates the idea that anyone who removes the grief of a brother or sister, God will remove his or her grief in the afterlife. Such grief is a common experience for many migrants thus as this hadith indicates, Islam provides encouragement to those who help immigrants in bettering their conditions.

Throughout the history of Islam, there have been many examples of kindness and generosity towards immigrants. Bilal Habashi, a black African slave, was an immigrant in Mecca and considered a second-class human being in the period

6 For instance, the Turkish Muslim organization known as Kimse Yok Mu, literally "Is Anybody There?" which in the Turkish context is equivalent to "help," assists immigrants and refugees from around the world. Recently, the organization has been active in providing relief aid to the Syrian refugees in southern Turkey who lack many basic necessities, while suffering through severe winter conditions. See Sevgi Akarcesmet, "Kimse Yok Mu reaches out to Syrians in joint project with UNHCR" *Today's Zaman*, 9 Feb 2014. See also İlkay Gocmen, "56 TIR 'Kimse Yok Mu' diyen Suriyeliler için yola çıktı," *Zaman*, 19 Feb 2014.

prior to Islam. Abu Bakr rescued him from that situation by paying the ransom for his freedom. After he was freed, he became the first muezzin (prayer caller) in Islam. As mentioned above, the Qur'an speaks of the *Ansar*, and hence of all people who are generous, in a highly positive manner: "They do not covet what they are given but rather prefer (their brothers and sisters) above themselves although they are in need." (Qur'an, 59:9). Al-Tabari (d. 923 C.E), commenting on this verse in his *tafsir*, narrates the following story that is understood to have taken place in Medina and was the occasion for the verse's revelation. A hungry *muhajir* came to the Prophet as a guest. Since the Prophet did not have any food to provide, he asked if anyone else could host the *muhajir*. One of the *Ansar*, Abu Talha, took the man to his home. Though his family was poor and they only had enough food for one person, he advised his wife to honor the Prophet's guest. Abu Talha dimmed the lights and put his children to bed. He and his wife decided that they would pretend to eat, so that there would be food for their guest (al-Tabari, 2000, 285).

Considering the relationship between Europe and its Muslim immigrants, it is clear that Muslims constitute a significant proportion of new Europeans and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. These immigrants come not only from Muslim majority countries within Europe like Albania and Bosnia, but also from many different parts of the Islamic world, Turkey, the Arab world, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Indian subcontinent being the most prominent. By the second and third generation, European Muslims tend to consider themselves European and they have generally been integrated into the host society to the extent that some have lost their religious identities. If the Islamic model of migration and the universality of Islam are well understood by Muslim immigrants, they could become an engine of development for Europe because the idea of God's ownership of all lands gives Muslims the belief that all countries are God's country whether the place of their birth or not. If they feel alienated in Europe due to discrimination, racism, or social ostracism, European Muslims will become an obstacle to, rather than an engine of development. Therefore policy makers and administrators should find ways to make Muslims, who, according to the Pew Research Forum, number roughly 45 million in Europe, feel at home (Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, 2011). There is no way to remove all Muslims from Europe, but there is a way to make Muslims feel more comfortable in their European environment and become fruitful citizens, socially and economically. In this regard, Europeans can take lessons from America where Muslims feel much more comfortable, not because America has solved all of its immigration problems, but because America is open to immigration and works to integrate immigrants into society. If Europeans can develop similar institutions, Europe can become a better place for all immigrants.

Islam provides an important historical and ideological foundation for a society composed of immigrants and nonimmigrants. The practice of the Prophet of Islam gives important examples of creating harmony between the various segments of society and can be used as a model for dealing with immigration today. Muslim immigrants are ultimately capable of providing a source of economic strength and social harmony. Such harmony in Europe is important not only for Europe, but for the entire world.

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