

1. Islam's Divine Mandate for Ethical Action against Social Injustice

God delegated to Muslims a moral trust. At no point in history can Muslims ignore their unending obligations to appropriately discharge this moral trust. The basic and invaluable point is that all Muslims — and non-Muslims — must understand that it is in the power and is in fact the duty of Muslims of every generation to answer the question: What Islam? The response must not be left in the hands of the bin Ladens of the world.

— Khaled Abou El-Fadl

The Relation of Islamic Theology to Islamic Ethics

What evidence supports the claim that social justice is central to Islam? How do ethical values relate to Islamic theological foundations? How does the theme of social justice relate to Islam's fundamental mandate that a believer should submit to the will of Allah? This chapter will explore the dynamic relationship between ethics and Islamic "theology" (*kalam*). Appreciating the conceptual *rationale* that supports believers in their work for justice will significantly aid those attempting to support interfaith social justice partnerships.

One's view of God's nature and attributes has a dramatic effect on one's view of the world. Islamic mandates for social justice spring from the Muslim understanding of God's revelation. Believers claim that God Almighty is at work in the world through the community of the faithful. Allah is self-sufficient (Q. 96:6–7), while all humans are dependent upon the divine for life itself. Although God is clearly beyond the limitations of human understandings, Islam reveals that God loves justice. To follow Allah is to obligate one to work for justice among the created order. One cannot conclude that any injustice comes from God or is an expression of the divine will (Q. 39:30).

Since God has provided clear revelation to humanity, individuals are expected to follow the straight path of righteous action. One cannot only believe in a transcendent and unitary God; one is also accountable to worship Allah and to express that worship through acts of service. The fact of God's authority is the foundation for our actions and attitudes. Those who do not work for social justice are not grateful to God and have forgotten the facts of the coming Day of Judgment (Q. 76:3; 74:55–

56). We should be ever mindful of the fact that death, at the end of this brief life, becomes the gateway and provides the beginning of eternal life. The vertical quest for right relationship with God relates integrally with the horizontal responsibilities of an individual's daily interactions. In Islam, there are no monasteries or calls for the faithful to serve Allah in remote and isolated corners of the world: true faith in this temporal and fleeting dimension must be engaged within our daily lives.

Muslim teachers note that one of God's Ninety-nine Magnificent Names is *al-Rabb*, which means "the nurturing and the sustaining". God sustains and nurtures us so that we can serve the divine will. This explains why the Prophet defined piety in terms of ethical conscience. Nothing is hidden from God and God promises to reward every single act of charity (Q. 2:271) performed within the community (*ummah*) of believers (see Q. 10:19; 11:118; 16:93; 42:8; 43:3). Allah has revealed only one religion that has been given equally to all of the Prophets (Q. 21:92; 23:52); this one truth teaches that believers have both an inward and an outward obligation to divine decrees.

Atkhar writes, "The God of Islam is an educator."¹ Despite the rhetoric of some anti-Islamic apologists, God is not indifferent to the injustices that individuals experience in their daily lives. This critique clearly says more about the plaintiff than it does about the defendant. Farid Esack observes of some Christians who make this claim: "Much of this talk of a God of love has become little more than Western conservative Christianity avoiding fundamental issues of structural social injustice and poverty in a society that prevents the love of Allah from being experienced in concrete terms in the daily lives of ordinary people."² Believers, in contrast, are forbidden to follow any unengaged path of an escapist idealism, which sidesteps the evils of the world in the name of serving God.

A Distant God?

Critics have argued that Islamic philosophy, influenced by Greek thought, has promoted narrow and legalistic interpretations that have perpetrated the pervasive notion of a remote God. It is imperative to distinguish between the nearness of God and the historically Jewish or Christian idea of the personality of God. A static — and usually critical — view of Islam may try to take into account questions about the nature of God; these renderings often fail to consider the dynamic portrayal in Islam of a compassionate and merciful God who calls the faithful to work for ethical justice.

It is difficult to disprove the claim that the Qur'an and Hadith describe God's loving nurture and compassionate graciousness toward the created order. While this is true throughout Islamic religious

and devotional sources, it is particularly visible in the Sufi tradition, the warm and smiling face of Islamic theology. Sufism stresses an individualized, ongoing experience of the divine in everyday life and underscores what all Muslims believe — that an awareness of God's presence should fill every expression of life. The Qur'an explains: "And when my servant questions you concerning me then surely I am near" (Q. 2:186).

The active nearness of Allah within our daily lives does not contradict the truth of divine greatness or God's over-arching uniqueness; in fact, it underscores the pervasive reality of Allah's authority as Lord over all. While God is above and beyond, the call to follow God is pressing and immediate. The eternal God is worshiped in the present tense through lives of obedient righteousness. The Qur'an teaches a message that must be embodied in the daily lives of the Muslim community. It is God's nearness and the promise of God's active, engaged participation in the everyday events of the world that calls the faithful to work tirelessly for causes of social justice.

This nearness is expressed in Muslim responses to the question of theodicy (why Allah allows evil). Islamic teachers have often reframed the theoretical problem of evil by assuring believers that God knows all about their daily lives and, with justice, will ultimately answer every perplexing question and resolve every experienced evil. Humility and submission before Allah frees an individual from trying to ascertain why, for example, a child might die with an illness, and allows them still to accept that God is both loving and all-powerful (to use the paradigm popularized by Rabbi Harold Kushner, b. 1935). This is not to say that believers cannot ask these perplexing philosophical questions, but that they should be asked in the spirit of exploration, not in the hope of finding simple conclusions. Engaged faith in Allah is not compromised by such probing questions. On the contrary, the absence of such doubts might characterize the experience of a superficial believer who has never really fully subjected their faith to the gritty tests and tumults of daily life. Those who submit in obedience to Allah will find, on the Final Day, that all mysteries will be revealed and that all doubts will be silenced.

The Day of Judgment and Social Justice

Critics have claimed that Islam teaches that God has no moral responsibility to humanity and that He can be capricious, because, as God (by definition), He is somehow beyond the pale of any kind of moral responsibility.³ In actual fact, God's greatness reaffirms the justice message of Islam. One cannot say that Allah is capricious or callously allows for humanity to suffer. One text reminds the believer,

“God desires ease for us and does not wish us discomfort” (Q. 2:185). Coming to terms with the transcendence of God forces us to go beyond the confines of ourselves. The constantly repeated refrain *Allahu Akbar* is often translated as “God is Great” but it can also be translated as “God is Greater” (as in, greater than anything at all). God’s transcendence demands from each individual complete humility and radical obedience. There is no room for any form of dishonesty in God’s presence. Because Allah is “the light of heaven and earth” (Q. 24:35), there is always a way on this earth to live out the revealed will of heaven.

The Qur’an repeatedly reminds believers that the Day of Judgment is fore-ordained to demonstrate God’s eternal justice and to end oppression through the outworking of divine power: only God Almighty has the authority to judge every individual’s actions and prescribe an eternal reward or punishment. The very notion of a Day of Judgment is, in itself, a statement about ethical morality and the inevitability of accountability to the highest authority. This revelation is about more than simply instilling fear and terror in the minds of believers; it is about gaining an accurate perspective on what is truly important in life and about our fundamental dependence on God. Qur’an 112:1–3 asserts that there is none like Allah; Qur’an 83:4–6 reveals that every individual will eventually face a Divine Judge: “Do they not think that they will be called to account? On a Mighty Day, a Day when all humanity will stand before the Lord of the Worlds?” It is a day of “sorting” (Q. 30:14–16), which is so horrific that even a “mother will forget her suckling babe” (Surah 22) because the power of Allah will be on full display and those who have promoted injustice will be called to give a full account.

God’s revelation through Islam is incontrovertible; all individuals will be rewarded in heaven for their earthly actions. Allah is the giver of both merited punishment and unmerited mercy (see Q. 33:17). Those who have disregarded their obligations to promote social justice will find that they have chosen to place themselves outside of God’s merciful path to abundant blessings, the path of Islam. The fires of hell can even be viewed as a loving gift to motivate the faithful in this life; the ample warnings of the Qur’an give no doubt about how righteousness or unrighteousness will be regarded by the Great Judge of the world. Of this theme, Daud Rahbar explains: “the reminders of the Judgment Day are invariably there throughout [the Qur’an], which again is the most obvious evidence of the fact that the central theme, in light of which the character of the Qur’anic doctrine of God is to be determined is God’s strict justice.”⁴

Qur’an 30:14–16 warns that on the Day of Judgment, oppressors will cover before their divine interrogator and give account for their vile misdeeds. While it is God’s abundant mercy, and not the sum of one’s

charitable deeds, which ultimately causes a person to enter paradise, an individual should never forget that God's mercy should not be assumed upon; Allah cannot be mocked. There is a direct relationship between what one has done and whether one will be considered either acceptable or unacceptable; to think otherwise would make moot the very notion of our ethical accountability.

Islamic *kalam* teaches that if God simply forgave all misdeeds by divine fiat, this would be the ultimate expression of a capricious being; such actions would devalue the significance of living a life of faithful obedience to Islam. It is this view, which many Muslims contrast with certain Christian views of God's grace, which are seen to make irrelevant the need for righteous living because an individual can simply live a sinful life and then expect God to forgive all of their sins because of the salvific work of Christ. In contrast, one Hadith warns that all souls will be required to cross a narrow bridge, and oppressors, the unrighteous, and non-believers, will invariably fall off into the hellfire while the righteous are promised to enter into an eternal garden of amazing delight. Sinful Muslims may also fall into the fire for a time, other Hadith explain, but these errant believers will probably and eventually be rescued by the intercessions of faithful family members, friends, and the Prophet Muhammad. Many Islamic theologians — most notably Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328) — have concluded that even the flames of hell will only be temporary because the logic and wisdom of God suggests that there would be no place for a loving God to punish for countless eons those who had been rebellious.⁵ In contrast, paradise is the just reward for those who have endured trials and lived noble lives that have advanced Allah's will. Only those who practice justice in their lives are promised to gain the right in heaven to have intercessory powers on behalf of others.⁶

The fear of Allah is clearly a prime motivation for all believers to work for social justice. Over and over again this theme resonates from the pages of divine revelation; some have asserted that at least one in ten verses in the Qur'an urges believers to avoid the possibility of divine punishment.⁷ The Creator God knows the nature of humanity, and these warnings are to be seen as blessings of God's grace and not some primitivistic form of divine terrorism. It is for their own benefit — and not for God's self-satisfaction — that believers are repeatedly encouraged to fear Allah (see Q. 22:1–2 and Q. 27:87–90). God's revelation is unambiguous about the need for moral obedience. Rahbar explains: "It is a fact well-recognized in scientific scholarship that the fear of God is the dominant sentiment in Qur'anic morality. The roots of this conviction are in God's stern justice."⁸ An example of this recurring prophetic theme is found in Qur'an 2:264, which declares: "do not perform charity for your own glory but for the fear of Allah on the Last Day."

Social Justice Work as Worship

Gratitude for God's goodness is another vital motivating reason that Muslims are called to strive for social justice in this world of evil. Because Allah has been merciful to each person, individuals should graciously extend compassion to those around them. Qur'an 93:6–9 calls Prophet Muhammad to be generous: "Did He not find thee an orphan and give thee shelter. And He found thee wandering and He gave thee guidance. And He found thee in need and made thee independent. Therefore treat not the orphan with harshness, or repulse the petitioner (unheard); and the bounty of the Lord — proclaim." Merciful acts that foster social justice are the works of an ethical warrior in a world of injustice; such actions are of far more value than pious acts of devotion which do nothing to address injustice.

Islamist cleric Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) cites a Hadith, which announces: "The one who helps widows and the poor is like the one who participates in *jihad* or the one who watches all night (in prayer) and fasts all day."⁹ Qutb recounts another Hadith about a devout person of prayer who possesses many spiritual powers — not because of his prayers, but because of the acts of mercy and generosity practiced by his older brother. When Muhammad was asked about the spirituality of this devoted man of prayer, the Prophet confirmed: "Surely his brother worships better than he."¹⁰ Allah is pleased by those who compassionately invest their lives in others with a bountiful heart of genuine thankfulness. Gratitude may be the best motivation to labor for justice and to help others, but it is not the only impetus. Individuals who work for social justice will also bring eternal benefit to their souls (see Q. 57:7). Qur'an 64:16 challenges all believers to "spend in charity for the benefit of your own souls. And those saved from covetousness of their own souls — they are the ones that achieve prosperity."

A Message for All People

Allah loves the entire created order without partiality; the message of Islam is democratic in its scope. Because God is egalitarian in responding to humanity, the faithful should be careful not to favor the wealthy or the powerful above the poor and the oppressed. Each individual comes before their Creator with their hearts and souls and not with their ledger sheets or their resumes. Islam is adamant in asserting the equality of all peoples because worldly success is meaningless when an individual stands before the throne of Almighty God. The mightiest of kings and the poorest of beggars will stand side by side on equal

footing at the Final Day to be held accountable for their obedience to God. Individuals should never trust in the saving-power of their riches or come to think that they can gain material wealth on this earth that will carry into the ethereal halls of eternity.

The message of Islam makes clear that Allah is pleased by piety expressed through righteous actions and not by a person's economic, material, or political status. During the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca everyone is mandated to join the prayer line as an equal before God Almighty, wearing white robes without adornment to illustrate their equal standing before Allah. While it is consequential to do *salat* for one's own benefit, blame will be ascribed to "those who oppress men and revolt in the earth unjustly and they shall have a painful punishment" (Q. 42:41–42). The practice of *zakat* is one of the foundational "pillars of Islam" and it calls the faithful to give financially to the needy because of God's greatness (Q. 9:60).

This should explain why, through the centuries, Muslims who have been faithful to the Qur'anic teaching have sought to undertake social justice causes in God's name. Yaacov Lev describes the *ribats* of Medieval Islam, which were homes (or fortresses) for outcasts and widows who had no family.¹¹ Food and shelter were provided along with spiritual nourishment. One *ribat* built in Cairo (around 1285) even provided facilities for divorced (or separated) women until they either remarried or returned to their husbands.

The Oneness of God and Social Justice

There is a clear link in historic Islamic *kalam* between worshipping God and ministries of social concern. God's "Ninety-nine Beautiful Names" (or the "Most Comely Names") cite characteristics of God's will and actions among humanity. God is called the Merciful (*al-Rahman*), the Compassionate (*al-Rahim*), the Loving (*al-Wadud*), and many other similarly positive names reflecting God's virtuous actions. Qur'an 59:22–24 describes an awareness of these attributes as a way to worship Allah, which also obligates individuals to act in their lives with ever-increasing ethical consideration. The balance of the created universe reveals that God has created everything to live in harmony with divine decrees for social justice (see Q. 49:13).

God's unity is the foundation upon which Islam builds its vision for social justice. The relationship between the doctrine of God's oneness (*tawhid*) and social justice is rarely fully appreciated by non-Muslims. Because individuals have been liberated in their souls from the bondages of selfish idolatry or hedonistic darkness (*jahiliyya*), they are free to create a unified society before the one God rooted in singular justice and solidarity. Freedom from divisive polytheism (or other

distorted caricatures of monotheism) allows individuals to live their lives with greater clarity and moral singularity. Believers are called to “imitate” the unity of Allah’s attributes of goodness, unity, peace, forgiveness, mercy, wisdom, and justice. God’s “beautiful names” are not only descriptions of God’s will in the world, but they also form the well-spring source for how believers are to practice justice. The Qur’an shows that when individuals submit (*islam*) to the divinely established path they will foster human-to-human interactions that can construct a comprehensive and unified “world house” before the one true God. In one of the most striking verses in the Qur’an (2:177), God summarizes the way that humanity is called to work for social justice in light of the oneness of the divine character:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces toward the East or the West, but it is righteousness to believe in Allah, the Last Days, the Book and the Messengers; to spend your substance out of love for Him for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer and to practice regular charity, to fulfill the contracts that you have made and to be firm and patient, in pain or in suffering and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing.