

## Islam and the Ethic of Human Concern and Social Action

Although Islam advances a philosophy for life and existence, predicated on a clear epistemological foundation, it has never been an empty philosophy. It is a religion that calls for human concern and social action. These twin precepts are at the very heart of both the Qur'anic message and the prophetic tradition. Therefore, the essence of faith involves belief coupled with action. In the Qur'an, the faithful are frequently described as *those who believe and perform righteous deeds*. (2:25, 2:82, 2:277, 4:57, 22:56, 30:15, 103:3) The Prophet Muhammad, peace upon him, mentioned, "Faith has seventy some odd branches. The loftiest of them is to proclaim, 'There is no deity but God.' The lowest of them is to remove the harmful object from the pathway. And shyness is a branch of faith."<sup>1</sup> Here faith is mentioned as containing an action that involves service to others; namely, removing a source of harm.

Concerning human concern and social action, we read in the Qur'an, *He has made no progress on the steep path; and what will make you know what the steep path is? It is freeing the slave, and providing food in a time of famine; to the orphan who is related and to the dust-covered indigent person. Only then will he be among those who truly believe; those who counsel patient, who counsel mercy.* (90:11-17) Likewise, *Every soul will be redeemable by the deeds it has done, except the Companions of the Right Hand. [They will be] in Gardens questioning each other, and [asking] the sinners, "What has led you to the Inferno?" They will respond, "We were not among those who prayed, nor did we feed the indigent."* (74:38-44) He further states, *Those in whose wealth is a well-defined right, owed to those forced to beg, and to those deprived.* (70:24-25) It is worth noting that these verses occur at the beginning of the revelatory period. God is forging in the minds of the new believers a firm social consciousness that will be a defining feature of Islam.

As for the prophetic tradition, it contains many exhortations that urge concern and sacrifice for others. The Prophet, peace upon him, mentioned, "God will continue to help the servant as long as the servant is helping his brother."<sup>2</sup> He also said, "One who cares for an orphan, whether related to him or unrelated, will be with me in Paradise like these two [adjacent fingers]." He would also constantly encourage his companions to show great concern for the neighbors. He mentioned for example, "When you cook a stew add extra water in order to give some to your [needy] neighbors."<sup>3</sup>

This spirit of sharing with needy neighbors is especially pertinent today as we are living in a global village where increasingly large numbers of our "neighbors" are in need. Yet we go on enjoying our "stew," never thinking to add more "water" in order that we may share with those less fortunate than ourselves. For Muslims - as is the case for all decent

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<sup>1</sup> Abu Dawud al-Sajistani, *Sunan Abu Dawud* (Riyadh: Dar al-Salaam, 1420/1999), 661, no. 4676.

<sup>2</sup> Abu al-Husayn Muslim bin al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1420/2000), 1142, no. 2699.

<sup>3</sup> Muslim, 1116, no. 2625.

human beings - this is an untenable situation. Millions of people are being relegated to abject poverty, in many instances because of nothing they have done. In fact, most of their suffering can be laid at the steps of the excesses of the minority of us living in the so-called “developed” world.

Hegemonic, globalized economic practices have led to the plunder of “developing” nations’ resources and the destruction of their markets, leading to economic marginalization of hundreds of millions of unsuspecting, innocent individuals. We must act to both change our destructive ways and to ease their suffering.

Again as Muslims, these calls should only be echoes of what we already hear in the teachings of our religion. However, sadly when given the opportunity, we find our coreligionists contributing to the consumerism, environmental destruction, greed and shortsightedness that are destroying our planet.

It is time for us to play our part in helping to bring about a truly brave new world, one characterized by the lofty moral and ethical teaching advanced by our religion. We have alluded to some of those teaching above. Those teachings, urging concern for those less fortunate than ourselves, are reinforced by the way we live those teachings on an ongoing basis. Now is the time for more of us to translate those teachings into action. Let us join hands with all who are committed to eradicating the hunger, disease, deprivation, inequality and hardship that threatens to eventually eradicate us.

Now is the time to move beyond inaction and excuses. May Allah Bless us to be provided with the motivation, strength, and courage to do just that.

Sincerely, Imam Zaid Shakir, Zaytuna Institute & Academy