

Community Building in Islam, Part 4

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Al-Islam.org

Message of Thaqaalayn Vol. 17, no. 2, Summer 2016

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Publisher(s):

[Ahlul Bayt World Assembly](#) [2]

This series of papers studies the importance of community-building and Prophet Muhammad's efforts to implement it. Part 4 of the series expands on Allah's justice in the Qur'an, early controversy on the meaning of Allah's justice, the Shi'a view of justice, the necessity for establishing social justice, having just leaders, and examples of justice observed by the Ahlul Bayt.

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.

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Abstract

Having a shared identity working towards a joint cause is vital for a healthy community. In doing so, a community must share specific qualities in order 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, unity, moderation, humbleness, enjoining good and forbidding wrong, and maintaining a healthy balance in working for this world to eventually lead to a blissful hereafter were illustrated. Another important quality of a successful community is their implementation of justice, also one of the principles of Shi'i Islam.

This article expands on Allah's justice in the Qur'an, early controversy on the meaning of Allah's justice, the Shi'a view of justice, the necessity for establishing social justice, having just leaders, and examples of justice observed by the Ahlul Bayt.

Introduction

One of the vital qualities of an Islamic Community is its commitment to justice. In the previous part, verses 181 and 159 of the Chapter A'raf were reflected on. Verse 159 is about a group of followers of Prophet Musa, and verse 181 then generalises the same theme:

Among the people of Moses is a nation who guide [the people] by the truth and do justice thereby. (7: 159)

So among the people created by Allah there is a group, a community of people, who guide and judge truthfully. (7: 181)

These truthful people also observe justice. In what follows we study aspects of divine justice and then try to explore more the notion of social justice, a concept especially important for followers of the Ahlul Bayt, because justice has historically been considered as one of the principles of Shi'ism. In addition to the Unity of God, prophethood and resurrection – which are recognised by all Muslims and indeed by the followers of all Abrahamic faiths – the followers of the Ahlul Bayt have particularly emphasized on two other things: justice and Imamate. For this reason, it is essential to talk about justice, and in particular social justice.

Divine justice in the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, Allah frequently speaks of His justice. Of course, there is no verse of the Qur'an in which Allah introduces Himself as being 'ādil because this is usually used in the Qur'anic usage only for human beings. However, what is mentioned is that Allah is not a ظالم; Allah does not oppress or do injustice. Therefore, all Muslims have emphasised that Allah is Just and does not do any injustice, but, as will be explained later, there has been disagreement amongst them on the meaning of justice.

First, we will read some verses of the Qur'an about Divine Justice and then proceed to examine the theological differences that exist amongst Muslims on this topic.

In the Qur'an, Allah states that He is not in the least unjust to His servants (3: 182, 8:51, 22: 10). Thus, not even the slightest amount of injustice is exercised by God. In His creation and in His treatment of human beings, whether in this world or the hereafter, it is impossible that Allah commits any form of injustice towards His servants. A few examples among many:

Whoever acts righteously, it is for his own soul, and whoever does evil, it is to its detriment, and your Lord is not tyrannical to the servants. (41:46)

The word [of judgement] is unalterable with Me, and I am not tyrannical to the servants.' (50:29)

Indeed Allah does not wrong [anyone] [even to the extent of] an atom's weight, and if it be a good

deed He doubles it[s reward], and gives from Himself a great reward. (4:40)

Indeed Allah does not wrong people in the least; rather it is people who wrong themselves. (10:44)

Thus no Muslim would doubt that God does not commit any form of injustice.

Earlier controversy about the meaning of Allah's justice

In the early days of Islam, there was a disagreement about the meaning of justice. Some Muslims were of the opinion that by definition, God is just; they attempted to simplify the issue and thus avoid an important question by holding that whatever God does is just and hence, by definition, God does not do any injustice. Because if we say justice is what God does, then injustice is what God does not do.

These people were the Ash'arites who believed in some form of what is known in the West as Divine Command Theory – the idea that justice, or in a more general sense, good, is whatever is commanded or done by God. There is no possibility for us to either question God's actions or to comment on whether they are just or not. Indeed, they believe that we have to understand what justice is by looking at what God does or what He says; whether God sends good people to Heaven or to Hell, it is all up to Him, and either action is just.

However, the Shi'a and the Mu'tazilites had a different attitude towards justice. To them, justice is an objective matter, possible to understand it rationally. So first, we should believe justice is real and objective and then proceed to understand it rationally. It is not necessary to be religious to understand that, for example, we should not physically abuse and mistreat a child, or misappropriate the property of other people. It is obvious to any rational person that these are examples of injustice.

The followers of the Ahlul Bayt believe that justice is something that exists in reality; whether we are religious or not, we have the ability to understand and discern the difference between what is just and what is not just. Of course, we may need to refer to religious texts regarding details, but initially this understanding is essential to have even prior to becoming faithful. The Ash'arites believed that if we deny the ability of human beings to distinguish between what is just or unjust, then eventually we cannot even prove the existence of God, nor can we verify the truth of religion. This became a heated debate between early Muslim theologians and continues to the present day.

The Shi'a view of justice

The Shi'a held to the ideas of intrinsic goodness and badness, and intrinsic and rational justice. They maintained that justice is real and possible for us to understand its principles rationally. For this reason, the followers of the Ahlul Bayt chose justice as one of the principles of their faith to distinguish themselves from those who denied this necessary understanding of justice.

This is a theological debate, which requires a great deal of time to properly and adequately analyse and discuss it. However, we can briefly say that for the Shi'a, the issue of Divine Justice is not merely something that we must believe about God so that, for example, when we die we will be able to say 'God is Just' when questioned about this. On the contrary, justice is an important factor in our lives and in deciding what type of person we should be and what type of society we should have. In other words, for the followers of the Ahlul Bayt,

Divine Justice must be echoed in our relationships with each other. If God is Just, He expects us to be just. If He treats us with justice, we also must treat each other with justice.

Necessity for the establishment of social justice

Allah has sent the prophets with an important mission, as mentioned in the Qur'an. This is one of the arguments, among many, that prove the necessity of social justice:

Certainly We sent Our apostles with manifest proofs, and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, so that mankind may maintain justice. (57:25)

Our scholars have discussed the various meanings of 'al-mizān' ('the Balance') in depth. Some think it is Islamic Law whilst others hold it to be the ability of mankind to differentiate between what is good or bad, and what is right or wrong. Others believe that this 'Balance' is the Qur'an itself, and so it is mentioned for emphasis. But what is most important is that Allah provided us with enough guidance to understand our duties, and in particular, to be able to strike a balance which, as previously explained, is of great necessity for a true Islamic community.

Mankind must establish social justice

From the verse 57:25, we understand that the reason Allah provided the prophets with Books and the Balance (or Scale) was to guide and help people in establishing justice. It is important to note that it is not the prophets who are expected to establish social justice. They have not been sent to do everything for us so that we sit idly by, and just enjoy social justice once the prophets have made efforts and established it.

For example Allah explains when Prophet Musa told some of the Bani Israel to enter the Holy Land, they replied that in this land there were strong and powerful people, and so they were afraid to enter. They told Prophet Musa to go along with his Lord fight them, so that when those people were destroyed and peace was established, they would arrive to enjoy it¹.

However this attitude is certainly not accepted by Allah. We are not permitted to remain idle, waiting for Allah and His prophets to do everything for us. The reality of the matter is that the prophets have come to guide us, but in the end, we who are to establish social justice. In general, the Qur'an tells us:

Indeed Allah does not change a people's lot, unless they change what is in their souls. (13:11)

Allah's Justice must be reflected in society

Divine Justice must be reflected and echoed in society. Our Lord is Just, and therefore He expects us to have a just society in which there is equity, no discrimination, and everyone can progress according to their talents and efforts. Furthermore, in such a society, people can attain nearness to Allah.

If we want people who are spiritual and religious, who have time and energy to focus on their spiritual needs, we need to have a just society, because when there is no justice, the energy of people is wasted, their talents are disregarded, and tyrants and unjust rulers waste everything. Of course, it is still possible to have good people under such conditions but only truly dedicated people can become good in a society which is unjust. However, when we have social justice, then the masses can become good.

Observing justice

In Chapter al-Nahl, a beautiful verse summarises Islamic teachings, and if we implement this verse then surely ninety percent of our problems would disappear:

Indeed Allah enjoins justice and kindness and generosity towards relatives, and He forbids indecency, wrong, and aggression. He advises you, so that you may take admonition. (16:90)

So God asks, and indeed commands us, to observe justice and benevolence, to do good to ourselves and to others, and to give what is needed to our relatives. On the other hand, Allah asks us not to do injustice or ugly actions – a simple yet concise and profound verse. If we observe justice and do good to each other, by first looking after our own relatives and the people we know, society will become free of problems or crises.

Justice as a requirement for important positions

Shi'a jurists have emphasised on the condition of justice in many cases in jurisprudence as a requirement or a qualification for many positions. For example, we believe that imam of a masjid who leads the prayer must be just. This means that not only must he not do injustice to others, he must not even commit any injustice to himself by committing sins. This shows that even if someone lives alone in a desert, there is still the opportunity to be just or unjust. Though other people are not present, that person may still be unjust to himself or herself by committing sins. In Chapter Divorce, Allah says:

...and whoever transgresses the bounds of Allah certainly wrongs himself. You never know maybe Allah will bring off something new later on. (65:1)

So if we commit a sin such as missing just one compulsory prayer, lying, or eating impermissible foods,

we are doing injustice, to ourselves. We read in the Supplication of Kumayl:

I have wronged myself....

Furthermore, if, for example, someone has the potential to become a very good person but is then satisfied with something lower than that, then they are doing injustice to themselves. If someone has the ability to become a top scholar and then wastes their time, energy and talents, they are doing injustice to themselves. If someone is capable of being a good driver and does not drive properly, then they are doing injustice to themselves. So injustice to ourselves is when we disregard or waste our talents, energies, potentials, time and resources at our disposal.

Some may think that we do injustice to Allah, but this can never happen. In reality we are doing injustice to ourselves, not to Allah.

Even in the case of doing injustice to other people, before we harm others by doing injustice to them, we are firstly harming and doing injustice to ourselves. If someone hurts another person, they are firstly hurting themselves. If, for example, they mistreat, humiliate or insult someone else, before doing this to the other person they have degraded themselves. They have damaged their own dignity before damaging the other person. If someone has a sense of respect and honour for themselves, then they will not mistreat others.

For the followers of the Ahlul Bayt, the concept of justice not only concerns our relationships with others; justice starts from within and then reaches out.

The imam of a masjid, the Friday Prayers leader (imam of Jum'ah), and the narrators of hadith and the scholars are among those people of status who must be just².

The people who narrate hadith must also be just; if not, then the hadith will be ranked lower. The chain of narrators of a particular hadith must all be known to be just for that hadith to be authentic (sahih), which is the highest ranking for a hadith. If they are not known to be just, then at least they must be honest for the hadith to be considered good (hasan) and is ranked lower. It is preferable that they are just, because with a just person, you can trust their entire personality and conduct, but someone who tells the truth but is unjust and commits sins is very much at the verge of moral collapse and could also easily start to tell lies³.

The religious authority (marja'i) must be just and not commit any sins, in addition to being the most knowledgeable. Furthermore, a leader, a judge and witnesses who come to court to bear witness and give their testimony in front of a judge must all be just.

Justice in the history of Islam

The following are some examples in the course of Islam that illustrate emphasis on justice.

Justice observed by the Prophet

In the same year as the Conquest of Mecca, when the Prophet and the Muslims entered peacefully Mecca, a woman from a noble and well-known family committed theft. So the Prophet decided that it was necessary to bring her to justice. Some argued that she came from a rich and noble family, and the punishment would not look good for them, but the Prophet did not consent. The Prophet then said something very important: that the reason previous nations had been destroyed was because they administered justice only when the poor committed crimes, whereas it was ignored when the rich did the same.

Imam Ali accepts the Caliphate only to implement social justice

After the death of the third caliph, Imam Ali was forced to accept the Caliphate. Though he had refused to accept it, people insisted and forced him so much that in Nahjul Balaghah, Sermon 3, also known as his Sermon of ash-Shiqshiqiyah, he explains that the pressure and the size of the crowd was so overwhelming that Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn were knocked down by the crowd and fell under the feet of people.

We should remember that Imam Hassan and Imam Husayn were not children at that time; they were young men. Thus, so much pressure was exercised that Imam Ali accepted to become the caliph. Then Imam made the following statement:

Behold, by Him who split the grain (to grow) and created living beings, if people had not come to me and supporters had not exhausted the argument and if there had been no pledge of Allah with the learned to the effect that they should not acquiesce in the gluttony of the oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed I would have cast the rope of Caliphate on its own shoulders, and would have given the last one the same treatment as to the first one. Then you would have seen that in my view this world of yours is no better than the sneezing of a goat.

Imam Ali said that he had no excuse to refuse because so many people were coming to show their readiness to support him; he accepted the caliphate because there were supporters, and he felt great responsibility as a knowledgeable person to do so. Then Imam Ali compares the caliphate to a camel, saying that if the conditions were not like this, he would have put the rope onto the back of the camel and sent it off, and then the people would have seen that he had no interest in dunya. He said that their dunya was less valuable for him than the water that comes out of the nose of a goat. This is the insignificance of dunya for Imam Ali. He accepted the caliphate solely to implement social justice with the availability of supporters.

Those in power should live according to the level of the poor

In Nahjul Balaghah, Sermon 208, Imam Ali said:

“Certainly God the Sublime has made it obligatory on true believers that they maintain themselves at the level of the humble so that the poor do not cry out over their property.”

Ordinary people can be rich, but leaders and the people who hold power such, as the Imam, for example, or the supreme leader, should try to adjust their lifestyle so that the poor do not feel that their leaders are living on another planet and have nothing in common with them.

Responsibility to help the oppressed

The general responsibility of every person not to remain silent in the face of injustice is very important in Islam, especially so in the school of the Ahlul Bayt. If someone is being treated with injustice and they are in need of our help, we have a duty to go and help them.

There is a story about a treaty called ‘Hilf al-Fuḍūl’. An important event took place during the Era of Ignorance before Islam, when the Prophet was very young. A person went to Mecca for trade. The trader left his property, some possessions and money in safe-keeping with one of the Meccans, but then when he went to collect them, the Meccan denied responsibility and refused to return them. This would frequently occur in Mecca. The wronged could not do anything because there was no justice at that time and because they were strangers and therefore had no supporters.

Thus, the wronged trader went to the top of Mount Abu Qubays and shouted out loud to the people, explaining what had happened to him. Then a group of young Meccans came together and decided to support him. They made a treaty amongst themselves, known as ‘Hilf al-Fuḍūl’, in which they would support anyone who was wronged. These young people, including Prophet Muhammad, decided to help that man and this treaty continued to be implemented. Indeed, even after Islam, the Prophet said that if he was called upon to act according to the treaty that they had, he would still continue and help those people.

Thus, this is such an important responsibility that even non-Muslims realised this and acted accordingly. This concurs with what we said about justice being a concept that every person who has reason and conscience would understand it.

The importance of confronting unjust rulers

Therefore, according to Islam, we must react when someone is committing injustice, especially if this injustice is done by those in power. We cannot remain indifferent and inactive in the face of injustice. Prophet Muhammad said, and Imam Husayn has also this quoted from him:

“The best jihad, the best struggle, is to utter the word of justice in front of an unjust leader.”

This is so because the leader is the one who has power. When the rights of people are violated by kings, presidents, caliphs, and so forth, then it is a great struggle to confront them. This is why Imam

Husayn stood against Yazid although he knew that the cost would be the loss of his life and the lives of many others, and that his family would be taken captive. However, justice is so important that the Imam could not, and did not, remain silent.

Furthermore, all our Imams, apart from Imam Mahdi (atf), were martyred. This happened precisely because they did not remain silent in the face of oppression. They did not merely want to worship Allah, for example, by visiting Mecca and Madinah to sit in Masjid ul- Haram or in the Masjid of the Prophet and worship.

On the contrary, the Imams were extremely concerned about social justice, and because the caliphs rule during their lifetimes were not able to silence them using threats or bribery, they were killed. Due to the great importance of justice, we see that the history of the Shi'a is full of uprisings which were not for material gain but simply to establish justice. If justice was observed, then the Imams did not want anything from this dunya; they had no interest in power, or other people's property, money or land. What they wanted was justice to be implemented for everyone.

Right of people to protest at injustice

One of the requirements of an Islamic community and in particular of an Islamic government is to allow people to object and protest if they see that there is something wrong with their community or government and that injustice is being committed. In the chapter Ale- Imran, we read about the concept of enjoining right and forbidding wrong:

You are the best nation [ever] brought forth for mankind: you bid what is right and forbid what is wrong, and have faith in Allah. (3: 110)

Enjoining good must always be put into practice. In particular, Imam Ali focused a great deal on this because during the brief period of his Caliphate, which only lasted under five years, he was faced with the implementation of running a government. Imam Ali very much wanted to establish the right of people to protest at injustice, but unfortunately time was too short and after him matters went in the wrong direction again. The Caliphate eventually became like a kingdom once more.

However, during his caliphate, Imam Ali was extremely careful to give people the courage to come and protest and to make complaints about his agents or even about himself, so much so that during his Caliphate he himself was taken to court.

Imam Ali taken to court

Someone claimed that his sword, or a similar object, had been misappropriated by Imam Ali and so he demanded that Imam Ali be taken to court, in which the Imam politely and willingly accepted. The judge did not ask why the Caliph was brought to court because he knew that the Imam was pleased with the situation. Furthermore, when the judge addressed Imam Ali by his 'kunya' or title of 'Abul Hasan' and

only addressed the other person by his ordinary name, Imam Ali insisted that they must both be treated equally. Moreover, in the end, Imam Ali lost the case because he did not have enough evidence.

Imam Ali's advice to Malik al-Ashtar

Imam Ali appointed Malik al-Ashtar as Governor of Egypt. Unfortunately, Malik was killed by poisoning before reaching Egypt. However, because Malik was appointed as governor, the Imam gave him instructions to fulfil this role, and those instructions by themselves are crucial as they are Imam Ali's instructions on how to govern. Some have even been quoted by the United Nations in its 2002 Arab Human Development Report.

Fourteen centuries ago, before any philosopher articulated liberty in such a way, Imam Ali made the following beautiful point, found in his letter to Malik al-Ashtar in Nahj ul-Balaghah, Letter 53:

The Imam Ali advises Malik al-Ashtar that during his office hours he must allocate a certain amount of time for those who are dissatisfied and displeased and for those who want to approach him with their grievances and their problems, for example if they have been mistreated by the Governor's agents. During this time he should not do anything else except listen to them. For example he should not be reading something whilst letting them speak. He must treat them very nicely, give his full attention to them and pay careful attention to their complaints and grievances.

So for this purpose he must arrange a public audience for them during which, for the sake of God, he must treat them with kindness, courtesy and respect. These are people who want and need to come and complain. He must not let the army and police be in the audience hall at such times because if guards or police are there, then people will be frightened and unable to speak. So he must not let the army and police be in the audience hall at such times so that those who have grievances against his rule may speak to him freely, unreservedly and without fear.

In Letter 53 in Nahj ul Balaghah, narrating from the Holy Prophet, Imam Ali says that Prophet Muhammad (s) said:

No community, no nation, no society will be mighty, will be strong, will be powerful unless the rights of the depressed, destitute and suppressed are observed.

If there is a society in which people who are weak, poor and oppressed cannot claim their rights then this community or society will not become strong and indeed will perish.

Justice in the light of the history of the Ahlul Bayt

There are two highlights in the history of Islam and the Ahlul Bayt (a). One is the event of Karbala and the other is the advent of Imam Mahdi.

Imam Husayn in Karbala

When we study the history of Imam Husayn (a) and the event of Karbala, we find that the main thing we learn about was that Imam stood against injustice. For example, Imam said:

I see death as salvation and life with the oppressors as misfortune.

Living a life during which we see that people are being treated unjustly, is really not a life worth living.

In another Hadith from Imam Husayn (a) he said:

O people! Whoever witnesses an unjust ruler permitting acts prohibited by God , breaking Divine Covenants, acting against the Sunnah of the Prophet and treating people sinfully and with enmity, whoever witnesses all this and does not protest in word or deed, God has the right to treat them in the same way that e treats those oppressor.

Therefore if we witness such acts of injustice and remain indifferent, then Allah will treat us in the same way that He treats the person who committed those unjust actions.

Imam Mahdi (atf)

When we read the hundreds of Hadith which are about Imam Mahdi, narrated by both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, we discover that the main task and achievement of Imam Mahdi is to establish justice. This is his main task at the top of his agenda. Through Imam Mahdi and his supporters, Allah will establish justice and equity, so much so that the earth will be filled with justice and equity after being filled with injustice and discrimination.

So in the ideal society, which will take shape at the end of time and which is the final outcome of the whole history of mankind on this earth, top priority will be given to establishing social justice. A society will be created in which all people are treated equally; no one's right will be disregarded, no one will be humiliated, and no one will be deprived.

Conclusion

Every person firstly has the responsibility of achieving justice within themselves and of giving everything its due right. Our body has some rights over us as well as our soul. After this, our family, children and spouse, friends, neighbours, fellow human beings and even animals and plants, all have rights over us. In order to be just, we must observe all of these rights.

In the case of society, it can only be considered Islamic if full respect is given to the rights of all people and all things in that society. We cannot even disregard the rights of animals, the rights of plants or the rights of nature and the environment. Absolutely everything must be handled with justice. In this way,

Divine Justice will be reflected amongst us.

With Allah's support and our best and sincere efforts to firstly be just ourselves, we can then help with the establishment of justice in our society and then throughout the entire world, insha Allah.

1. They said: "O Moses! while they remain there, never shall we be able to enter, to the end of time. Go thou, and thy Lord, and fight ye two, while we sit here (and watch)." The Qur'an 5:24

2. Imam Khomeini, in his Tahrir al-Wasilah, explains the difference between the a) requirement of justice for the imam of a masjid and b) the imam of Jum'ah. If the people believe the imam of a masjid to be just, it is sufficient. For example, the imam may not personally believe that he is just although the people following him believe he is, so it is valid for those followers to make the intention of following him in congregational prayers and thus receive the increased reward for joining a congregational prayer, whilst the imam has made the intention of individual prayer.

Since the imam does not believe he is just, he does not make the intention of being the imam of the congregational prayers and simply says his own prayers. However, in the case of Friday Prayers, Imam Khomeini believed that the imam must make the intention of leading the prayer; therefore, he must himself believe that he is just.

3. For example, if someone wrongs his neighbour but is a truthful person, one might ask how this relates to the narration of hadith because it is surely sufficient that the person tells the truth. In response, we may say that the person who wrongs their neighbour does not have a just and balanced personality; if they are able to do one wrong action, they would more easily do the second and so forth.

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