



# Divine Duty: Islam and Social Justice

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## Author Biography

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**Note:** This article has been excerpted from the author’s contribution to a larger chapter co-authored with Amal Qutub (registered social worker) and Mahdi Qasqas (clinical psychologist) entitled “Islam and Social Justice” in the volume *Spirituality and Social Justice: Spirit in the Political Quest for a Just World* (Canadian Scholars Press, 2019) available [here](#). The chapter provides an introduction to, and overview of, the Islamic faith for Canadian social workers counseling Muslim clients with special focus on contemporary challenges facing the Canadian Muslim community. The portion of the chapter relating to Islamic theology and social justice has been excerpted and adapted below.

## Introduction

The concept of justice in Islam is rooted in God’s Divine nature. The Qur’an states, “Verily, God does not do even an atom’s weight of injustice” (Qur’an 4:40). The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ quotes God as saying, “O My Servants, I have forbidden injustice upon myself and have made it forbidden amongst you, so do not commit injustice.”<sup>1</sup> In this saying of the Prophet, we see a connection between how humans ought to act and our knowledge of God’s Divine qualities. In fact, it is a principle of Islamic theology that our quest in life is to come closer to God by emulating His Divine Names. One builds a relationship with God by building virtues within oneself. The famous theologian, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH/1111 CE), wrote a book on the concept of God in which he included a chapter entitled, “Explaining that the perfection and salvation of the worshipper is in emulating the Divine qualities of God and embodying their meanings to the extent that is humanly conceivable.”<sup>2</sup>

All the experiences of life provide human beings with opportunities to embody virtues that emulate the Divine attributes, such as being compassionate to those in distress, giving generously to those who are needy, advocating on behalf of the oppressed, and so on. Belief in God’s Divine Justice is thus directly linked to one’s

<sup>1</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: no. 2577.

<sup>2</sup> A. Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. Muhammad ‘Uthmān al-Khisht (Cairo, Egypt: Maktabat al-Qur’an, 1984), 45.

commitment to strive for justice and to avoid any form of oppression towards anyone in one's personal life. In fact, those who stand for justice are the ones who truly know God and testify to His Grandeur: "God testifies that there is none worthy of worship except Him, as do the angels, and those endowed with knowledge standing firmly for justice" (Qur'an 3:18). Thus, in Islam, the starting point for any type of justice is rooted in one's spiritual quest to love God and be God's beloved. That spiritual justice begets all other forms of justice.

In Islam, justice is woven into the very nature of the cosmos. The Qur'an states, "God raised up the heavens and established the Scales of balance" (Qur'an 55:7), a phrase which commentators take to mean "He established justice (*athbata al-'adl*)."<sup>3</sup> This concept of balance is central to the Islamic definition of justice which entails upholding the rights (*ḥuqūq*) due to others, or giving what is due to the one to whom it is due.<sup>4</sup> Upholding rights begins in one's relationship with God, acknowledging that God is the sole Sovereign, the ultimate objective of one's pursuits, the only One worthy of worship (which constitutes part of the basic testimony of faith in Islam). Pure monotheism is the Qur'anic message. The deification of earthly creatures, invention of false deities, and worship of others alongside God all constitute 'associating partners with God' (*shirk* in Arabic) which is termed a 'grave injustice' (Qur'an 31:13). The primary victim of such an injustice is one's own soul because it is deprived of the spiritual fulfillment that comes about from a meaningful connection with one's Creator, and instead becomes subjugated to false ideologies and worldly desires.

One's relationship with God must manifest in the way one deals with others, and thus there is tremendous emphasis on upholding the rights of all creation—from one's family, to one's neighbors, to all human beings, to animals and the environment.<sup>5</sup> A verse of the Qur'an cited routinely at the end of the Friday sermon states, "Verily God commands justice, excellent conduct, and caring for one's relatives, and He forbids all forms of immorality, evil and transgression. He

<sup>3</sup> Jalāl al-Dīn Al-Maḥallī and Jalāl al-Dīn Al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (Cairo: Dar al-Hadīth, 2010), 709.

<sup>4</sup> M. R. Al-Nābulṣī, "Khuṭbah al-Jumu'ah, Silsilat al-Akhḷāq, Al-'Adl," *Nabulsi*, 1992, <http://www.nabulsi.com/blue/ar/te.php?art=599/>.

<sup>5</sup> Sira Abdul Rahman, "Religion and Animal Welfare: An Islamic Perspective," *Animals: An Open Access Journal from MDPI* 7, no. 2 (2017): 11.

admonishes you so that you may take heed” (Qur’an, 16:90). The Qur’an admonishes human beings to always arbitrate every matter with justice (Qur’an, 4:58), and to remove every bias in upholding justice even if it requires taking a stance against one’s own interests: “O you who believe, be persistently standing firm in justice, as witnesses before God, even if it be against yourselves or your parents and relatives” (Qur’an, 4:135). So important is the notion of impartiality to justice that the Qur’an advises, “Let not the hatred of others towards you prevent you from being just. Be just, that is closer to piety” (Qur’an 5:8).

## The Islamic perspective on social justice

Justice has many dimensions. Broadly defined, the vertical dimension of justice between humankind and God is the theological sense of justice while all forms of justice between human beings constitute forms of social justice. This would include everything from macro-level political and economic dimensions to micro-level interpersonal interactions between family members, friends, neighbors, and so on. The Qur’anic term which best explains social justice is the Arabic term *qist* (fairness) which entails a sense of equality and justice in distribution<sup>6</sup> and a shared social project to ensure that all members of society receive their fair share.<sup>7</sup> The political aspect of justice entails fair governance of people according to mutual consultation (Qur’an 42:38). There are many sayings of the Prophet ﷺ that praise the virtues of the just ruler and assign a place in paradise for one who rules with justice.<sup>8</sup> As well, the Prophet declared that the most noble struggle is to speak a truthful word in the presence of a tyrannical ruler.<sup>9</sup> This latter sentiment is a powerful motivation for political activists calling for human rights. When the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ heard about an incident in Abyssinia where an elderly woman was pushed, he declared, “How would God sanctify a nation that does not

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, vol. 7 (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1990), 377.

<sup>7</sup> Ramon Harvey, “Justice and Mercy on the Scale,” *Renovatio*, July 10, 2017, <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/justice-and-mercy-on-the-scale/>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: no. 2865.

<sup>9</sup> *Jamī‘ al-Tirmidhī*: no. 2174.

protect its underprivileged from its powerful?”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the prosperity and wellbeing of an entire nation are at stake when its members fail to protect those underprivileged from those in power.

In many ways, Islam is fundamentally a faith of activism. According to the Qur’an, an essential characteristic of believers is their participation in publicly “enjoining good and forbidding evil” (Qur’an 3:110, 9:71). The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “Whoever witnesses something evil, let him change it with his hand, and if he is unable then with his tongue, and if he is unable then with his heart, but that is the weakest form of faith.”<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Islam does not permit one to be a bystander to any form of injustice; one is morally obligated to do everything in one’s power to eradicate oppression. Of course, this duty is accompanied by the requirement for wisdom to ensure that one’s attempt to remove an evil does not backfire and lead to a greater evil. Activism encompasses both collective and individual efforts. In Islamic terminology, the term *farḍ kifāyah* describes a collective obligation which the community as a whole participates in, and the term *farḍ ‘ayn* describes an individual obligation that must be fulfilled by each and every person. Thus Islam calls upon human beings to work individually and collectively to eradicate injustice on the micro- and macro-levels.

The Arabic word for injustice, oppression and wrongdoing is ‘*ẓulm*.’ It is linguistically closely related to the word for darkness ‘*ẓulmah*’ (pl. *ẓulumāt*) and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ drew on this comparison when he said “Verily, injustice (*ẓulm*) will become darkness (*ẓulumat*) on the Day of Judgment.”<sup>12</sup> God, being the “Light of the Heavens and the Earth” (Qur’an 24:35), guides humanity out of the depth of darkness into the light (Qur’an 2:257). The faithful striving for justice represent the forces of light wrestling with the darkness of oppression and injustice. One’s proximity to God is thus based on the extent to which one embodies this light and emulates the Divine attribute of justice.

<sup>10</sup> *Sunan Ibn Mājah*: no. 4010.

<sup>11</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: no. 49.

<sup>12</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*: no. 2315.

The Qur'an also speaks about humankind having the position of *khilāfah* (custodianship) in various passages (Qur'an 6:165, 27:62). One famous interpretation of this is that humanity as a whole has been given the role of being God's appointed custodian, deputy, viceroy, or vicegerent (Arabic: *khalīfa*) on earth, tasked with the mission of promoting virtue in accordance with the Divine plan.<sup>13</sup> As Ramon Harvey notes, "If the basic idea of the *khalīfa* within the Qur'an is the human steward charged with a duty to live according to the moral scale that God has set within creation, then in the social sphere this implies upholding justice, establishing his law, and rectifying worldly corruption."<sup>14</sup> Throughout time, as human beings have drifted from their divinely ordained mission of striving for justice, God has sent prophets in every epoch for the purpose of re-establishing justice. "We have sent Our Messengers with clear signs and sent down with them the Scripture and the Scales of balance so that humanity may uphold justice (*qist*)" (Qur'an 57:25). This spiritual worldview of custodianship is integral to the Muslim notion of social justice.

## Justice in wealth

Social justice requires fairness in the allocation and distribution of goods to all members and groups in society. To this effect, there is an incredible emphasis in Islam on taking care of people who are poor. The two fundamental duties incumbent on believers which the Qur'an repeatedly cites (e.g., Qur'an 27:3) are prayer to God and giving money to the poor, the latter referred to as *zakāh* or alms-tax. *Zakāh* is the religious obligation that requires all Muslims who possess sufficient wealth to donate 2.5% of their assets to the poor and needy. As Wael Hallaq writes:

Among all "branches" of the law, *zakāt* is unique in that it has a dualistic character: on the one hand, it is an integral part of religious "ritual," and, on the other hand, it functions as a substantive legal sphere, constituting itself as a "tax law." Inasmuch as socially based financial responsibility merges into rituality, rituality merges into the moral accountability for society's

<sup>13</sup> Al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt*, vol. 3 (Khobar: Dar ibn 'Affān, 1997), 24.

<sup>14</sup> Ramon Harvey, *The Qur'an and the Just Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 83.

welfare. Like the ubiquitous charitable trust (*waqf*), *zakāt* was one of the most important instruments of social justice.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the mandatory amount to be paid, Muslims are also encouraged to donate additional money in charity (*ṣadaqah*). The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ quotes God as stating, “O son of Adam, spend in charity and I shall spend on you.”<sup>16</sup> According to the Prophet, one’s generosity is not to be limited only to members of one’s own community, for he advised, “Donate in charity to people of all faiths.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the Prophet himself regularly sponsored a Jewish household, and his followers continued the practice after him.<sup>18</sup>

The abundance of Qur’anic passages containing exhortations to donate to the poor reveal a conception of spirituality in Islam that is fundamentally tied to social activism and humanitarian relief. Proximity to God requires proximity to the poor. In a powerful statement related by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, God will say on the Day of Judgment:

O son of Adam, I sought food from you but you failed to feed Me. The man would ask: My Lord, how could I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds? God replies: Do you not realize that a particular servant of Mine asked you for food but you did not feed him? Didn’t you realize that if you had fed him, you would have found him with Me?<sup>19</sup>

Based on this hadith, prayer to God is understood to be bereft of benefit for those who do not actualize their worship in the way they care for others.

Individual actions of charity and kindness are certainly praiseworthy, but in order to effect real change, one must work collectively on a larger scale to address systemic injustices and institute policies that rectify inequalities on a comprehensive scale. For instance, during the rule of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, upon hearing from a woman that she was hastening to wean her infant in order to obtain

<sup>15</sup> Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 123.

<sup>16</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*: no. 5352.

<sup>17</sup> *Muṣannaf Ibn Abī Shaybah*: no. 1194.

<sup>18</sup> Abū ‘Ubayd Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb al-amwāl*, ed. Muhammad Ammarah (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1989), 727–8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: no. 2569.

a stipend from the treasury (*Bayt al-Māl*), he instituted a new policy whereby all newborn infants were documented in state records and a stipend of financial support was allocated to their mother.<sup>20</sup> In doing this, he made a systematic change to help all mothers avoid such hardships rather than just helping the woman in question.

## Standing with the marginalized

When the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ arrived in Madinah, he began his message to the people with several instructions which included, “supporting the weak, helping the oppressed, and spreading peace.”<sup>21</sup> It is a fundamental tenet of Islamic activism to always be on the side of the oppressed which involves advocating for those groups as allies. The Prophet Muhammad taught, “Beware the supplication of the oppressed, for there is no barrier between it and God.”<sup>22</sup> If God listens to the oppressed, so must we all. In order to advocate effectively for those who have suffered injustice at the hands of others, one must begin by lending an ear and listening attentively to understand what has happened, and what their demands for justice and reconciliation are. The Qur’an states, “God does not love the public mention of evil, except by one who was wronged; Verily God is All-Hearing, All-Knowing” (Qur’an 4:148). In other words, publicly mentioning the faults of others is generally prohibited in Islam unless a person has suffered some injustice and oppression, in which case the society must listen to their demands for justice. The legacy of Islam demonstrates the comprehensive manner in which the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his followers strived to support all those who were oppressed or marginalized in society prior to the coming of Islam.

<sup>20</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah*, vol. 7 (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir, 2010), 266.

<sup>21</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*: no. 6235.

<sup>22</sup> *Jami‘ al-Tirmidhī*: no. 2014.

## Orphans

In seventh-century Arabia, during the time of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, one's status and security in society were contingent on one's tribal affiliation. Without a powerful clan for protection, there was no way to ensure that one's rights would not be violated or trodden upon by the upper echelons of society. In this context, the emphasis placed by the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions on caring for orphans is of profound relevance to the subject of social justice. "God instructs you," the Qur'an tells us, "that you stand firmly for justice towards orphans" (4:127). So critical to Islam's message is support for orphans that rejecting it has been linked with the rejection of the faith: "Have you not seen the one who rejects faith? That is the one who repels the orphans" (Qur'an 107:1-2). The Qur'an refers to orphans no less than 23 times.

The Prophet ﷺ himself grew up an orphan, his father having passed away shortly before his birth, while his mother passed away when he was only six years old. The Qur'an reminds him that it was God who ensured his survival and shelter, "Did He not find you an orphan and grant you refuge?" (Qur'an 93:6). The Qur'an then instructs the Prophet to emulate and replicate God's care towards him: "So therefore, do not treat the orphan with harshness" (Qur'an 93:9).

Why should caring for orphans figure so prominently in this faith? The orphan represented the most vulnerable member of society, most susceptible to exploitation, the one who had lost all means of physical, financial and emotional security in the fierce tribalistic milieu of seventh-century Arabia where everything hinged on patrilineal descent. It is easy to see how the Qur'anic concept of the orphan can be extended as an archetype, emblematic of those who are vulnerable, marginalized, and disenfranchised in any community, in any time and place.

## Slaves

The economic context of pre-industrial societies resulted in the proliferation of coercive labor institutions such as slavery and serfdom.<sup>23</sup> Thus, slavery and forced labor was the most common form of labor transaction in ancient civilizations<sup>24</sup> and was the norm in pre-Islamic Arabia. Islam targeted the eradication of the maltreatment of slaves as a critical form of social injustice.

First, Islam ordained freeing slaves as an integral part of the spiritual journey towards God:

What will make you understand the uphill climb? It is the freeing of a slave. Or feeding on a day of severe hunger the close orphan or the needy person lying in the dust. Then he will become one of those with faith, who urge one another to have patience and urge one another to show compassion and mercy. (Qur'an 90:12-17)

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ stated, “He who frees a slave, God will set free every limb of his body from Hell in reward for every limb of the slave’s body.”<sup>25</sup> To this end, the early Muslim community set about freeing many of the slaves in society, much to the irritation of the Makkan elites, the chiefs of the various powerful tribes in the city. Slaves like Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ and ‘Āmir ibn Fuhayrah attained great prominence in Islam, both of whom were freed by the Prophet’s companion Abū Bakr. The Prophet Muhammad himself personally freed 63 slaves during his life, his wife Aisha freed 69 slaves, and his companions freed numerous slaves, most notably his companion ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Awf who freed an astounding thirty-thousand.<sup>26</sup> The exhortation to free slaves was not limited to those who were Muslim. The foremost compendium of Hadith, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, contains a chapter on freeing idolater slaves wherein it is mentioned that the

<sup>23</sup> Gregory Clark, *A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 220–223.

<sup>24</sup> Daron Acemoglu and Alexander Wolitzky, “The Economics of Labor Coercion,” *Econometrica* 79, no. 2 (March 2011): 555–600.

<sup>25</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: no. 1509.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Shirwānī and Aḥmad ibn Qāsim al-‘Abbādī, *Hawāshi al-Shirwānī wa-al-‘Abbādī ‘alā tuḥfat al-muḥtāj bi-sharḥ al-minhāj*, 10 vols. (Cairo: Maktabah Tijaria al-Kubra, 1938), 352.

Prophet praised Ḥakīm ibn Ḥizām's action of freeing 100 non-Muslim slaves during the pre-Islamic period.<sup>27</sup>

Islam also set about eliminating the mistreatment and abuse of slaves. The Prophet declared, "He who slaps his slave or beats him, the expiation for it is that he should set him free."<sup>28</sup> The Prophet ﷺ preached, "Your slaves are your brothers. God has placed them under your care, and he who has his brother under him should feed him with the same food he eats and clothe him with the same clothes he wears, and do not burden him beyond his capacity, and if you burden him then help him."<sup>29</sup> The Prophet thus transformed the status of existing slaves, elevating them to servants who had rights over their former masters. Even referring to them as 'slaves' was prohibited: "None of you should say: My slave, for all of you are the slaves of God. Rather, you should say 'My young man.'"<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, Islam condemned the enslavement of free persons as an abominable act, as the Prophet ﷺ stated he would personally prosecute such a person on the Day of Judgment.<sup>31</sup> The Prophet also said that the person who enslaves a free person would not have their prayers accepted by God.<sup>32</sup> The companions understood this as a universal principle affirming the freedom of all humankind from any kind of exploitation or abuse. When the Muslim ruler 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was told that a Christian peasant had been abused in Egypt, he angrily turned to the governor of Egypt and asked him, "Since when did you treat people as slaves, when their mothers bore them as free souls?"<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> The Muslim jurist Ibn Baṭṭāl al-Mālikī (d. 449 AH/1057 CE) comments on this chapter by stating, "There is no difference of opinion amongst the scholars of Islam concerning the virtue of freeing idolaters as a voluntary act of worship." Cited in Badr al-Dīn Al-Aynī, *Umdat al-qārī sharh ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 13 (Beirut: Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, 2009), 141. In fact, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ explained that the more expensive the slave, the more noble an act it was to free him (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 2518), which was used by the earliest Muslim jurists, like Imām Mālik (d. 179 AH/795 CE), to prove that freeing an expensive disbelieving slave could be more virtuous than freeing a believer since it required a greater financial sacrifice on the person donating. Cited in Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fath al-bārī bi-sharḥ ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 6 (Riyadh: Dar al-Taybah, 2005), 339.

<sup>28</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: no. 1657a.

<sup>29</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: no. 1661.

<sup>30</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: no. 2249.

<sup>31</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*: no. 2227.

<sup>32</sup> *Sunan Ibn Mājah*: 5:1023.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ Miṣr*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabah al-Thaqafah al-Deeniyah, 2010), 195.

Indeed, the influential Muslim intellectual Muhammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935 CE) postulated that the gradual abolition of slavery was the final goal of Islam, and if Muslim rulers had been true to the Islamic code of ethics, slavery would have died out centuries ago.<sup>34</sup> While many rulers continued the institution of slavery into the modern era for political and economic interests before eventually ceding to European pressure, the Tunisian ruler Ahmad Bey issued an abolition decree in 1846, arguing that freedom was the aspiration of Islam, with the support of the two highest religious authorities—the Ḥanafī Shaykh al-Islam Muhammad Bayram IV and Mālīkī Mufti Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Riyāhī.<sup>35</sup>

Islam's campaign against slavery represents an ethic of combating all forms of exploitation, subjugation, abuse, and should continue in modern times through advocacy for factory workers in deplorable conditions, as well as rescuing victims of human trafficking, child labor, and forced marriages.

## **Persons with disabilities<sup>36</sup>**

Recently, there has been a growth in public awareness and sensitivity towards those with physical and mental disabilities. Historically, those with disabilities were often stigmatized and marginalized; in Islamic society, however, some of the greatest legacies were established by famous individuals with disabilities, which established an important precedent of respect and dignity for all.

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<sup>34</sup> William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 205.

<sup>35</sup> Elisabeth C. Van Der Haven, "The Abolition of Slavery in Tunisia (1846)," *Revue d'Histoire Maghrébine* 27, nos. 99–100 (2000): 449–64.

<sup>36</sup> There is considerable discussion in the literature over the most appropriate language to use for individuals with disabilities and health conditions. The trend has been towards "person-first" language (thus, a "person with schizophrenia" rather than a "schizophrenic person"), which has been seen to be more humanizing and less stigmatizing. However, the "person-first" model has been challenged in some scenarios by advocates who argue that "identity-first" language is less stigmatizing, particularly with evidence demonstrating that the label "autistic person" is preferred by individuals rather than "person with autism." See for instance Roger Collier, "Person-First Language: What It Means to Be a 'Person'," *CMAJ* 184, no. 18 (2012): E935–6; also see D. S. Dunn and E. E. Andrews, "Person-First and Identity-First Language: Developing Psychologists' Cultural Competence Using Disability Language," *American Psychologist* 70, no. 3 (2015): 255–264. The use of sensitivity and respect in one's terminology is part of the Qur'anic directive to not refer to one another by undesirable or offensive names (Qur'an 49:11).

One of the illustrious companions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was ‘Abd Allāh ibn Umm Maktūm, a man who also happened to be fully blind. He holds a very unique distinction in Islam, being one of two people assigned by the Prophet to perform the daily calls to prayer, the other being the aforementioned Bilāl Ibn Rabāḥ.<sup>37</sup> On one occasion in the early period of Islam when the Prophet ﷺ was preaching about the teachings of Islam to the chiefs of Makkah, ‘Abd Allāh came and interrupted the gathering with a request, which caused the Prophet to frown momentarily. Even this very slight expression of displeasure (invisible to ‘Abd Allāh) was considered a lapse in judgment and the opening verses of the 80th chapter of the Qur’an were then revealed which corrected the Prophet and reminded him that only God knows who will benefit the most from hearing the message. From this story, we can derive the importance of ensuring that those with disabilities are equally welcomed at all gatherings, provided equal and equitable access to educators and educational opportunities, and not discriminated against in any manner.

One of the famous reciters of the Qur’an was ‘Īsā al-Zarqī, better known as Qālūn (d. 220 AH/835 CE). He was the leading reciter in the city of Madinah during his lifetime. His style of recitation is the norm today in Qatar, Libya, and Tunisia. A lesser-known fact about Qalun, however, is that he was in fact a person who was deaf, and yet was able to master the art of recitation, with all its subtle phonetic nuances; it is said that through lip-reading he was able to correct his students’ errors.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to physical disabilities, Islam provided a precedent for treating with dignity and compassion those with mental health and learning challenges. On one occasion, a woman with an unspecified condition that affected her cognition approached the Prophet ﷺ to request his assistance. The Prophet immediately prioritized her request, he addressed her with a customary honorific title (which signifies both respect and comfort), and asked her to select any public place in the city at her convenience so that he could arrange to meet her and assist her. When he met with her, he patiently stood with her at the roadside until her requests were

<sup>37</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: no. 380a.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn Khalaf al-Anṣārī, *al-Iqnā ‘fī al-qirā’āt al-sab‘* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1983), 59.

all satisfied.<sup>39</sup> This story is particularly significant and authoritative for Muslims because the Prophet Muhammad represents the moral example to be emulated and his actions and teachings constitute the basis of the Islamic ethical framework. Thus, this specific incident can be used by Muslims to derive many lessons. For instance, it demonstrates that it is an Islamic goal to ensure that mental health counseling services are available, and that such services must be arranged according to the terms of those who utilize them, in a manner that is convenient and accessible for them. It demonstrates the importance of creating a safe space where people are not stigmatized, but rather addressed with terms of respect and equal dignity so that they feel comfortable accessing their needs in public.

## Diverse ethnicities

One of the most fundamental aspects of Islam's social justice message has been its emphasis on racial equality. The Qur'an has a famous passage that states:

O Humankind, verily we created you from male and female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most honorable of you in the sight of God is the most pious. Verily, God is all-Knowing, all-Aware. (Qur'an 49:13)

This verse is universally cited by Muslims as endorsing racial equality because it mentions that belonging to different ethnic identities is not a matter that confers superiority, but rather is intended to enhance human interactions and harmony. Meanwhile, it is only virtue and piety that make one more honorable in the sight of God, not one's skin color or ethnicity.

In his most famous sermon delivered during the pilgrimage towards the end of his life, the Prophet ﷺ declared:

O People, your Lord is One, and your father (Ādam) is one. Verily, there is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab over an Arab. There is no superiority of a white over a black nor a black over a white. Only piety causes one to excel.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: no. 2326.

<sup>40</sup> *Musnad Aḥmad*: no. 22978.

Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ's story has become one of the most iconic examples of Islam's campaign against racism. He was an Abyssinian slave in Mecca who embraced Islam and was freed by Abū Bakr, and became one of the most prominent companions of the Prophet ﷺ, given the honor of regularly making the call to prayer (in addition to 'Abd Allāh Ibn Umm Maktum). In fact, when the Prophet ﷺ returned to Makkah eight years after being expelled from the city, he requested Bilāl to climb on to the roof of the Holy Ka'ba and make the call to prayer, thus simultaneously establishing Islam's message of monotheism and racial equality. The Makkan elites who opposed Islam were horrified at this sight and began making derogatory racist remarks, and the Qur'anic verse on racial equality (49:13) was revealed to refute them.<sup>41</sup>

It is difficult to overstate the importance of Islam to the civil rights movement in the United States. Malcolm X was particularly inspired by his experience during the Hajj pilgrimage where he witnessed people of all ethnic backgrounds united in worship without any distinction between them. He wrote in his letters, "America needs to understand Islam because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem...I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color."<sup>42</sup>

## Other faith communities

Truth cannot be arrived at through compulsion or coercion, and hence the Qur'an stipulates that people should arrive at their own convictions willingly: "There is no compulsion in faith; truth is clear from error" (Qur'an 2:256) and "Had your Lord willed, all people on earth could have believed; so how then could you try to force people to arrive at faith?" (Qur'an 10:99).

From its outset, Islam called upon its followers to express kindness and compassion towards all people: "Be compassionate with all those on earth, and the One above Heaven will bestow His Compassion upon you," the Prophet ﷺ

<sup>41</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-maṣīr* (Beirut: Dar ibn Hazm, 2002), 1335.

<sup>42</sup> Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*, (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 345.

advised.<sup>43</sup> As custodians of God on Earth, establishing justice for all people is of utmost importance, and hence it is those who stand for justice who receive Divine aid regardless of their ideological affiliation. A famous tradition amongst Muslim scholars states, “God will support a just nation, even if it be a nation that rejects faith, and He will not support an unjust nation even if it be a nation of believers.”<sup>44</sup> Believers who do not act upon their belief by establishing justice are failing to live up to the dictates of their religion. True faith requires that believers manifest their commitment to God by upholding justice for all people.

Islam’s message of social justice was not limited to supporting the rights of Muslims alone. The Prophet ﷺ affirmed his commitment to a pledge known as *Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl*, an agreement by some of the clans of Makkah to protect anyone who was oppressed, regardless of their identity or background. The Prophet’s affirmation of this pledge demonstrated the duty Muslims have to protect anyone who is oppressed and that Muslims should have no qualms entering into alliances with other religious communities in order to fulfill this duty. As the Qur’an states, “And cooperate in moral virtue and piety, and do not cooperate in sin or transgression” (Qur’an 5:2). Religious identity should not be a consideration when deciding whether to support someone in need. In one tradition, the Prophet ﷺ related that God says, “I do not reject the supplications of the oppressed, even if it be from one who rejects faith.”<sup>45</sup>

In the previously mentioned story of the Christian peasant in Egypt during the time of the Caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb lies one of the most powerful examples of social justice for all people. Umar decreed for the Egyptian Christian peasant to exact full retribution upon the Arab Muslim nobleman who had abused him, disregarding any favoritism based on class, ethnicity, or religion.

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<sup>43</sup> *Jami‘ al-Tirmidhī*: no. 1924.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted by Ibn Taymīyah (d. 728 AH/1328 CE) in *Majmu‘ al-fatāwā*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Qāsim, vol. 28 (Riyadh: Majma‘ al-Malik al-Fahd li-Ṭibā‘at al-Muṣṣhaf al-Sharīf, 2004), 63.

<sup>45</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān*: no. 361.

## Women's rights

In seventh-century Arabia, Islam played a revolutionary role in transforming the status of women in society.<sup>46</sup> The Qur'an contains several passages criticizing the cultural favoritism of sons over daughters, condemning the practice of female infanticide (Qur'an 16:58-9 and Qur'an 81:8-9), and declaring that it is a gift from God when a person is bestowed with a daughter or a son (Qur'an 42:49). In a famous anecdote, when the Prophet ﷺ saw a man treat his son preferentially over his daughter (by greeting only the former with a kiss), the Prophet spoke out and said, "Why did you not treat them equally?"<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the Prophet declared that God promises paradise for whoever raises a daughter in the best manner, never demeaning her nor preferring his sons over her.<sup>48</sup>

The Qur'an affirmed the spiritual equality of men and women. The Qur'an states, "I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors in My way, be it man or woman; you are equal to one another" (Qur'an 3:195). The Prophet ﷺ stated, "Women are the equal counterparts of men."<sup>49</sup> The Qur'an dedicates its fourth chapter, entitled *Women*, with a call to society to uphold the economic and marital rights of women. The message of Islam on women's rights overturned the existing culture and revolutionized the way men thought about women's rights. As one of the companions of the Prophet ﷺ testified, "In the pre-Islamic era, we used to have no regard for women whatsoever. But when Islam came and God made mention of them, this caused us to realize that they have rights upon us."<sup>50</sup> Women began to occupy public roles including that of market advisors and supervisors in

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<sup>46</sup> For further readings on the status of women in seventh-century Arabia, refer to F. Sulaimani, "The Changing Position of Women in Arabia Under Islam During the Early Seventh Century," (PhD diss., University of Salford, 1986).

<sup>47</sup> *Musnad al-Bazzār*: no. 6361.

<sup>48</sup> *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*: no. 5146.

<sup>49</sup> *Musnad Aḥmad*: no. 5869. Abū Sulaymān Al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 386 AH) writes, "His saying that women are counterparts of men means their equals and their likeness in creation and nature as if they split off from men. In jurisprudence, it is an affirmation of the analogy and equivalence in rulings, equal by equal. Such that if the address is conveyed in the male grammatical form, it is also addressed to women, except for specific topics whose specification is established by evidence." See Al-Khaṭṭābī, *Ma'ālim al-sunan*, ed. Muhammad Rāghib al-Ṭabbākh, vol. 1 (Aleppo: al-Matba'ah al-Ilmiyyah, 1932), 79.

<sup>50</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*: no. 5505.

the case of Samrā' bint Nuhayk<sup>51</sup> and Shifā' bint 'Abd Allāh.<sup>52</sup> They also served the community as teachers and scholars, the greatest scholar being Aisha, the Prophet's wife, who taught over 300 students.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ taught that seeking all types of knowledge is important for both men and women. The Caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz would consult the female scholar 'Amrah bint 'Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 98 AH/717 CE), whose authority was so weighty that she could overturn the ruling of a court case. The Muslim female scientist Maryam al-'Ijlīyah (d. 356 AH/967 CE) designed astrolabes that were used by the ruler, Sayf al-Dawlah, and an asteroid belt has since been named after her. In the field of Ḥadīth alone, there have been over 8000 famous women scholars.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

The Islamic faith, shared by one-quarter of the world's population, has a profound tradition of social justice that is rooted in spirituality, seeing humankind as custodians of this world, divinely entrusted with the duty to always stand on the side of the oppressed and speak truth to power. Through the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his companions, Muslims seek to revitalize the true essence of the faith, which calls upon human beings to serve God by caring for those in need.

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<sup>51</sup> Al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu'jam al-kabīr*, ed. Ḥamdī 'Abd al-Majīd al-Salafī, vol. 24 of 25 (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyyah, 1983), p. 11, no. 785.

<sup>52</sup> Ibn Abī 'Āsim, *Al-Āḥād wa al-mathānī*, ed. Basim Faisal al-Jawabira, vol. 6 of 6 (Riyadh: Daral-Raya, 1991), p. 4, no. 3179.

<sup>53</sup> M. A. Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (London: Interface Publications, 2007).