



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Tawhid and Social Justice: An Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

The concept of human inequality paved the way to the concept of social injustice and was ubiquitous throughout the world of antiquity. Islam, managed to succeed because Islam gives us a complete ideology in favor of human equality. According to Islam man is equal in creation and is originated from a single source. Those who belong to the various classes in society are not created by different gods. Islam demolishes all structures of social superiority by asserting common origin of all human beings. This is the essence of Islam which is called Tawhid. Tawhid implies the release of all human beings from servitude and yielding to anyone but God. Tawhid is tantamount to defiance of any power obscured under whatever colour or veil and an absolute submission to the absolute authority of God alone. The concept of Tawhid makes it clear that all of us have been raised from dust and we shall be reduced to dust. There is no difference among the particles of dust; hence why should there be any difference between somebody else and me. This consciousness undoubtedly gives man the greatest incentive to bring about social justice. The aim of this paper is to explain the concept of social justice in Islam and how Tawhid has direct bearing on social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Equality and human brotherhood are old discourses. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, regarded certain classes of individuals as natural slaves. As for the present times we find that in many parts of the world justice and equality have become handy slogans to exploit the innocent masses. In the name of these beautiful ideals human beings are massacred, millions of innocent people are uprooted, and the struggle to get rid of the old chains quite often leads to the forging of new, heavier and more oppressive chains.

In modern times, the concept of human inequality has been further strengthened by Darwin's theory of evolution, which professed to show that in the evolutionary process, some groups had made distinctive advancement while many other groups had been left far behind. It was due to this theory of evolution that white races considered themselves invested with the natural right to vanquish the rest of the world in order to civilize it.

Even though the modern world has tried many a system capitalism, communism, fascism, socialism, etc., class conflicts and animosity between man and man continue to plague humanity. In short, social justice has eluded the grasp of the contemporary man.

The essence of religious experience in Islam is Tawhid; that is, the recognition that there is no god but God. What is distinctly Islamic – and hence original – in Tawhid as metaphysical principle, is the negative aspect of its statements, that no being of whom Godhead is predicated is God except God. It accomplished a double purpose: that of acknowledging God as sole creator of the universe, and that of equalizing all men as creatures of God, endowed with the same essential qualities of creaturely humanity, with the same cosmic status.

Tawhid implies absolute faith in the Lord Who alone grants life as well as causes death, Who confers His bounties as well as withholds them and exercises total control over their destiny. Besides, no intermediary is recognized between man and God. Everyone, regardless of how exalted or low he might be, is His servant. Tawhid presented to the world that in spite of outward differences, all human beings are equal. All are entitled to equal social status and equal rights. The elevation of human values is attainable only through righteousness which is the only safe route for man to ascend to heights of perfection and prosperity. Shirk is against man's nature and conscience. It makes him slave of slaves and thus injustice takes place. Tawhid is the keystone of Islam, the foundation of its ethics and philosophy of life and the basis of its systems and institutions. It is the primary determinant of one's relationship to the natural and social order.

TAWHID AS THE BASIS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social injustice has bedeviled man's life in the past, and continues do so today. Social injustice vitally affects the predicament of the individual. It tends to cramp and distort his personality and rob him of his freedom and dignity. In the 7th century, in pre-Islamic Arabia, the social unit was the group, not the individual. The group was held together externally by the need for the self defense against the hardships and dangers of desert life, internally by the blood tie of descent and in the male line which was the basic social bond. A mutual antagonism has divided the inhabitants of Arabia into the militant nomad and the peaceful settler. The settled man regarded the nomad as a natural enemy and the nomad regarded the settled man as a legitimate prey. They had their own code of tribal honour and tribal sanctions. Moreover, it was a society in which slaves toiled miserably in service of their dissolute masters.

It was in such conditions that Islam introduced Tawhid to be the way for the people. It was a new reckoning for the world.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ لِلَّهِ شُهَدَاءَ بِالْقِسْطِ وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَاٰنُ قَوْمٍ عَلَىٰ ءَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا ءَعْدِلُوا هُوَ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

O ye who believe! Be steadfast witnesses for Allah in equity, and let not hatred of any people seduce you that ye deal not justly. Deal justly, that is nearer to your duty. Observe your duty to Allah. Lo! Allah is Informed of what ye do.¹

The Islamic system of social justice is based upon three fundamental principles of freedom of conscience, equality of human beings, and mutual sharing². These principles can be explained in the light of Tawhid.

FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

In Islam, freedom of conscience is one of the corner- stones for building of social justice. Since Allah is one, his worship is also one and to Him must all men turn. Islam frees the human conscience from servitude to anyone except Allah and from submission to any save Him. It strove to free the human conscience even from the servitude of prophets.

Allah says in the Quran;

This is a declaration for mankind, a guidance and an admonition unto those who ward off (evil).³

Syed Qutub Shaheed said;

When the conscience is freed from the instinct of servitude to and worship of any of the servants of Allah; when it is filled with the comprehension that it can of itself gain complete access to Allah; then it cannot be disturbed by any feeling of fear of life, or fear of its livelihood, or fear of its station. This fear is an ignoble instinct, which lowers the individual's estimation of himself, which often makes him accept submission, or abdicate much of his natural honor or many of his rights.⁴

Life is given by Allah. No creature has the power to shorten that life by one hour or by one minute. Allah says in the Quran;

قُلْ لَنْ يُصِيبَنَا إِلَّا مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَنَا هُوَ مَوْلَانَا وَعَلَى اللَّهِ فَالِيتَوَكَّلِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ

Say: Naught befalleth us save that which Allah hath decreed for us. He is our Protecting Friend. In Allah let believers put their trust.⁵

فَذَالِكُمْ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمُ الْحَقُّ فَمَاذَا بَعَدَ الْحَقِّ إِلَّا الضَّلَالَةُ فَأَنَّى تُصْرَفُونَ

Such then is Allah, your rightful Lord. After the Truth what is there saving error? How then are ye turned away.⁶

كَيْفَ إِذَا جَمَعْنَاهُمْ لِيَوْمٍ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ وَوُفِّيَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ

How (will it be with them) when We have brought them all together to a Day of which there is no doubt, when every soul will be paid in full what it hath earned, and they will not be wronged.⁷

Thus, Islam guarantees an absolute social justice. The Holy Qur'an declares that, compulsion is incompatible with religion, because religion depends upon faith and will, and there would be meaningless if, induced by force, truth and error have been so clearly shown up by the mercy of God that there should be no doubt in the minds of any persons. Allah says in the Quran;

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ يَتَّبِعْ النَّبِيَّ الرُّسُلَ مِنَ الْغَيْبِ

There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is henceforth distinct from error⁸

This verse conveys that the right course is the Tawhid, and it has also sorted out the wrong and misleading ideas from the Truth, so that there is a clear line of demarcation between them. Now the will of God and the striving of Muslims is that the mankind should accept the Islamic message of truth. But there should be no compulsion while dealing with them, because compulsion would result in the injustice.

Equality of Human Beings:

Islam emphasizes the principle of equality in word and precept. Islam taught the unity of the human race in origin. Islam rejected the assertion of any kind to be the progeny of gods and also condemns the claim that some are blessed and some are loathed some are created by the head of god while some created by the feet of a god. It also asserted that there is no such thing as blue blood or noble blood.

Tawhid implies the unity of the lordship of Allah, which means Allah is the real lord, the real owner, the real master of everything and everyone. From the unilordship of Allah emerges the universal unity and equality of mankind. Men are all equal; there is no master and no servant.

Allah says;

بَرَكَ الَّذِي بِيَدِهِ الْمَلَكُ وَهُوَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

Blessed is He in Whose hand is the Sovereignty, and, He is Able to do all things.⁹

The equal treatment of caliph Umar to his camel-driver while travelling to Jerusalem was due to such a feeling.

Allah says;

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتَقْوَمُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

O mankind! Lo! We have created you from male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.¹⁰

Thus, Holy Quran recognizes the righteousness as the sole basis of nobility and superiority. None is high, none is low by dint of his tribe, family or nationality. Blood, colour makes no difference in the status of man. It is the degree of Taqwa which bestows dignity, better position and status in the Muslim society.

No one has any kinship with God. For if two or more gods were possible, it is logically necessary that one should seek an individual relation with his creation or his dependents; that one should rise above the other in mutual competition.

Allah says in the Quran;

مَا اتَّخَذَ اللَّهُ مِنْ وَلَدٍ وَمَا كَانَ مَعَهُ مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِذَا أَذْهَبَ كُلَّ إِلَهٍ بِمَا خَلَقَ وَلَعَلَّ بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ عَمَّا يُصِفُونَ

Allah hath not chosen any son, nor is there any God along with Him; else would each God have assuredly championed that which he created, and some of them would assuredly have overcome others. Glorified be Allah above all that they allege¹¹

Even the messengers cannot escape His wrath if (at all) they commit any injustice.

Allah says in the Quran;

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَبِيٍّ أَنْ يَغْلِبَ وَمَنْ يَغْلِبْ يَأْتِ بِمَا غَلَّ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ تَمْ تَوْفَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ

It is not for any prophet to deceive (mankind). Whoso deceiveth will bring His deceit with him on the Day of Resurrection.

Then every soul will be paid in full what it hath earned; and they will not be wronged.¹²

Hence all are same and at parity before God.

SLAVERY

Islam's approach to slavery was a part of the same cardinal principle of equality and oneness of mankind on which it had built the entire superstructure of its ideological edifice. In ancient times the beating of slaves was considered a natural right. The prime challenger to the slogan of Tawhid was the wealthy and the powerful class of the society. The concept of Tawhid makes it clear that in the eyes of God the master stood on exactly the same ground as the slave. It elevated the position of the slaves making them equals of free men in the sight of God, as well as in respect of a great number of social rights.

Abu Jahl, for instance, protested to the Prophet (S.A.W.): "Did you, O Muhammad, come to make the lowly Ibn Sumayyah an equal of the noble alWalid?" Muhammad (S.A.W.) answered: "Yes, both are sons of Adam, and Adam was from clay". Abu Jahl got angry and cried out: "Will you make them our equals when they are our slaves and clients?" The Prophet (S.A.W.) firmly and confidently said 'yes' to that and recited the Quranic verse:

وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَيَسْتَخْلِفَنَّهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كَمَا اسْتَخْلَفَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ وَلَيُمَكِّنَنَّ لَهُمْ دِينَهُمُ الَّذِي ارْتَضَىٰ لَهُمْ وَلَيُبَدِّلَنَّهُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ خَوْفِهِمْ أَمْنًا يَعْبُدُونَنِي لَا يُشْرِكُونَ بِي شَيْئًا وَمَنْ كَفَرَ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

Allah hath promised such of you as believe and do good work that He will surely make them to succeed (the present rulers) in the earth even as He caused those who were before them to succeed (others); and that He will surely establish for them their religion which He hath approved for them, and will give them in exchange safety after their fear. They serve Me. They ascribe no thing as partner unto Me. Those who disbelieve henceforth, they are the miscreants.¹³

RACISM:

The basis of humanity with all its races, according to Islam, is one source without any distinction. Tawhid eliminates the false pride in lineage, social status and belonging and the like.

Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) said;

“o people! your God is one and your forefather(Adam) is one. An Arab is not better than a non-Arab and a non-Arab is not better than an Arab and a red (i.e; white tinged with red) person is not better than a black person and a black person is not better than a red person, except in piety”¹⁴

With these words, the Prophet (S.A.W) announced the advent of a new age, an age freed by him of all false notions and ushered in with the special succor of God.

MUTUAL SHARING (MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY):

Besides granting the individual freedom and human equality in the most perfect sense Islam also lays down the principle of individual responsibility over against that of individual freedom and also sets the principle of social responsibility, that is the mutual responsibility in society.

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مَّا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ أَسْتَوَىٰ إِلَى السَّمَاءِ فَسَوَّاهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

He it is Who created for you all that is in the earth. Then turned He to the heaven, and fashioned it as seven heavens. And He is knower of all things.¹⁵

Tawhid signifies that the believers are indeed a single brotherhood, whose members mutually love one another, who counsel one another to do justice and be patient.

Allah says in the Quran;

إِنَّ هَلَاكَةَ أُمَّتِكُمْ أُمَّةٌ وَاحِدَةٌ وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُونِ

Lo! this, your religion, is one religion, and I am your Lord, so worship Me. ¹⁶

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تُؤَدُّوا الْأَمَانَاتِ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا وَإِذَا حَكَمْتُمْ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ أَنْ تَحْكُمُوا بِالْعَدْلِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ نِعِمَّا يَعِظُكُمْ بِهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ سَمِيعًا نَبِيرًا

Lo! Allah commandeth you that ye restore deposits to their owners, and, if ye judge between mankind, that ye judge justly. Lo! comely is this which Allah admonisheth you. Lo! Allah is ever Hearer, Seer. ¹⁷

AL ZAKAH

The most important obligation commanded by Allah is al zakah. Al zakah is a self imposed duty of sharing God’s bounty, entered into for His sake; an institution in which participation brings spiritual rehabilitation to the giver, and economic might to the ummah. Al zakah and al sadaqah together ought to bring society as close to the ideal of distributive justice as possible.

It was Tawhid, as first principle of the economic order that created the first welfare state, and Islam that institutionalized that first socialist movement. But Islam and its quintessence, Tawhid, have done so much more for social justice as well as for the rehabilitation of humanity that it is degrading for them to be described in terms of the best ideals of contemporary western societies.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Under Tawhid the life of a Muslim falls under constant monitor ship. Allah knows everything and everything is recorded and counts for its author whether for good or ill. In absence of any concept of accountability, social justice is missed. Once we recognized that there is such a thing as accountability and responsibility, social justice becomes a principal necessary for everyone including ourselves. In atheistic society where people do not believe in God, such accountability is not possible.

Allah says;

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلٰٓئِكَةِ اِنِّىْ جَاعِلٌ فِى الْاَرْضِ خَلِيْفَةًۙ

And when thy Lord said unto the angels: Lo! I am about to place a viceroy in the earth.¹⁸

The concept of Tawhid signifies man's role as that of Allah's khalifah (vicegerent) on earth. As khalifa, mankind is not free but responsible and accountable to Allah. It signifies the dual function of man; man as servant of Allah and man as khalifa on earth. As a servant of Allah, man needs to worship God, seeks God's pleasure, follow God's laws, be good to all creatures of god and to refrain from doing destruction. On the other hand, as a khalifa on earth, man needs to maintain the harmony and peace, and establish a just society.

CONCLUSION

Tawhid is not merely a dry theoretical concept; it is like a lens through which one views everything. As such, it provides a worldview characterized by unity, coherence, and harmony—a worldview in which all parts of the universe and all aspects of existence are related to each other. Since the Creator is One, everything that exists is related to the same origin and source, there being no multiplicity of gods or creators, every dimension of one's existence is related to the Creator through a dynamic relationship.

Islam is not a religion in the common, confining its scope to the private life of man. Islam is al-din a complete way of life and its values are universal in character, transgressing across geographical, racial and linguistic differences, catering for all the fields of human existence in all phase of life. Its beliefs, Tawhid being the basic and important belief, provide a frame work within which justice can be institutionally carried out.

Belief in the Unity and Sovereignty of Allah is the foundation of the social and moral systems of Islam. It is from this belief that a Muslim derives inspiration and strength which make him feel equal to every other human being in the sight of God. Islam seeks to liberate human beings from the shackles of property based relationships; the shackles that grossly restrict the freedom of human beings. Property is important but is not the only important thing in human life. It should never be allowed, however, to become a cause of human misery. Hence, if any society seeks to establish justice, as enunciated by Islam, it must be guided by the moral and spiritual values that it propounds in order to be able to re-enact the miracle which was performed some fourteen centuries ago.

In the communist view, life is a continual strife and struggle between the classes, a struggle which must end in one class overcoming the other; at which point the communist dream is realized. Communism looks at man only from the stand point of his material needs; it looks not only at human nature, but also at the world and at life from a purely material point of view.

Justice in Islam is linked to human equality and not the equality of wages. Islam does not envision the equality in a narrow, material sense. This equality also encompasses the souls of Muslims. For Islam liberates the souls of people from all forms of servitude raises their moral standards, and refines their feelings with the result that every Muslim acquainted with the basic concepts of Islam considers himself to be the brother of every other Muslim and fears none except God. This equality at the psychological level has been altogether ignored by the West.

The more we study the social experiments of other societies, the more we become confident that the principles taught by Islam are the best source of guidance in our striving to establish a good, just and progressive society. The dire need of the present-day Islamic world seems to be to develop a vivid awareness of the richness of our heritage and a robust confidence in the continuing validity of the teachings of Islam.

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³ The Holy Quran, 3:138

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⁵ The Holy Quran, 9:51

⁶ The Holy Quran, 10:32

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⁸ The Holy Quran, 2: 256

⁹ The Holy Quran, 67:1

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