

RELIGION AND POVERTY A Qur'anic Approach

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I got an invitation from Union Theological Seminary, New York, to participate in a seminar on "Religion and Poverty." I welcomed this opportunity to speak on the subject on which I had written a great deal in the past under the title *Liberation Theology in Islam*.

The very first day we visited a union office to understand issues of poverty in the USA. It was, indeed, moving to see so much poverty in the land of plenty. It was all along known that there is poverty in the USA, but it was a different thing to experience it in the field. We were taken to an office of the association of restaurant workers. We were told that more than 40,000 restaurant workers were rendered unemployed when the two world trade towers collapsed on 9/11 in which about three thousand people were killed.

We could hardly imagine that such a huge work force was rendered jobless on 9/11 as entire focus was on those killed and on politics of terror and foreign policy of the nation. No one ever referred to woes of these restaurant workers who lost their jobs and continue to suffer till today in various ways. No one was ready to employ them, firstly, because they were unionized and secondly because many of them had no documents required by immigration. For years, they continued to suffer until they came together to form their own association for their survival. We listened to the story of their suffering and survival and drew inspiration.

Many of these workers, as pointed out, are those who have migrated from other countries, some without valid documents. They are most exploited lot because of their legal vulnerability. It is for this reason that Qur'an considers *ibn al-sabil* (travellers, strangers) among the weak and treat them on par with poor and needy and apportion a part of *zakat* (tithe) for this category. Thus, a correct Islamic attitude can help this most vulnerable section in the USA and other countries.

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The same day the seminar began on "Religion and Poverty." Resource persons from Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism took part in the debate. From an Islamic viewpoint, I spoke on Qur'an and its various verses deeply committed to the eradication of poverty. Mecca, as I have pointed out in my writings on liberation theology, was passing through a period of deep social malaise which disturbed Muhammad, the prophet of Islam (PBUH). This social malaise was caused by extreme wealth (from Meccan standards of those days), on one side, and extreme poverty, on the other. Interestingly, the Qur'an uses the word *miskeen* for the poor and the needy. Its root is *sakana* (meaning, he remained motionless) and a needy *miskeen* is one who is rendered immobilized due to a state of helplessness. Thus, Qur'an shows great sympathy with *masakeen*, the poor and the needy. In Mecca, when the rich traders were neglecting these sections of society, including orphans and widows, there was no state mechanism to bring about proper distribution of wealth through taxation; on the part of the rich merchants, they had no will to set apart a part of their wealth to mitigate the misery of these suffering sections. Also, tribal norms were being destroyed by the greed of wealthy merchants. The Prophet of Islam (PBUH) was seriously disturbed by this state of affairs in Mecca. He could not tolerate this acute suffering of the poor, needy, orphans, and widows. He was an extremely sensitive soul. He himself had suffered poverty in his childhood. He came from a respectable family of clan of Hashim but had very little means of survival. He was an orphan as his parents had died in his early childhood and was brought up by his grandfather and then by his uncle.

It is important to note that Allah chose Muhammad (PBUH), a poor and an orphan, for the prophethood. He did not choose a wealthy or influential person of Meccan society for spreading His Mission. That is why the rich merchants of Mecca held him in contempt that a poor orphan is claiming to be the Prophet of Allah. They thought it is below their high position to submit to a poor orphan who hardly had any means of survival.

The message of Allah was clear: poor have as much human dignity and are capable of spreading Allah's mission as anyone else. Allah does not necessarily choose wealthy and socially influential for His mission. Thus, prophethood was destined for the poor; poverty is a social condition, and not a permanent status. Muhammad (PBUH) also showed the world how one can maintain one's dignity despite strained economic conditions. He never adopted 'high style' of life, even when he was capable due to his changed condition in Madina.

Throughout the Qur'an, one finds Allah's sympathy with the poor and the needy. Qur'an even declares that Allah is on the side of the poor, the needy, and the weak (*mustad'ifin*) and it is these weaker sections of society who will be made leaders of this earth and would inherit it (Qur'an 28:5). Thus, no one can have any doubt that Allah is on the side of the weak and the poor and, certainly, not on the side of powerful and arrogant described by Qur'an as *mustakbirun*.

Nimrod and Pharaoh are examples of power and arrogance and they perished by their own deeds of oppression and exploitation. They were challenged by Allah's prophets Abraham and Moses; both of them, again, come from weaker sections of society. It is these prophets who liberated their nation from oppression (*zulm*). We all, to this day, condemn Nimrod and Pharaoh and salute Abraham and Moses.

Qur'an upholds life based on need and condemns greed in different ways. Ideally, Qur'an requires believers to retain only what is needed to fulfil their basic needs and the rest shall be given away in the way of Allah (Qur'an 2:219). Of course, need is a socially dynamic concept and may vary from time to time and place to place. What are basic needs in the USA may not be necessarily so in India or African countries.

The American poor may possess a car, but car is not necessarily an indicator of prosperity as it is in India or other developing countries. Social needs of a particular society would determine the levels of need and greed. What the Qur'an condemns is greed and accumulation. In Mecca, it came out with a concept of *zakat* as charity; when a sort of state structure began to develop in Madina, however, it became an obligatory levy with a well defined *nisab* (slab). Though Qur'an did not fix any rate or slab, it exhorted believers to give away what is surplus. The Prophet (PBUH) took a practical attitude and required believers to take out at least two and half percent of their wealth and income at the end of the year.

However, the Qur'an described the portions of *zakat* to be spent on the needy, the poor, orphans and widows, for release of prisoners, for travellers, for the indebted and for undefined category 'in the way of Allah' (Qur'an 9:60). This verse on *zakat* embraces all weaker sections of society and is as much valid today as it was when revealed.

It is, however, very unfortunate that the so-called Islamic states give more importance to punishments than poverty reduction program of the Qur'an. Reason is very clear. Punishments help impose state's authority and protect the elite supporting the state while undertaking poverty

reduction program amounts to hurting the rich and powerful. Islam lays great emphasis on social justice and justice in all its forms.

The Prophet never showed any favour to the powerful and rich and rigorously tried to impose justice as required by the Qur'an. There are several verses in Qur'an emphasizing *qist* and '*adl* (justice and equity) like 49:9, 72:15, 5:42, 49:9, 60:9, and so on. However, all modern Islamic states have strayed far from this Qur'anic ideal. The contemporary Islamic states are dominated by the powerful and rich and are oppressive and exploitative in nature and yet claim to be Islamic states by merely enforcing some *Shari'at* rules on punishment and personal laws.

In fact, the Qur'an maintains the understanding of a just social order, irrespective of nature of state structure. However, to implement the Qur'anic punishment without fully implementing its just social system itself is *zulm* (oppression). If social structures are unjust and there remain poverty and suffering in the society, first priority would be enforcement of social, economic, and legal justice.

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was extremely sensitive to the suffering humanity, especially to those who suffered from woes of poverty. He is reported to have said that it is more meritorious to feed a hungry soul than to pray the whole night and that in the vicinity of hungry people, angels of mercy do not descend. He required Muslims to pay *fitrah*, i.e., a portion of one's wealth to the poor on the occasion of *Eid* so that poor could also partake in the celebrations of festival.

While setting up a society in Madina, the Prophet's whole emphasis was on equality among believers. When migrants came from Mecca to Madina he established a novel form of institution, called *mu'akhat* (i.e., brotherhood) between one immigrant and one helper from Madina who was well-settled there. Till the time one gets on his own, the helper would support the former for his livelihood. However, the immigrant was required to start earning his own livelihood. This created an atmosphere of cooperation among the people.

It also helped create a self-supporting people so that they do not become burdens on others. Some immigrants were quite well to do in Mecca but as immigrants they were helpless in the new situation. These immigrants soon began to earn their own livelihood through trade and other economic activities. The Prophet himself was an immigrant and many helpers (*Ansar*) considered it a great privilege to keep him and his family at their respective houses. The Prophet, however, declined and preferred to establish himself and soon he constructed his own quarters

along with a mosque, which came to be known as Masjid al-Nabi, the mosque of the Prophet.

Also, the Prophet (PBUH) called leaders of all religious groups and tribal chiefs to draw up a covenant to live in harmony with each other despite pursuing different religions – Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Paganism – and different tribal traditions. It came to be known as Mithaq-i-Madina, a novel political document of its time. It was very close to the modern political ethos. In fact, Prophet's Madina presents the best model of religious pluralism which even the West came to adopt in later part of the twentieth century.

Though there was no formal government, Madina became the best governed city depending entirely on mutual cooperation and voluntary services, including defence services. Formal state structure did not develop in Madina until the Umayyad period. Even during the four Caliphs, who succeeded the Prophet, there was hardly proper state structure except some elements of it. However, despite severe challenges and complex problems Madina was the better governed city compared to capitals of powerful empires like Roman and Sassanid empires. There was great emphasis on social justice without heavy burden of taxation. It was the spirit of social justice based on the concept of equality and equal dignity for all human beings (Qur'an 17:70) that created a just social order.

Though Abu Bakr, the first Caliph after the Prophet, did not get much time to organize Madinese society due to his preoccupation with tribal revolt (war of *riddah*) Umar and Ali, the 2nd and 4th Caliphs, tried their best to create a just society. Umar used to say: "I will be responsible to Allah even if a dog died of hunger in my regime." He used to impose norms of governance very strictly. He chided his most competent general Khalid bin Walid when he came to know that the latter had given a large amount of money to a poet because he liked his composition.

Ali, who was the bravest general and a great scholar, orator, and a poet, was very rigorous in dispensing justice according to the Qur'anic ideals. He would not allow a single dirham to be spent from Bait al-Mal (state treasury) without justification. He chided his own brother Aquil when he wanted money from state treasury for himself. Ali would take from state treasury as much as he would give to his servant, not more, not less.

When an Arab woman demanded more from Ali than a non-Arab woman, Ali said: "By Allah I would not make any distinction between an

Arab and Ajam (non-Arab).” It was because of such rigorous imposition of justice that Madina could avoid, at least for few years, the extremes of riches and poverty. One must, however, admit that this did not last long as when Caliphate was turned into a monarchy by Mu’awiyah who nominated his son Yazid as his successor. All norms of social justice were thrown to winds as the Caliphate turned into a dynastic empire and, thus, worst kind of oppression and exploitation began. Maulana Maududi, in his book *Khilafat aur Mulukiyyat*, has given a vivid description of this change. It is worth noting that a society could remain just only if it is small in size and not obsessed with power. It is megalomania which leads not only to complex problems in the society but also severe injustice, exploitation, and subjugation of others. It is megalomania of western powers which resulted in colonialism, leading further to wars and bloodshed, as is seen in the global war initiated by ‘American’ priorities.

The Christian community too led a life according to the ideals of the Bible, though the whole character of Christianity changed once it was associated with the Roman Empire. Thus, history has proved that political power and religious spirit cannot go together. Political power is based on coercion and religion on persuasion. If we want religion to be an important resource to fight poverty in contemporary society, it should never be associated with political power. I stated during the seminar in Union Theological Seminary that if we want religion to be an important resource, give training to your students that they should fight poverty by siding with the poor, not with rich and powerful in pursuit of political power. Our priests and religious preachers should be strongly committed to social justice which is the real spirit of religion.

Within Christianity, the liberation theology was developed in the poor and exploited Latin America, and not in the powerful and affluent USA. The Catholic priests working among poor peasantry and urban poor in Latin America stood by the oppressed and exploited and developed liberation theology, which the powerful church hesitated to recognize. Many of these priests were killed by the powerful landlords. Supreme sacrifice is the real spirit of religion. Qur’an also says: “You cannot attain to righteousness unless you give (in the way of Allah) what you love.” Thus, real spirit of religion is giving, not receiving, sacrificing, not accumulating. Wherever religion gets associated with powers that be, it remains anything but religion. Then, religion assumes the form of rituals completely devoid of spirit. The whole history of church during medieval

ages and history of Islam through various empires, beginning with Umayyad Empire, is a powerful demonstration of this fact.

Separation of church and state is the right doctrine but it is observed more in breach than in practice. Religion must remain a powerful critic of powers that be and should play subversive role for establishment. Political revolutions fail because ultimate logic of political revolution is to seize power from one set of elite for another set of elite without bringing any qualitative change.

Religious revolution, on the other hand, plays, initially at least, a different role to bring about qualitative change in society by ushering in a just structure. However, soon it also gets associated with political power and its spirit is lost in the ocean of lust for power. All religious revolutions also lost their edge soon after they tried to change society. It is this dilemma which human beings have faced since the beginning of known history.

In fact, religion and poverty should never go together and religion should once again play the role of a powerful critic of the established powers who thrive by accentuating unjust distribution of social resources. A truly religious society cannot be built by building grand temples, churches, mosques, and gurdwaras, but by building a simple and need-based social structure. Poverty is opposite of material riches, not of simple need-based lifestyle. The resources of our earth are limited and must be used with a great sense of economy. The right word in Arabic for simple need-based lifestyle is *faqr*, which implies patience, constraint on desire, and dignified but simple lifestyle. The Prophet of Islam also said *faqr* is my pride (*al-faqr fakhri*). However, today we see the so-called religious personalities living in high style in grand buildings and maintaining an army of servants and subservient followers. A truly religious person should never be afraid of social critique and should never display power and influence. He/she should be distinguished from others by simplicity, honesty, and transparency.

One who gives into greed and opulence can never be seen with the masses. All great founders of religions are known for their simplest possible lifestyle, be it Buddha, Christ, Muhammad, or Nanak. Also, Sufi saints, like Baba Farid, Moinuddin Chishti, or Nizamuddin Awliya, led a life of *faqr* in its true sense. Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, often used to eat dry bread with salt and curd. Nizamuddin Awliya fasted during day and would break it with a dry piece of bread. Yet, they were so powerful

that kings used to envy their popularity. Moreover, they remained powerful critics of power-seeking monarchs.

This, of course, cannot be realized as history has shown but until then religion should remain critical of oppression and exploitation and be seen always on the side of the weak. It should advocate moral, not political power. Its superiority should lie in moral superiority. If religions perform this role there will be no conflict among religions but only among exploiters. Religions, unfortunately, fight among themselves, as they become tools of exploiters.

Religion being a powerful critic of the powerful must be on the side of the oppressed and exploited to fulfil its role in society. Tagore, in his *Geetanjali*, rightly points out that if you are seeking God you will not find it in grand temples but in workers breaking stones in the heat and dust of summer. Real miracle is not to produce things from nowhere as many charlatans do, but transform our society into a just and cooperative one, than sheer competitive society where all can have their needs fulfilled and live a rich spiritual life.