

Justice and Moral Principles in Islam are above physical relationship (1)

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 27 November 2020

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ شُهَدَاءَ لِلَّهِ وَلَوْ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَوِ الْوَالِدِينَ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ ۚ إِن يَكُنْ غَنِيًّا أَوْ فَقِيرًا فَاللَّهُ أَوْلَىٰ بِهِمَا ۖ فَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا الْهَوَىٰ أَن تَعْدِلُوا ۚ وَإِن تَلَوَّا أَوْ تَعْرَضُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا ﴿١٣٥﴾

“O you who believe, be maintainers of justice, bearers of witness for Allah, even if it is against your own selves or (your) parents or near relatives — whether he is rich or poor, Allah has a better right over them both. So do not follow (your) low desires, that you deviate. And if you distort (the truth) or turn away (from it), surely Allah is ever Aware of what you do.” (The Quran, 4:135)

I have chosen this verse because of a recent book, entitled *The Weirdest People in the World*, by Joseph Henrich, Professor of human evolutionary biology at Harvard University. It contains an analysis of why Western countries have so greatly excelled the rest of the world in becoming prosperous and making unprecedented scientific and technological advancement, which has also given them cultural global dominance. I have read a review of this book which was published in *The Times* newspaper, London, on 7th November, earlier this month, and I am going by that review.

From this review, it appears that this book argues that the reason for the West getting vastly ahead of non-Western cultures in these fields relates to their different concepts of what is moral behaviour and justice. According to the author, in non-Western cultures a person gives complete and absolute loyalty to his family, to his tribe and to those close to him in human relationship. To him, ‘good’ is anything which is in the interests of his family or community, and those interests are paramount to him. He doesn’t consider himself as a separate, accountable individual in his own right but merely as a part of his family or tribe. He is not motivated to act on any principle like truth or justice, but just adheres to blind allegiance to family or community.

But Western civilization, says the author, gave up such a concept of blind loyalty to family ties, the concept which led to feuds between entire families and the seeking of revenge by one tribe over another. Instead, the West, he says, “became more reliant on general moral rules and principles”. This is why, according to the author, Western civilization made great progress in the economic, scientific and technological fields, so much more than other cultures, and became dominant in the whole world.

To illustrate the difference in attitude and values, the author gives this example. If you are driving a car with your friend and you hit a pedestrian and the fault is entirely yours, what should your friend do? Should the friend testify against you in court because you broke the law or should he lie for you in court because of his friendship with you? The author answers that, according to Western civilization, the friend should testify truthfully against you in court. But in non-Western cultures morality means to give unreserved and unconditional support to your relative or friend. So your friend will stand by you and give false evidence in your favour.

Further according to the author, the Western preference for *following a principle* instead of unjustly favouring your friend or family is due to the influence of Christianity. Whether the author is right or not to say that following a principle is an attitude produced by Christian influence, we won't argue that point here. But we can assume that the author is including Islam also in the non-Western cultures that he is mentioning. That may be, to some extent, the author's fault for lacking knowledge of the teachings of Islam. But when we consider the actual behaviour of Muslims, in real life, we can certainly excuse the author if he really believes that a Muslim will ignore principles of justice and truth and give false evidence to favour a friend or relative. It is a great pity and tragedy, then, that the behaviour of Muslims themselves should create an impression of Islam which is totally opposite to its teachings.

So here we have two opposite concepts, which both have their own attractions. The noble idea of adhering to the principles of truth and justice appeals to the human mind and uplifts it. The thought of showing loyalty to those who have ties with you is a natural human instinct that you want to act upon. The Quran has mentioned both of

these concepts in a few short words. These occur at the opening of the verse recited at the end of the second part of the Friday *khutba*: “*innallāha ya ’muru bil- ’adli wal ihsāni wa ’itā’i dhil-qurbā*, meaning: “Surely Allah commands (the doing of) justice and the doing of good (to others) and the giving to the near of kin...” (16:90).

The doing of justice, or *’adl*, comes first. If someone has done something for you, then justice requires that you do something for them in return. This might be under a contract, for example, that someone has done a job for you or sold you something for a payment. It is justice that you make the payment, and it is also the law of every country. But someone might have done something for you without any legal obligation on you to do something in return; for example, a neighbour looks after your house in your absence. It is justice that you do something for them in return. After justice comes *ihsān*, or doing of good. This is when you are doing something for someone but *not* in return. They haven’t done anything for you, but you take the initiative in doing something for them. Even in doing such good, justice must be observed. If you do a favour to someone but it involves doing injustice to someone else, then that does not constitute doing good. For example, you hold a position where you have to apply the law to people and you have the discretion to be lenient or to be harsh to them depending on the circumstances. If you are lenient to your friends because they are your friends, and harsh on others, then that is not an act of doing good because you are not doing justice.

The third point mentioned in this verse is giving to the near of kin. It is a natural inclination to support people who are related to you. But justice comes in here as well. A man came to the Holy Prophet Muhammad and wanted him to witness that he was giving a gift to his son. The Holy Prophet asked him if he had given a similar gift to all his sons. The man said, No. The Holy Prophet replied: Then don’t make me a witness because I cannot be a witness to an injustice. What the man was doing was not illegal or against Islam. He had the right to give a gift to anyone he wanted. But he was not doing justice. So doing justice is the primary consideration, whether it is a matter among relatives or between your relatives and other people.

Because doing good and favours to those who are nearest to us is a natural human instinct and desire, the Quran has dealt with this question in a number of ways. In the first verse of chapter 4, which is recited at the *nikah* (marriage) ceremony, it is stated:

“O people, keep your duty to your Lord, Who created you from a single being and created its mate of the same (kind), and spread from these two many men and women. And keep your duty to Allah, by Whom you demand one of another (your rights), and (to) the ties of relationship. Surely Allah is ever a Watcher over you.” (4:1)

This verse extends family relationships to cover the whole of humanity, as the origin of all mankind goes back to a single being or essence. So, returning to the example of a friend who lies for you in court after you have hit a pedestrian, it means that infringing the pedestrian’s rights is to infringe the rights of a family member of yours. Then this verse tells us to keep our duty to Allah and our duty to the ties of relationship. We do not have any such duty to the ties of relationship which goes against our duty to Allah. We are not duty-bound to tell lies for our relatives or friends, because by telling a lie and giving false evidence we are contravening our duty to God. And, as I have already said, we are also contravening our duty to those other human beings who are harmed when we falsely favour our friends and relations.

Another verse in the Quran is very well-known:

“O mankind, surely We have created you from a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other. Surely the noblest of you with Allah is the most dutiful of you.” (49:13)

From this we learn that, in the sight of God, some other family or tribe may be better than our own family or community. So if we are trying to falsely benefit our relatives at the expense of others, we may be doing harm to people who are better human being than us, as far as God is concerned. In fact, we should be trying to find out who is better than us and then taking them as an example for us to emulate, and

we should be supporting them, instead of blindly pursuing whatever is in the interests of our family or kinship even if our action deprives others of their justified rights.

According to this book, Western civilization became supreme because the “people in these societies became more mobile and thus freer to exchange ideas more widely”, that is to say, they were able to mix with other people beyond the circle of their own families and communities. This verse of the Quran is also presenting a similar notion. It says that Allah made you, O mankind, into “tribes and families that you may *know* each other”. This “knowing” is to meet each other, exchange information and ideas, and learn from others. Those nations who acted on this succeeded in the world and those who didn’t failed and remained behind.

I turn again to the verse I recited at the beginning. It commands us not merely to do justice as an individual act, but also to keep a *system of justice* going and in existence — we should be maintainers of justice. It further commands us to be “bearers of witness for Allah”, not bearers of false witness to save the skin of a relative or friend. Then this verse speaks in the clearest possible and most unmistakable way that you should give true testimony regardless of whether that testimony goes against your own self, your parents or any of your other relatives.

Regrettably, the people of the world are not familiar with the Quran to know that it contains such clear and emphatic teachings about justice, and from what they see of Muslim behaviour they cannot believe that the religion of Islam requires a Muslim to bear true witness even against himself or his close relations.

بَارَكَ اللهُ لَنَا وَنَاوَكُمُ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعَنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-