

# ‘Thinking about poverty’

## A personal reflection \*

*by*

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### Introduction

During my stint at Hartford Seminary, I took a course on Global Ethics which focused on the effects of globalisation on nations, communities, cultures, religions and values. Course participants were required to think about their own faith traditions and develop the connections between their religious beliefs and current global ethical issues e.g. consumerism, global poverty and environmental degradation.

Professor Heidi Hadsell, my course instructor shared with us that historic Judaism observed the practices of Jubilee which called for a periodic readjustment, in which the wealthier members of society were compelled to show their social piety (*tzedakah*) by helping the poor and marginalised. In fact, the Hebrew Scriptures, the Gospels and the Qur’an all encourage various forms of charity. Without doubt, all these religious scriptures affirm the importance of compassion and justice to the poor and strongly condemn the powerful who misuse or ignore the needs of the oppressed.

Such principles are clear, but the implications for contemporary practice are much less so. These texts appeared during a time of tribal, monarchical and imperial political order. Much have changed since then. Humans must now contend with modern socio-economic and political structures that are continually shaping societies.

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The modern world system is characterised by the emergence of international actors in the global stage, *inter alia*:

- i) Trans-national corporations that is politically influential and economically powerful.
- ii) Global media conglomerates that control not only the conduit of information but also the content. A global media conglomerate typically controls a variety of businesses that include publishers, television networks, film companies, cable and internet operations as well as broadcasting systems.
- iii) International institutions like the International Monetary Fund or the United Nations that create policies which would impact the world.
- iv) Non-governmental organisations that have political, financial, intellectual or even moral capital that may influence the course of events.
- v) Trans-national criminal syndicates that deal in the illegal trafficking of drugs, humans, weapons and other contraband.

### **Contemporary religious discourse**

Any attempt to tackle seriously the ethical issue of poverty in our time must therefore deal with such social realities. The public issue of poverty therefore requires a contemporary religious discourse to deal adequately with its complexity.

It is particularly instructive that a more meaningful and modern application of many religious concepts has already been done by contemporary Muslim scholars e.g. Prof Sherman Jackson. An interesting example is Prof Jackson's discussion of the meaning of *hifz al-aql* (preservation of the mind) in which he argued that "rather than restrict the meaning to potential internal, self-induced corrupters such as drugs or alcohol....**socio-political and or cultural factors may be equally or perhaps more corruptive** [emphasis mine]."

He further argues:

Normalized domination occurs when humans are reduced to such a state of self-doubt and or self contempt that they internalize the vague but inextricable feeling that they can only redeem themselves by living up to the norms and expectations of those who seek to exploit them .... To the extent that regimes of normalized domination exist, clearly the preservation of “*reason*,” or “the ability to know,” would have to go beyond the mere proscription of drugs and alcohol. For the ability to know is clearly affected by more than the essentially private acts of self-administered corruption of the mind. Indeed, regimes of normalized domination corrupt reason on a far grander scale and provide in many instances the very incentive for drug and alcohol abuse. In this context, *hijz al-‘aql*, if it is to be effective, would have to take on a much more public and political dimension. **It would have to deal not simply with individuals but with political, social, cultural, educational, and economic institutions** [emphasis mine].

As a self-described “Blackamerican” convert to Islam, Prof Jackson is informed by his historical context though his approach is in no way procedurally different from the classical Muslim jurists since the constructs invoked by them were informed also by their historical context.

In a similar vein, our views on poverty and how we must tackle it must not only be rooted to our intellectual heritage but anchored in the insights and wisdoms intellectual traditions from all human civilizations. The aim is to ensure that a contemporary religious discourse would address concrete concerns and urgent issues rather than constructing new essentialism and pseudo-scientific perspectives. Thus, such a discourse is one that is able to appreciate and sensitive to social realities and needs, brings about awareness and understanding and prevents a non-critical state of external dependence and internal submission.

Without an understanding of the massive transformations taking place in the world today, the Muslim religious intelligentsia would not be able to provide the means to help Muslims live in the real world of the present. As Abdolkarim Souroush pointed out, “[t]he modern Muslim intellectual has to be one who understands the fundamental differences

between Islam and modernity, and would therefore be able to bridge the gap between the two.”

One of the urgent tasks of the Muslim religious intelligentsia, therefore, is to provide a contemporary religious discourse. In order to do this, I would propose that the religious discourse must:

**(1) Draw from the insights and perspectives of a multi-disciplinary approach**

When discussing the qualifications of a *mujtahid*, classical Muslim scholars often insisted that the person must have, among others, knowledge of the historical, social, and political context: that is to say, the state of affairs and the situation of the people (*ahwal an-nas*). The classical Muslim scholars understood that the conditions of society change as humanity develops and advances materially and technologically.

Unless we are informed by our context, we run the risk of promoting a religious discourse that is disarticulated from its socio-cultural reality and it would thus lose its potency, relevance and dynamism. Dr. Muqtedar Khan argues that the social sciences would provide conceptual and intellectual tools that will enable us to have a critical understanding of our context and reality as well as the profound economic, cultural and social transformations that are taking place

Social sciences are more interested in understanding and describing the world as it is – rather than on postulating on how it ought to be...Very simply, if you do not understand where you are – even if you know where you have to go – you will go nowhere. Hence, you need social sciences to understand where you are – and, on that basis, put religious knowledge of where to go to effective use.

Thus, if we believe that the poor are where they are because they are lazy, fatalistic, lack financial planning or easily contented; critical social sciences would prod us to consider the structural factors that perpetuates the cycle the poverty. A multi-disciplinary approach

will help us understand that in a modern economy, the role of wealth is not simply to act as a cushion for those times when income is interrupted. But more importantly, the role of wealth -shaped by the advantages that accrue to groups of people- is to allow economic security to be passed down. Consequently, a lack of assets makes it difficult for one to get ahead in life.

Muslim scholars like K. H. Masdar Mas'udi, Director of P3M and Dr. Ashgar Ali Engineer, Director of Institute of Islamic Studies argue that Islamic precepts like fasting and giving religious tithes (*zakat*) are more than just individual piety. For them, such precepts are intrinsically linked to social responsibility as the defining feature of piety. Their discourses thus would not touch on the merits of fasting or giving *zakat*, but rather emphasised how these precepts are grounded in public welfare (*li mashlahat al-'ammah*).

When we understand global poverty from a creative incorporation of social sciences, our religious discourse would be informed by these insights and our solutions would go beyond mere “tokenism” in tackling the issue.

## **(2) Critically reflect upon the dehumanising conditions that exist presently**

A contemporary religious discourse reflects upon concrete reality, raises critical consciousness and focuses on pedagogical strategies to struggle against all forms of dehumanising conditions. In concretising the meaning of *hifz al-aql* in Prof Jackson's example above, he critically reflected upon the socio-political experience of Blackamericans and argued that the Qur'anic concept of *fitnah*:

[t]urns on the simultaneous recognition and exploitation of the human condition and the contingent nature of much of human knowledge...For in the context of any regime of normalized domination, even the most obvious truths can evade acknowledgement or be undermined.. regimes of normalized domination achieve in psychological effect what politically predatory regimes achieve in behavioural effect, namely acquiescence that seeks to mollify itself by equating itself with the simple acceptance of truth.

Prof. Jackson demonstrated his concern over the oppressive elements that exist in one's surroundings which would prevent one from accessing the truth. His understanding of the Qur'an and Islamic jurisprudence was centrally rooted to a humanistic vision and is anchored to the urgent problems and issues of the society at large.

I believe we can enrich our Islamic intellectual tradition further when we continue to reflect critically on Qur'anic terms like *fasad fi al-ardh* (corruption on earth), *mustad'ifin* (weak/oppressed) and *mustakbirin* (arrogant/powerful) in a modern world system. The act of critical reflection would thus promote a contemporary religious discourse that is not only committed to peace and helping the victims of injustice but also concerned with our role in living up to our responsibility as a steward of God's creation;

### **(3) Speak the language of hope**

A fair reading of Prophet Muhammad's life history would inform us that the Prophet defended the interests of the poor, dispossessed, the weak and the marginalised sections of society even for those who did not embrace Islam. He was vehemently opposed because his message (*ar-risalah*) threw a powerful challenge to the status quo in Mecca. It was an ethical message that gave a sense of dignity to the oppressed and provided them with powerful conceptual tools to fight against their oppressors. In a society divided by class and status, the Prophet proclaimed the most liberating doctrine of equal honour for all children of Adam.

All religious traditions share not only a common bond of humanity, but also provide a great source for ethical reflections. Contemporary Muslims do not only benefit from a massive and sophisticated intellectual heritage but can also draw upon the insights of ethical religious discourse from other faiths since these faiths share common commitments to compassion, human dignity and social justice.

A contemporary religious discourse that speaks the inclusive language of ethics is thus one that transcends legalism, parochialism, sectarianism and consciously gives a voice to

the voiceless, oppressed and marginalised (both Muslims and non-Muslims). It would also allow the oppressed to relate oneself meaningfully with and to comprehend higher, spiritual aspects of reality and provide soulful motivation for the oppressed to change their condition.

In the words of Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer:

Islam can serve not only as an effective instrument of social justice...but can also provide a moral corrective to the purposeless growth and tendency to treat consumption as an end itself... [Islam is] against all that perpetuates poverty....arrogance of power, negation of justice, oppression of the weak, suppression of legitimate aspirations of the common people, discrimination on grounds of colour, nationality or sex, concentration of wealth and political power...[and all other] oppressive socio-economic measures.

A contemporary religious discourse must contain the message of hope. Even if we recognise that the problem of poverty is complicated, it should not stop us from proposing just solutions to the problem. Warren Copeland, a Christian theologian who has worked for many years on the issue of poverty in America, said “for human beings the loss of hope is the final indignity of poverty”. He further argues that “[i]n every moment there is the possibility of creative change...[and] moments add up to real change and thus to hope.” A contemporary religious discourse is thus one that is able to provide the impetus to persuading enough people to care enough to work together to address an issue. When it works, it is democracy at its best.

## **Conclusion**

Just as one would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to pursue morality without some sort of a theoretical basis or a set of reasons for being moral, similarly it is very difficult, if not impossible, to pursue socio-economic objectives without a suitable theoretical rationale. Thus, if the members of a society consciously or unconsciously believe that poverty and riches are created by God rather than the results of human actions, their motivation will never be as powerful as those who regard poverty as a man-made evil. In the

words of Soedjatmoko, a prominent Indonesian intellectual, “[r]eligion must move between two poles of fundamental human concern: on the one hand, the search for truth, for inner freedom, for perfection of the inner self or redemption of the soul; on the other hand, the search for a better society”.

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