

## ALI 435 - Readings #1

### Value of Justice in Islam

Islam revolutionized ways of thinking, that is it drastically altered the system and hierarchy of values. It elevated values like taqwa (God-fearing), which had no value at all in the past, to a very high status and attached an unprecedented importance to it. On the other hand, it deflated the value of such factors as blood, race and the like, which in the pre-Islamic days were of predominant significance, bringing their worth to zero.

Justice is one of the values revived by Islam and given an extraordinary status. It is true that Islam recommended justice and stressed its implementation, but what is very significant is that it elevated its value in society.

A man of intelligence and understanding puts the following question to Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ('a): "Which is superior, justice or generosity?" (Hikam 437)

Here the question is about two human qualities. Man has always detested oppression and injustice and has also held in high regard acts of kindness and benevolence performed without the hope of reward or return.

Apparently the answer to the above question seems both obvious and easy: generosity is superior to justice, for what is justice except observance of the rights of others and avoiding violating them; but a generous man willingly foregoes his own right in favour of another person. The just man does not transgress the rights of others or he safeguards their rights from being violated. But the generous man sacrifices his own right for another's sake. Therefore, generosity must be superior to justice.

In truth, the above reasoning appears to be quite valid when we estimate their worth from the viewpoint of individual morality, and generosity, more than justice, seems to be the sign of human perfection and the nobleness of the human soul. But 'Ali's reply is contrary to the above answer. 'Ali ('a) gives two reasons for superiority of justice over generosity.

Firstly he says: 1) Justice puts things in their proper place and generosity diverts them from their (natural) direction. For, the meaning of justice is that the natural deservedness of everybody must be taken into consideration; everyone should be given his due according to his work, ability and qualifications. Society is comparable to a machine whose every part has a proper place and function.

It is true that generosity is a quality of great worth from the point of view that the generous man donates to another what legitimately belongs to himself, but we must note that it is an unnatural occurrence. It may be compared to a body one of whose organs is malfunctioning, and its other healthy organs and members temporarily redirect their activity to the recovery of the suffering organ.

From the point of view of society, it would be far more preferable if the society did not possess such sick members at all, so that the healthy organs and members may completely devote their activities and energies to the general growth and perfection of society, instead of being absorbed with helping and assisting of some particular member.

The other reason Imam Ali (a) gives for preferring justice to generosity is this:

2) Justice is the general caretaker, whereas generosity is a particular reliever. That is, justice is like a general law which is applicable to the management of all the affairs of society. Its benefit is universal and all-embracing; it is the highway which serves all and everyone. But generosity is something exceptional and limited, which cannot be always relied upon. Basically, if generosity were to become a general rule, it would no longer be regarded as such.

Deriving his conclusion, Ali (a) says: “Consequently, justice is the nobler of the two and possesses the greater merit.

Oppression, injustice and discrimination cannot bring peace and happiness-even to the tyrant or the one in whose interest the injustice is perpetrated. Justice is like a public highway which has room for all and through which everyone may pass without impediment. But injustice and oppression constitute a blind alley which does not lead even the oppressor to his desired destination.

Ali (a) regards justice to be a duty and a Divine trust; rather, to him it is a Divine sanctity. He does not expect a Muslim who is aware and informed about the teachings of Islam to be an idle spectator at the scenes of injustice and discrimination.

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