

The Moral Basis Of Economics In Islam

Sometimes it is argued that the socioeconomic aspects of Islam represent only a part of its overall ethical code, rather than any specific methodology of economic significance, since, morality constitutes the basis of the Islamic teachings.

This argument treats the Islamic teachings as no more significant than passive moralizations normal for all religions. It presupposes that the practical significance of the Islamic teachings is confined to their promotion of morality in and among individuals.

Further, it implies that the Muslims' sublime rapport with God and their brotherhood with the co-religionists do not extend to any regulation of the social welfare aspect. In short, the sceptics give an impression that the Islamic teachings serve as mere recommendations. In their judgment, these differ from any secular economic methodology, in the same way as a moralist's exhortation of individuals towards mutually establishing salutary human relationships does from a social reformer's planned improvement of his people's conditions and seeking to determine their social rights!

In support of the above argument, the sceptics acknowledge that Islam teaches Muslims to unite and practise human brotherhood. They recognize that Islam enjoins its adherents from doing anything contrary to the divine prescriptions of rectitude, truthfulness, honesty, moderation, consideration, patience, and similar other virtues, on the part of the individual Muslims, or even mankind as a whole.

The alleged absence of systematic content of economic significance in Islam is not borne out by the actual position. The skeptical interpretation in this regard seeks to reduce the idea of an Islamic economy from its real position of a school of thought to an imaginary level of recommendatory, moral exhortations.

No doubt, morality permeates Islam. It's essentially moral teachings are comprehensive enough to render the individual and societal conditions, including the economic status, wholesome; this is made possible through mutually salutary human relationships in the appropriate societal conditions envisaged in Islam.

Islam commands its followers to abstain from and oppose any kind of oppression, selfish exploitation and injustice. The socio-economic aspect of Zakat, for example, is treated not only in quantitative terms of taxation, but in the qualitative terms of its salutary effects on the tax payer and the beneficiaries. What is more significant is the fact that Zakat has been religiously prescribed as an obligatory act of devotion to God, at par with Namaz (Prayer), the Ramadan fast and the Haj. Moreover, the Islamic teachings repeatedly emphasize that the rich and the affluent must always support and enhance the status of the poor and the needy.

Clearly, the Islamic teachings (commandments, exhortations and guidelines) aim at strengthening the morale of individuals. These are action-oriented and, as such, go beyond any passive moralizations. Accordingly, their comprehensive scope and legal significance extends to realization of a systematic Islamic economy, consistent with their socioeconomic implications.

Yet, it does not mean that Islamic role is that of an advisor only, so that it is incapable of formulating a method and system for society in all its aspects, including the economic.

Islam forbids man's injustice to man, or any persecution arising from violation of human rights. In doing so, it invites people to be righteous and just in honouring each other's rights. This it does by first conceptualizing justice (and human values) in its own ideological perspective, so that the enlightened Muslims can clearly distinguish between what is right and lawful in Islam and what is wrong and unlawful or unjust. Thus, they are meaningfully induced not to exceed the (moral, ideological and legal) limits determined by Islam.

Islam does neither allow others to interpret the moral concepts, human values or rights, nor advocate any existing ones, as advisers normally do, Islam clarifies what it means by justice, and states the general rules concerning matters, such as production and distribution of, and transactions in, wealth. It also explains what it considers to be unjust or an oppression.

The foregoing indicates the difference between a moralist and an economic school of thought. A moralist does no more than invite people to act with justice, and discourages them from unjust acts. He does not determine any standards of justice, nor does he establish any criteria for determining injustice.

He leaves these up to any good sense of his listener or follower.

However, in Islam, any socio-economic methodology presupposes the relevant standards and criteria of justice as applicable to an Islamic economy. Had Islam allowed the people themselves to determine its concepts of justice and injustice, and to come to an agreement on a set of rights by taking into consideration the conditions of their living, their needs, and contemporary values, it would have meant that Islam's role was that of a moralist only. While Islam offers advice to people and discourages them from being unjust, and invites them to justice, it also states clearly its concept of justice and injustice. This is independent of any individual opinions held on these matters.

Islam itself clarifies and distinguishes between the just and unjust paths concerning production and distribution of wealth. For example, Islam regards forcible ownership of (fallow) land, without rendering it cultivable, is an act of oppression. On the other hand, if the land is reclaimed and made cultivable, the developer becomes entitled to own the same. Further¹, Islam considers it an act of oppression to increase wealth by means of usury. However any increase in one's wealth due to legitimate earnings is treated as just and fair. In these and similar other cases, Islam clarifies the limits of justice and injustice.

It is also true that Islam encourages the rich to help the poor, but it does not stop there. The Islamic government concerned is religiously obliged to upgrade the living standards of poor to a sufficient level.

According to a tradition attributed to Imam Musa Bin Ja'far (a.s.) a Wali al-'Amr¹ has a specific responsibility concerning Zakat. The Imam is reported to have said that it is incumbent on the Wali al-'Amr to collect Zakat and dispense it according to the divine commandments. This would necessitate division of Zakat collection into eight parts, including that of the poor and the needy.

The dispensation should be so made as to provide an allowance (to the authorized person) that is sufficient to take care of his household needs for one year. If, at the end of a year, it is found that some amount of the Zakat allowance is still left, it should be returned to the authority concerned. Then, if the poor continue to be in need, the authority concerned has a duty to provide the necessary subsistence allowances.

Clearly, the social responsibility and the necessity of securing a good life for everybody is deemed to be an Islamic duty. This is definitely more than mere advice. It involves compliance with a socio-economic requirement as a matter of social responsibility, which is treated as one of the major responsibilities of Wali al-'Amr in Islam, so that the Islamic authorities are duty-bound to look after the poor and the needy by all means. This represents just a small part of the foundations of a socioeconomic system in Islam,

Islam envisages appropriate practice of whatever it preaches. To illustrate this point, let us consider an Islamic tradition and the relevant Islamic practice. The tradition says: "Those who go to sleep, after dining to their hearts¹ content, and in a state of insensibility to the sufferings of their neighbour(s), who remain hungry and restless through the next morning, do not actually believe in God and the Day of Final Judgement."

The relevant Islamic injunction lays down that a Wali al-'Amr is charged with the responsibility to undertake the maintenance of the poor and the needy until the latter- are no longer in need of help.

While the above Islamic tradition may be construed as even a moralization, the relevant practice cannot evidently be treated as such. No doubt, the Islamic practice is action-oriented to a vital aspect of socioeconomic welfare.

Furthermore, it may be recalled that Zakat has been treated as an important act of worship (in that the tax-payer obeys not only the divine commandment in this regard, but earns virtue in this world for the

hereafter), while its practical socio-economic implications, too, are emphasized.

The foregoing explanation shows that the overall responsibility of Wali al-‘Amr concerning Zakat and its dispensation is rendered practicable through the relevant provisions, so that Zakat represents not only a significant individual act of devotion, to God,¹ but a vital socio-economic methodology, of Islam, too.

¹. the highest authority dispensing justice under Islamic laws. --Ed.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/towards-islamic-economy-sayyid-muhammad-baqir-al-sadr/moral-basis-economics-islam#comment-0>