

Translator's Introduction

Imam Zayn al-'Abidin's 'Treatise on Rights' is the only work attributed to him other than supplications or relatively short sayings and letters. The fact that it was a written document from the first may support the suggestion that at least some of the supplications were originally written compositions.

The 'Treatise on Rights' elaborates on a well-known saying of the Prophet, which has been transmitted in a rather large number of versions, no doubt because he repeated it in many different contexts. A typical version can be rendered as follows: 'Surely your Lord has a right against you, your self has a right against you, and your wife has a right against you.'

Other versions of the *hadith* add guest, body, eye, and friend to those who have rights. In some of the versions, another clause is added: 'So give to everyone who possesses a right (*kull dhi haqq*) his right'.^{[1](#)} Another *hadith* tells us that 'God has given to everyone who possesses a right his right'.^{[2](#)}

Shi'ite sources provide many relevant *hadith*. For example, the Prophet said:

God has made seven rights incumbent upon the person of faith (*al-mu'min*) toward the person of faith: To respect him in his person, love him in his breast, share with him in his property, consider backbiting against him unlawful, visit him in his illness, escort his coffin, and say nothing but good about him after his death.^{[3](#)}

Zayn al-'Abidin's 'Treatise on Rights' seems to have been written at the request of a disciple, since, in one of its two versions, it is prefaced by the words: 'This is the treatise of 'Ali ibn al-Husayn to one of his companions.' In it the Imam explains in more or less exhaustive fashion what is meant by 'everyone who possesses a right' as mentioned in the above *hadith*. Throughout he provides specific examples, basing himself upon the Qur'an, the *sunna*, and the actions and sayings of the earlier Imams.

Though in the present context the word *haqq* translates best as 'right', it has a number of closely related meanings which should be kept in mind, such as suitableness, justice, truth, reality, correctness, properness, appropriateness, necessity, incumbency, obligation, due, and duty.

A glance at the 'Treatise on Rights' will quickly show that the word 'rights' might better have been

translated as duties, obligations, or responsibilities, since the treatise is not directly concerned with the rights of the individual, but rather with the rights of others which the individual must observe. Nevertheless, I think it is important to preserve the term 'rights', if only to show that in considering human rights primarily in terms of responsibilities, Islam diverges profoundly from most modern Western views, though it has deep kinships with other religious traditions of East and West.

Islam views the individual in his total context, which means that it considers first his relationship with God, then his relationship with God's creatures. What is important for the individual in his relationship with God is that he attain to salvation, or in other words, that he follow God's guidance, which is based upon mercy and directed toward his own best interest.

In short, Islam devalues the individual's perspective, since human beings on their own can see no further than their immediate interests during life. But this devaluation of individualism is not a devaluation of the individual; on the contrary, it raises him to the ultimate pinnacle of importance, since everything is directed toward his happiness in the next world.

Islam merely recognizes the ignorance of human beings and their inability to perceive their own ultimate good without divine guidance. Then it sets about to undermine and destroy individual ignorance, a process which involves deflating the ego and eliminating all self-centred desires. As a result, the human self or soul (*nafs*) has few 'rights', but many duties and responsibilities. Or rather, the soul has only one true right – the right to salvation.

The individual's right to salvation follows naturally upon God's right, which is to be worshiped without any partner (i.e., *tawhid*). The way to salvation is to obey God, and hence it is the soul's right to be employed in obedience toward Him. By His very nature since 'His mercy precedes His wrath' – God displays compassion and guidance, and through obedience the servant opens himself up to the full range of this compassion.

In other words, partaking of God's mercy and compassion depends upon following His guidance, and following His guidance means following the *Shari'a* as revealed through the Qur'an and the *sunna*. Hence the Imam speaks of 'being employed in obedience' as the self's key right, since only that can bring about its deliverance.

As soon as this wide context for attaining to the right of the self is envisaged, dozens of duties become obligatory upon the individual. The Imam makes clear that the primary duties are toward the various organs and activities of the self, since these determine man's relationship to God. The organs have 'rights' because they share in the individual's destiny; the 'resurrection of the body' is taken for granted (cf. Supplication 31.22).

Activities have rights because they shape the destiny of the soul. And other human beings have rights because they form the context within which activity occurs. Human actions can only be correct if the rights of all of God's creatures are observed. This, in short, is the theme of the 'Treatise on Rights', a

theme which is reinforced by many of the supplications of the *Sahifa*, number 24 being a prime example.

The treatise has been transmitted in two versions, one in *Al-Khisal* and *Al-Amali*, both by Shaykh al-Saduq (d. 581/991), and the other in *Tuhaf al-'uqul*, by his contemporary Ibn Shu'ba. Perhaps one half of the text of the two versions is identical, but Ibn Shu'ba's version adds a good deal of material that shows it to be a later recension, perhaps by the Imam himself, or more likely by a later author trying to clarify the meaning. The translation follows the earlier version, with a minor addition from the second version which seems to be demanded by the context.⁴

¹. Bukhari, Sawm 51. Cf. Wensinck, Concordance, I, 487, under inna 'alayka haqqan.

². Abu Dawud, Wasaya 6, Buyu' 88; Tirmidhi, Wasaya 5; Ibn Maja, Wasaya 6, etc.

³. Shaykh Saduq, *Al-Khisal*, II, 6; and *Al-Amali*, p.20 (quoted in *Bihar*, LXXI, 222). For other relevant hadith, see *Bihar*, LXXI.

⁴. Both versions are provided in *Bihar*, LXXI, 2–21 (where they have been collated against the printed versions in *Al-Khisal* and *Tuhaf al-'uqul*). A far less satisfactory edition, with a number of errors and with a mixing of the two texts so that neither is complete nor clearly separated from the other, is given by al-Amin in *A'yan al-Shi'a*, V, 215–30.

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