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Warnings Of Corporate Moral Failure In Islam

Introduction: Red Lights

Red lights serve a variety of functions, but here we shall be concerned with their use as warning devices. The image of the red light flashing on to indicate some danger will be used to draw pertinent analogies with respect to issues in the ethics of individual responsibilities toward corporate entities and social institutions such as governments, businesses, families, and social organizations.

The issuance of warnings is also one of the primary prophetic functions, and if we look, we find that Islam has its own red lights.

Corporations have powers and liabilities beyond those of their members. In certain respects, a corporation is like a complex piece of machinery that requires many operators. When it is in operation, it is as if the machine has a life of its own.

Such a piece of machinery would have a number of red lights that would indicate to the operators when various problems arose. Some red lights would signal to an individual operator that something over which he had direct control was awry.

It could indicate, for example, that the operator should replace a part. Other red lights would have a more global significance. They would indicate to a number of operators that appropriate action should be taken to avoid some danger. Such danger might arise as the unintended consequence of acts by the operators that, though innocuous in them, combine together in a way which may have disastrous effects. This kind of phenomenon is sometimes likened to the effects of an invisible hand. Financial institutions utilize a number of indicators to guard against such invisible hand effects.

Just as there are warning lights to indicate local and global mechanical problems, responsible members of corporate entities should utilize ethical indicators when decisions are made about involvement in corporate activities.

However, while red lights are commonly found to warn the operators of complex pieces of machinery, ethical indicators with respect to individual and corporate moral responsibilities are rare. Most institutions make some provisions for censure in cases of gross misconduct, but these are limited. In no way are they adequate to guide the complex moral decision making necessary in the corporate environment.

Consider, for example, the health care system in the United States. This system involves doctors, patients, lawyers, administrators, insurance companies, hospital workers, and many others. Doctors are subject to peer scrutiny and possible censure for wrongdoing by the American Medical Association.

But this association is also an advocacy group on the behalf of doctors, and as such appears reluctant to accuse its members of wrongdoing in all but the most extreme cases. Thus, the task of moral censure falls to the judicial system.

This has resulted in widespread public debate over the reluctance doctors to perform procedures which have resulted in frequent litigation, and over the prohibitively high insurance rates in areas of specialization where litigation is common, most notably in pediatrics.

The institutional system of red lights, the A.M.A. and the courts, are not providing the kind of moral warnings needed in the health care industry. A similar lack of moral guidance could be cited in other professions, social institutions and corporations.

The most important red lights to indicate the moral peril of association with various corporations must be self-installed. Instructions for the self-installation of red lights are provided in the teachings of the prophets and Imams, peace be with them.

It may be argued that the kinds of moral safeguards that are needed with regard to corporate entities are not institutional procedures, but values and commitments on the part of the individual members of such entities. According to this way of thinking, we do not really need red lights in the corporate machine; we just need honest operators.

There are no special criteria needed to govern behavior in the corporate setting other than general ethical duties and principles. There are several problems with this point of view. First, there is the invisible hand effect mentioned earlier, that is, even when individuals observe their duties and act morally, the institution as a whole may have moral failings.

Second, if one benefits from the profits of a corporation, then without red lights, there will be a tendency to ignore corporate faults. Third, the moral principles that govern action in personal life do not always coincide with the principles by which public action is or should be governed. [1](#)

Furthermore, there are a number of moral questions that arise regarding involvement in corporate activities that tend to be slighted in most standard approaches to ethics. Suppose I know that there is corruption in the corporation, but I do not know which members of the corporation are corrupt. Should I

disassociate myself from such a corporation? What if the corporation provides vital services that will be diminished by my resignation? What if I have reason to believe that by staying, I may be able to limit the corruption?

These are just a few of the questions about individual involvement in corporate activities which reveal the need for red lights, that is, for special moral criteria and institutional apparatus to warn of moral peril due to involvement in corporate activity.

In short, moral criteria are needed to evaluate corporate behavior per se, the global behavior of the corporation itself, as well as the behavior of individuals or groups of individuals within the corporation. Such criteria are needed because of the present lack of corporate moral reflection and because individual ethics tends to emphasize autonomous individual acts rather than corporate behavior or the interactions among individuals and corporate entities.

Once we recognize that some system of red lights is needed, we can turn to design problems. Safety features must be designed in such a way that operation of the machinery is not unduly hindered. It is not practical to check every possible flaw prior to each operation of the machine.

So too, we cannot expect to put into practice a system of moral checks that would require so much attention that the effective operation of the corporation would be thwarted. Charles E. Larmore has recently defended the claim that some moral shortcomings are to be tolerated as the cost of bureaucratic efficiency:

The political value of predictability is considerable enough that to a certain degree we are willing to forego having the decisions of government display all the subtlety that we expect of the truly virtuous and morally wise.²

The thorny problem of how to weigh safety risks with losses in production finds its analogue in the problem of how to weigh the seriousness of possible moral failings against the threats moral challenges pose to the unimpeded functioning of the corporate entity. How do we measure evil against efficiency? There are many other difficult questions, as well.

The system of warning indicators should be reliable. Not every rumor of corruption is to be answered by an investigation, but the persistence of rumors from various sources is cause for alarm.

Red lights should be placed where they will be visible to operators who can respond to them. This suggests two important desiderata of a system of moral warnings for corporate entities. First, analogous to the visibility of the red lights is the effectiveness of the moral warning system. The National News Council in the U.S. provides an example of a warning system that failed largely because of its invisibility.

The NNC was designed to investigate charges brought against the media of malicious misreporting and other unethical practices. The leaders of the industry, however, tended to simply ignore the criticisms

made by the NNC.

The NNC was unable to gain the attention of the industry, and eventually went out of business. Second, just as a red light can only be useful if it is able to elicit a response which decreases the danger of which it warns so too, a system of moral warnings must be designed with some idea of the appropriate responses they are to command.

The red light on the dashboard may indicate that the oil level is low. The appropriate response would be to add oil. But other considerations may need to be taken into account. If we recently added oil, we might decide to check for a leak.

If it is an emergency and no oil is available, we might decide it is necessary to continue to drive, even with the prospect of burning out the engine. Likewise moral criteria for corporate behavior and for individual involvement in corporate entities need not be absolute.

Moral guidelines may even fail to prescribe a specific response to a moral failing; yet they may provide guidance by indicating the kinds of factors that need to be considered when making a moral decision.

Both theoretical problems and problems of design for a system of moral warnings with respect to association with corporations are so complicated that one may be tempted to conclude that the project is hopeless. Consider the disanalogies between mechanical alarm systems and the proposed system of moral warnings. Precise criteria may be specified to trigger mechanical alarms.

Stress levels, fluid pressures, and circuit checks are readily quantifiable. Dishonesty, cruelty and corruption are much more difficult to estimate. Situations that call for the overriding of mechanical warning systems are limited. Extenuating circumstances relevant to moral judgments are more the rule than the exception.

The responses to be elicited by mechanical warning devices are predictable. Ethical warnings typically require responses which involve a certain moral creativity, an ability to discover a course of action which draws on insights with respect to the characters of the implicated persons while balancing considerations of means and ends. There is no formula for practical wisdom.

The recognition of such enormous difficulties does not excuse the failure to attempt to make some limited progress toward systematic moral warning with regard to involvement in corporate activities. The fact that preparations cannot be made for the occasion of all possible moral dangers does not justify failure to prepare for any.

The latitude that must be allowed for responses to a moral danger does not obviate the need for a warning when such danger arises. The obtrusiveness of extenuating circumstances does not diminish the need to consider the general features of the circumstances in which problems of individual responsibilities toward corporate entities arise.

Corporate Moral Failure

The evils that are to trigger our moral red lights are all too common: dishonesty, corruption, injustice. In some circumstances, to perpetrate such evils is to violate the law. The justice system may therefore be considered a system of moral red lights.

However, there are many forms of corporate moral failure that escape the justice system. Institutions of international justice are extremely limited, weak, and not without biases of their own. An international judiciary never addresses most injustices committed by nations.

So, even evils that would be confronted by a justice system in some contexts will be ignored in others. Often the context in which violations of the law go unreported is one of corporate conspiracy.

One of the few topics in the ethics of corporate activities that has received attention in philosophical literature is that of corporate whistle-blowing. Some forms of corporate evil escape judicial scrutiny because they involve abstruse financial and legal dealings.

Nevertheless, all these cases are ones in which the evil is either criminal, or is of the same sort as criminal activity, or would be criminal, were it not for the absence of an appropriate mechanism for prosecution. Let us refer to all such evils as criminal, whether or not there is a legal system within whose jurisdiction the commission of such evils falls.

In addition to criminal evils there are many other kinds of corporate evil or moral failure. A corporation, for example, may pollute the atmosphere while keeping within the standards set by the appropriate regulatory commission.

Corporations, like people, may do a great number of bad things without breaking the law. In some cases legal evils skirt the limits of the law, as in the pollution case. Some evils are legal because legislation against them would be unenforceable. The law permits some evils because legislation against them is seen as worse than the legal perpetration of the evil.

Some corporate evils are prosecuted. Local, national and international courts thus provide a system of red lights; they warn the public of corporate wrongdoing. There are two types of problems with using legal systems as moral warnings. First, there are flaws in the legal systems. Jurisdiction is limited in scope, and in areas to which it extends, it is misapplied. Second, there are non-criminal corporate evils.

The judiciary is not the only social institution whose actions may be seen as indicators of the moral danger of corporate activity, various industries are monitored by associations which publish ethical guidelines and which censor violators. In the context of international relations, there are international organizations that attempt to monitor human rights violations.

Most of what has been mentioned here with regard to the judicial system could be repeated with regard to industrial associations and international organizations. They may serve to warn of corporate evil, but

their effectiveness is circumscribed by the unreliability of their findings, by their limitations of scope, and by their relative invisibility.

Most of what has been said in this section so far is true of both individual evils and corporate evils. What gives corporate evil its distinctive flavor is the fact that often times no individual appears to be blameworthy for the corporate evil.

Suppose that because of a flaw in the management structure of a corporation, incompetent people rise to leadership positions. Through their ineptitude harm is done. The unfit officers might be blameless in themselves, while evil is done at the fault of the system. All parties involved can justify their actions on the grounds that they are just doing their jobs, and doing them as best they can.

Another typical sort of case is one in which a large corporation forces many small business people to go bankrupt. The members of the board of directors of the corporation are only fulfilling their duties to the stockholders. The stockholders have no direct influence on corporate policy.

As a result, there appears to be no one to blame, yet, justifiably or not, evil is done. Judgments on an action being criminal, or not, will depend on one's political view. Some will justify the evil in the name of economic progress, and claim that the evil is not criminal.

Others will argue that legislation should have been enacted and enforced to prevent the evil, which would thus be criminal in the sense defined above. Similar controversies arise over industrial and international guidelines.

An important element in a system of moral warnings about institutional behavior is the press. Corporate evils that are neither punishable by law nor proscribed by any commission or recognized set of guidelines may be exposed and debated in the press.

The press can warn when the judicial system breaks down and guidelines are ignored. Reliable investigative journalism coupled with responsible editorial policies can serve as an important means to alert communities to political corruption, corporate exploitation, and other social evils. Sadly, this system of red lights is short-circuited when the press is controlled by the very institutions that should come under its scrutiny.

This is most obvious when the state controls the press, but even in places where the press is supposed to be free; there are often indirect ways in which the politically and financially powerful are able to exert such pressure on the press and other public media that they are not able to play an effective role as red lights.

Very large-scale corporate evils can involve an entire society. Marx claimed that capitalism causes alienation, and although he disdained the morality of his day, his critique of nineteenth century European society was largely an appeal to the moral sentiments of his readers. Social critics, whether to the left or right on the political spectrum, are red lights.

They can warn of profound moral failings that are independent of any personal wrongdoing, but that lie at the very heart of the structure of society. Well established traditions are confronted by accusations of systematic defect. Such criticisms can even threaten the personal allegiances upon which the life of the tradition depends. The unfortunate result is that social criticism is often suppressed.

As a system of moral admonition with regard to corporate actions, social criticism has a number of serious drawbacks. It is no alternative to positive institutional frameworks for the investigation and censure of corporate wrongdoing. It is often vague.

The root ills it points out are notoriously difficult to remedy. The evaluation of social criticism is recondite. The range of institutions targeted by social critics is relatively small. Few social critics write about specific professions or industries. Where it is not suppressed, social criticism of quality is largely ignored. Despite such difficulties, social criticism provides an invaluable source of moral reflection on corporate activities.

Social criticism is not the exclusive province of the academy. At its most vulgar, it can be found in popular forms of entertainment, and in ordinary complaint. Complaints are red lights. Those who complain often tell of being wronged by institutions, caught in the bureaucracy, victimized by the state, shafted.

These complaints are warnings that something has gone afoul at a corporate level. Of course, complaints often turn out to be unjustified, or mere expressions of personal dissatisfaction with the result of a particular encounter with a corporate entity. But because of their personal quality, ordinary complaints are especially forceful catalysts for the moral reevaluation of one's relations to corporate entities.

If we want to understand the nature of corporate evil in order to make explicit the moral principles which are distinctive of corporate behavior and individual involvement with corporate entities, we can begin by examining the systems of red lights which are already in place: international declarations, laws, professional guidelines, and social criticisms.

These provide some indications of the kinds of corporate activities that generally arouse moral condemnation. Corporate entities are obliged to operate without many of the personal preferences that are expected of individuals. On the other hand, corporate entities are permitted a callousness which would be condemnable in an individual.

Moral expectations shift when we change from dealings with an individual to dealings with a committee. Here we only indicate the shift without delineating the specific differences between personal and corporate morality. At one time, perhaps, corporate entities were identified with their leaders.

There was no difference between loyalty to the kingdom and loyalty to the king. With the movement away from autocracy and toward constitutional government, the moral expectation is that governments

should adhere strictly to their constitutions, though they may display less sensitivity than an autocrat might. The potential wisdom of individual judgment is traded for the consistency of the bureaucracy.

The question of the morality of association with corporate entities can also be approached by considering the difference between the requirements of loyalty to an individual and to an institution. Individual loyalty depends on the possibility of moral dialogue, which is most often missing in relations between an individual and a corporate entity.

The impersonal magnitude of the large corporate entity and lack of moral exchange have a tendency to alienate the individual from his own moral concerns with respect to one's role in corporate activities. The Nuremberg trials make a significant statement with regard to the ethics of corporate activity precisely because they impose limits on the extent to which individual responsibility can be diluted in the corporate mechanism.

These limits block the flow of responsibility from the individual to the corporation, but this has no impact on the flow of responsibility in the other direction. In the next section, we shall return to the question of how corporate evil can taint those who participate in the corporation, even when they are not directly involved in any misdeeds.

What Is To Be Done?

Once systems of red lights are in place and are recognized, the question of how to respond to such moral warnings must be addressed. Some cases are more problematic than others. Where there are institutional apparatus to investigate and punish some corporate evils, there will be conflicts between one's duty to report violations of ethical standards and loyalty to the corporation or to colleagues who may be engaged in wrongdoing.

However, the most difficult moral cases arise in areas to which such apparatus do not extend, or where they are defeated.

If one finds a colleague engaged in some wrongful activity, one may attempt dissuasion. Failing that, one can approach one's superiors about the matter. Such efforts will be in vain when there is complicity at the highest levels of the corporation.

The next step is whistle-blowing. One can go outside the corporation to an industrial association, the courts, or to the press. However, if the corporate evil is seen to be relatively minor, and attempts made within the corporation fail, it is unlikely that one will be able to succeed outside.

We can begin to appreciate the moral problems this kind of situation poses by examining the cases of two minor officials. First, suppose someone who works at City Hall learns that one of the council members regularly has parking violations fixed for his close relatives. The mayor refuses to do anything about it because he needs the counselor's vote on the budget proposal.

The public prosecutor will not take up the case unless instructed to do so by the mayor's office. The press and the public are uninterested in such petty crime. Frustrated, the employee simply complains about the venality of public officials. Here is a small flashing red light, warning of corporate evil, yet unable to elicit an appropriate response.

Our second government employee learns of torture in the prisons. In many places throughout the world, there are such government employees. Sadly, in too many places the complaints of this employee are met with much the same reaction as faced the municipal worker.

If the torture is limited and primarily focused on an unpopular minority or on a so-called terrorist group, the press and public will often show little or no concern about allegations of mistreatment in the prisons. The red light is ignored, if not extinguished.

The prospects are even worse when the corporate evil is not the product of the misdeeds of a few individuals within the corporation, but is a result of impersonal corporate forces. Here there is little reason to expect that by climbing the corporate chain of command with one's complaints, one will find corporate officers willing to confront their superiors with a moral challenge to their policies.

Arrangements that exclude disadvantaged elements of the society from economic opportunities are often perpetuated in this way. Short of governmental intervention, there is normally little hope that such policies and arrangements will be corrected.

Whether corporate evil is found in private companies or in government, the only means of effective response to specific wrongs is often through governmental action. Regulatory agencies, oversight committees and special investigations are often needed if there is to be any alteration in an entire ecology of evil.

Of course, these treatments of moral ills often bring with them further moral afflictions, for the politicians who must be relied upon to correct institutional moral flaws are not motivated exclusively by moral interests, and even with the best intentions, corrective measures frequently have unexpected results. Nevertheless, political action constitutes an important response to corporate evil.

We can now begin to see the development of a series of responses to moral warnings of corporate immorality. The order in this series is not strict. Sometimes direct public action such as a boycott will be more effective than recourse to the law or to legislative bodies. Nonetheless, some steps can be outlined.

First, there is the attempt to persuade specific miscreants. Then, one can climb the chain of corporate command with complaints. Next, one can complain to professional organizations, union officials, or regulatory agencies. Next, one can seek judicial redress. Failing all these measures, one can undertake political activity, or seek the attention of the press.

Political activity can take a wide variety of forms; it can be violent or peaceful, it can occur within existing

political structures or outside them. But by the time we find it necessary to take political action, we are a long way off from the specific instances of corporate evil that drove us in this direction.

From this distance, the point of the initial evil is often lost. Because he allows a counselor to fix parking tickets, should we campaign against an otherwise fine mayor who faces no respectable opposition? We may even find ourselves unable to oppose the counselor, if in other respects we are satisfied and we can expect nothing better from the opposition.

We may be able to tolerate fixed tickets, you may think, but not torture. Somewhere between the two, even if we cannot say exactly where, a line must be drawn beyond which we dare not tread. This is no simple matter.

We may be able to construct a hypothetical case in which we would abide an isolated beating hidden in some dungeon if by failing to support the authorities who overlook the beating we would strengthen the hand of an even more monstrous faction in the government or opposed to it. Perhaps we would offer our support under protest.

There is palpable moral danger here, and it is not merely hypothetical. Certainly the major powers, as well as most other governments, are guilty of atrocities, either directly or by proxy. Yet many morally responsible people find themselves compelled to support these governments. Unless directly confronted with horror, moral blindness pervades; the red lights blink for naught.

To say that there is no alternative, even if it is true, is no excuse. Even in cases where support for an unjust institution is morally defensible because of the need to avoid greater injustice, there are alternatives. Where possible, one should attempt reform. Given the futility of reform, one can fight. Where struggle against the institution will just make matters worse, there is the possibility of resignation.

There is a broad spectrum of positions with relation to an institution, from total support and identification to revolutionary rejection and renunciation. Perhaps resignation from the institution is the most extreme reaction, because of the lack of hope it implies. The revolutionist at least labors under the hope that positive change can come about through his efforts.

Renunciation can take a number of forms. It might mean that one resigns from one position in the government or corporation, but accepts another. The act of resigning can be a form of protest. If one's position in the corporation is sufficiently valued, the threat of resignation can also exert pressure for reform.

Resignation can also provide a platform from which to issue criticisms that could not be delivered from within the institution. The expatriate may write a stinging expose of the moral decadence of the forsaken society, which would result in his imprisonment if he remained at home. The political exile may mount a campaign from abroad. These are political activities.

The most extreme manner of resigning is simple abandonment. It implies a violation of one's special obligations.

Special obligations ensue from propinquity. We have special obligations to our families, our countries, our societies, and even to the professions we have chosen and, to some extent, to the corporations for which we have worked.

Naturally, there can be overriding moral reasons that these obligations should be violated, but this is not to deny the violation. Sometimes the opportunity to live a good life in exile may warrant the total desertion of one's native environs, but there is a moral price to pay. The fact of that moral price stems from the reality of missed opportunity to effect moral growth in the context of one's home. Sometimes it just cannot be helped.

The hometown has nothing to offer. There isn't any opportunity. The hazard lurking here is the illusion that purity can be achieved. The exile who thinks that by keeping aloof he can regain his innocence deceives him. It does not follow from the fact that a corporate entity commits sins, that one's duties to that entity are thereby annulled.

On the other hand, benefiting through participation in a corrupt institution does taint one. Consider the case of Mr. X; he is a partner in a legitimate family business. Recently, members of the family have been using the business as a front for criminal activity. The police have been paid off, and the press is not interested in the story. Mr. X tries unsuccessfully to persuade his partners to abandon crime. He may resign from the family business.

If he resigns he can have no influence on the business, but if he remains in his current position, he will be able to prevent the family from committing murders. Mr. X is in an unhappy position. It is wrong for Mr. X to resign, because to resign is to refuse to prevent murder. It is also wrong for Mr. X not to resign, for by failing to resign, he becomes an accomplice to crime. He must distance himself from the business to the greatest extent consistent with the maintenance of his ability to prevent the murders.

Suppose that Mr. X stays with the family business, but tries to insulate himself from its criminal aspects by basing his salary on a percentage of the legitimate dealings of the business, and by refusing to become personally involved in any criminal activity, except by giving advice on how to extort payments from clients without resorting to violence.

Many clients conduct their legitimate business with X because of fear of reprisals if they go elsewhere. So, X benefits indirectly from the criminal activity of the family business. Clearly, Mr. X shares to some extent in the guilt of his family. One may even be tempted to argue that he shares equally with the other partners in responsibility for the crime, except that Mr. X's indirection makes possible a hypocrisy of which the other partners are free.

This view is mistaken for two reasons. First, Mr. X's voiced opposition to the criminal activity of the

business reduces, though it does not eliminate, his responsibility for this activity. Second, Mr. X is not directly engaged in extortion. The moral preferability of indirect over direct involvement in wrongdoing can be argued on rule-utilitarian grounds, as well as from deontological and Aristotelian perspectives.

Direct violation of moral obligations does more to weaken general determination to comply with the obligation, and thus threatens the character of the subject of such violation to a greater extent than doe's indirect violation.

Whether through renunciation, protest, expatriation, or even mental reservation, it is morally essential that some distance be placed between oneself and corporate evil. The ways in which we see ourselves, our ideas of who we are, of what we are prepared to tolerate and what we will not countenance, all of this is in part determined by the positions we take with respect to nations, governments, families, traditions, civilizations, religions, institutions and corporations.

To a large extent one's moral character is defined in terms of allegiance and opposition to traditions and institutions, to subcultures and social movements. Our moral activities take place on a field whose dimensions are partially determined by the positions one occupies through such support and antagonism. We are responsible for the manner in which we participate in corporate entities. The point is well put by *Jurgen Habermas*:

Every carrying on of a tradition is selective, and it is just this selectivity that must be drawn through the filter of critique, of a deliberate appropriation of history—if you will, or a consciousness of sins.[3](#)

We have a responsibility to choose from among the best of the alternatives open to us, even when all the alternatives are bad. There are moral dilemmas that have no solutions. There are circumstances in which the question, "What is to be done?" has no answer.

This should not be cause for despair. It does not mean that there is nothing to be done in situations of moral dilemma, but that the best courses cannot be discerned by means of any formula or decision procedure. It requires wisdom to see what is best in such cases, and even the best alternatives available will remain problematic.

The Red Light Of Islam

The issues of individual responsibility with respect to corporate entities, involvement in corporate evil, politico-religious exile, mental reservation, open revolt against tyranny, limited cooperation with unjust governments, these and related topics are treated extensively in the Islamic tradition.

Allusion to such topics can be found in the Qur'an, in *ahadith*, religious biographies, and in jurisprudence. Perhaps more than the members of any of the other great religions of the world, Muslims have defined themselves in terms of moral positions taken with respect to the formation of communities in various social, political, and religious historical settings.

The major religious division in the Islamic world, between Sunni and Shi'i Islam, is based upon conflicting interpretations and evaluations of history in which the moral dimensions of social and political conditions are paramount.

Since this writer lacks the competence to provide a detailed review of the vast Islamic literature on this subject, a few citations will be given which provide some indication of the moral reflection about associations with corporate entities which abounds in the context of Islamic history and jurisprudence.

Particularly relevant to the question of associations with corporate entities are the following ayat from the Qur'an:

“And guard yourselves against an affliction which may not smite those of you exclusively who are unjust; and know that Allah is severe in requital.” (8:25)

“And do not incline towards those who are unjust, lest the fire touch you, and you have no guardians besides Allah, then you shall not be helped.” (11:113)

“Let not the believers take the disbelievers for friends rather than believers. And whoever does this has no connection with Allah—except that you guard yourselves against them, guarding carefully. And Allah cautions you against His retribution. And to Allah is the eventual coming.” (3:27)

The first two ayat warn against association with an unjust group, even when one does not participate in the injustice. The third ayah makes allowances for dissimulation. Association with an unjust group is permitted as a means of protection from greater evil.

With regard to dissimulation, it is reported in Shaykh al Saduq's *I'tiqadatu al-Imamiyyah*:

And Imam Ja'far [as] said: "Verily, I hear a man abusing me in the mosque; and I hide behind a pillar so that he may not see me." And he (Imam Ja'far) said: "Mix with the people (enemies) outwardly, but oppose them inwardly, so long as the Amirate (imratun) is a matter of opinion."[4](#)

Another ayah that can be interpreted as demanding that one disassociate oneself from corporate evil when one is powerless to fight it is the following:

“Surely (as for) those whom the angels cause to die while they are unjust to their souls, they shall say: In what state were you? They shall say: We were weak in the earth. They shall say: Was not Allah's earth spacious, so that you should have migrated therein? So these it is whose abode is Hell, and it is an evil resort.”(4:97)

God's earth is still wide enough for those who believe to quit injustice; the question of how and in what circumstances what sort of response is appropriate remains one which calls for wisdom, not a rule. In his

Risalah, Imam Khomeini wrote about association with the leaders of unjust governments:

If the association and frequentation of the prominent religious authorities with the oppressors and the kings of tyranny result in amelioration of their cruelty they must consider whether the breakage of association is preferable to the abatement of cruelty, since it is possible that such associations will cause weakening of the peoples' beliefs and will result in dishonoring Islam and Islamic authorities. Thus, they must choose whatever is most important and act accordingly.[5](#)

This edict is interesting because it does not prescribe a specific course of action, but rather draws attention to some moral considerations that are left to be weighed by the individuals concerned. A similar ambiguity can be found in Shaykh Muzaffar's earlier treatment of the same issue, in which non-cooperation with oppressive governments is demanded, while exceptions are allowed where this may result in sufficiently commendable consequences.

However, while Imam Khomeini stresses the importance of cutting off relations with oppressors, Shaykh Muzaffar places more emphasis on cooperation with the unjust in order to ameliorate their wickedness.

He explains the armed struggle of Imam Husayn as required to keep Islam from being destroyed, but emphasizes that such action should be taken with great reluctance, and that the Imams who succeeded Husayn, since they realized that there was no hope to establish a truly Islamic government, occupied themselves with education rather than insurrection.[6](#)

Shaykh al-Mufid's *Kitab al-Irshad* is replete with discussions of how the Imams behaved with respect to usurped or unjust authority exercised in the name of Islam. For example, a number of instances are described in which legal advice is given by Imam 'Ali to the caliphs. After introducing the Imamate of Husayn, Shaykh al-Mufid writes:

According to what we have (just) mentioned the Imamate of al-Husayn, peace be on him, was confirmed after the death of his brother al-Hasan, peace be on him, and the obedience of all creatures to him was binding, although he did not summon them to (follow) him because of precautionary dissimulation (taqiyya) which he was following and because of the truce which existed between him and Mu'awiya b. Abu Sufyan and the need to fulfill it. In that he followed the same course as his father, the Commander of the faithful, peace be on him, in terms of the establishment of his Imamate after the Prophet, may God bless him and his family, despite (his own) silence (about it), and also of the Imamate of his brother after the truce despite (his) abstention (from politics) and (his) silence. In that they were acting according to the practices (sunan) of the Prophet of God, may God bless him and his family, when he was blockaded in al-Shi'b and when he escaped Mecca as an emigrant by hiding in a cave and he was hidden from his enemies.[7](#)

The life of Imam Husayn exemplifies both accommodation with and revolt against an unjust institution. The literature on Imam Husayn's campaign against the army of Yazid and his subsequent martyrdom abounds with discussions of the responsibilities of an individual toward family, religion, government, and

supporters.[8](#)

The general context of the discussion of how to affect reform is the duty to enjoin the good and forbid evil, *amr bil ma'ruf wa nahl 'an al-munkar*. This duty is considered fundamental in Shi'i Islam, and its practice is discussed in the basic works of Islamic law. We are commanded to seek to reform the evils we encounter.

These attempts are to precede by stages so that the use of force may be kept to a minimum, and the attempts are not to be undertaken at all unless one has hope that one will finally be successful. First, one is to speak privately with the miscreant. Indirection is recommended.

An attempt is to be made to save the wrongdoer from any embarrassment. Then public protest becomes appropriate. Only after other means have proven unsuccessful to stop the commission of evil, may force be employed.

Here we find a basis for the institutionalization of corporate checks and balances: such measures can prevent the need for violent resistance to evil. One who can be removed from office by election will not have to be violently expelled from office if he acts wrongly. Those who operate under the scrutiny of a free press will be less likely to do what is forbidden than those whose acts remain hidden.

The media also serve as the fora for the sort of protest that is one of the stages of enjoining the good. Public accountability is not merely an artifact of modern liberal political thought; it can serve to promote accord with divine commands, and it may be seen as essential for the fulfillment of the duty to enjoin the good and forbid evil in modern societies.

Only when non-violent means are not available, or are unsuccessful, is the final resort of combat to be employed. Sometimes the topic of jihad is discussed as a form of enjoining the good and forbidding evil. Even when jihad is apparently unsuccessful, the struggle itself may be sufficient to alter the circumstances to the extent that evil may be seen for what it is.

During the caliphate of Yazid, the evil done in the name of Islam had reached such a level that the integrity of Islam as a religious institution was threatened. Unless Islam itself could furnish a red light bright enough to annul the religious credentials of the caliphate, the moral claim of the Islamic call would be eclipsed.[9](#)

As for the red light, Allah sends the prophets (s) as warners. The prophets themselves are red lights. The ayat of the Qur'an describing the prophets as warner's, are too numerous to mention. Something is wrong with the human condition.

People are negligent of their interwoven moral and religious duties. They have become distracted by the glitter of worldly luxuries and power. The lower self dominates until the spirituality of the prophets dawns on the minds of men, reminding them of the need to restore the covenant with Allah.

“And We send not messengers but as announcers of good news and givers of warning; then whoever believes and acts aright, they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve.”(6:47)

When the warning of the prophets takes hold of the mind, and the spirit gains ascendancy over the self, red lights are seen illuminating the darkness of the sinful soul, warning of the dangers of preoccupations with the consumption of the things of this world, of envy, lust and greed and baseless pride.

This red light is seen by those who tread the spiritual path,^{[10](#)} but its significance is not limited to any specific group. In its most extreme form the red light is plain. It is the blood of the martyrs.

The mystics explain redness as the result of the mixing of the whiteness of the spirit or intellect with the darkness of the soul, as the harvest moon appears red through the darkness of the earth's atmosphere although its light is white.^{[11](#)}

So too, the red lights of warning that have been the topic of our discussion represent the intrusion of the enlightened intellect into the darkness of social evil and political corruption. The spirit revolts against the darkness of depravity by enjoining the good and forbidding evil. The intellect issues red warnings of admonition and protest. It rises up over the night of oppression like a huge red harvest moon.

Martyrdom is a red light. It warns of corporate evil as it calls by example for the ultimate renunciation of all wickedness. The blood of Imam Husayn is a crimson beacon that shines through history to warn that even in the name of the highest ideals, the worst atrocities may be committed.

At the same time, it calls for the greatest sacrifice in the struggle for justice. This is what is demanded by the red intellect of Imam Husayn, not a decision procedure according to some legal formula, but an invitation to reflect upon the wise choices made in exceedingly complex circumstances by the prophets and Imams, peace be with them all, in their struggle against evil, so that we, too, may gain insight into the moral dilemmas which face us in the radiance of their red lights.

^{1.} This point is argued by Thomas Nagel in "Ruthlessness in Public Life" in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 75–90.

^{2.} Charles E. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 42.

^{3.} Jurgen Habermas makes this point in an interview which appeared in *Die Neue Gesellschaft: Frankfurter Heft* 4, April 1989, translated by Stephen K. White in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 4/14:3, p. 439

^{4.} Shaykh al-Saduq, *A Shi'ite Creed*, tr. Asaf A. A. Fyzee, (Tehran: WOFIS, 1982), p. 97–98.

^{5.} Ayatollah Sayyed Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini, *A Clarification of Questions*, tr. J. Borujerdi (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), question #2809, p. 377.

^{6.} Muhammad Rifa al-Muzaffar, *The Faith of Shi'a Islam* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pps. 67–71.

^{7.} Shaykh al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*. tr. I. K. A. Howard (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 1981). p. 298

^{8.} See Ayatullah Mahmid Taleqani, et al., *Jihdd and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam* (Houston: Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986).

^{9.} For the relation between enjoining the good and the martyrdom of Imam Husayn see Shahid Mutahhari's *Ta'thir-e 'Unsur-e Amr bima'ruf dar Nehdat Imam Husayn* (The Influence of the Element of Enjoining the Good in the Movement of Imam Husayn) (1360/1981).

^{10.} See Najm al-Din Razi, *The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return*, tr. Hamid Algar (Delmar: Caravan Books,

1982), p. 300–301.

¹¹. See Suhrawardi's "Aql-e Surkh" in vol. 3 of his collected works, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Tehran: Anjuman-e Shahanshahi Falsafah-ye Iran, 1977), p. 228.

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