

## **Understanding Islam** **Series Three: Building a Just Society**

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### **Part Five: Relieving the sufferings of others**

Every human being has the high dignity of being the *khalifa* and the *abd* of God: the regent and the loving servant. To be the regent means to be the steward of the good things of God. To be the servant means to obey the commands of God. All that we possess is to be used according to God's guidance for the benefit of humankind and in the service of God. Just as God has no favourites, all are sustained and guided, so the regent of God must practise *sadaqa*, which we can translate as "bearing one another's burdens."

*Sadaqa* emphasises human beings in need; not members of our families, peoples, nations or religions. Muslims have duties to all these but concern for human beings must not stop there. Islam is not a mutual welfare society that only takes care of its members. Prophet Muhammad tells us that someone who goes to bed with a full stomach knowing that his neighbour goes to bed hungry should no longer be called a Muslim. Similarly, it is reported that he always went to bed at night with empty pockets, having given away to those in need anything that he had been given during the day. He was noted for his visits to the sick and those in any kind of distress.

### **Working for the good of society**

How is this principle of caring for other people to be put into a structure in Muslim society? Like in other societies, the welfare of people is cared for by a charitable trust, or in Arabic, a *waqf*. In Muslim societies, a *waqf* would be created to support an orphanage, library, hospital or place of learning. Often a particular family would establish a *waqf* and think of it as part of their family responsibility to keep that welfare organisation in funds and able to do its work.

Every human being has two angels assigned to them to record their good and bad deeds throughout their lives [Q. 82:10-12]. These records will be brought out on the Day of Judgement. When we are dead, there is nothing more that we can do to affect our records of good or bad deeds – except for three things. Upright children full of *taqwa* can be an on-going credit to us after we die. If we do something for education, as a teacher or through writing a book, the knowledge goes on working after we die. Finally, we can establish a charitable trust to go on doing good for later generations. Imagine creating a water supply for a village or building some houses for elderly people; those who use them in future generations will bless the name of the person who established the *waqf*.

The principle of *sadaqa* also applies to job and career selection; human beings should work in areas that take care of other people and not exploit them. This applies to

business, in which those involved in food production, building, trading or service industries should seek the ethical dimension in what they do. Muslims also are called to what would today be known as the caring professions: the various branches of medicine, caring for the young and elderly, and in social provision for those in need of support. There has always been an Islamic emphasis on education, whether in teaching, research, publication or the mass media.

### **Caring for one's neighbours**

Muslim living requires that one is concerned about those who share the same location. Some scholars have spoken of the duty to neighbours encompassing those who live within forty houses on either side of one's own. To smile at someone in the street is an act of *sadaqa* and a Muslim is required to greet those that one meets; indeed, the Qur'an counsels that when someone pronounces a greeting, the recipient should reply with one even better [Q. 4:86] and Islamic etiquette places the responsibility on the younger to be the first to greet the elder when they meet. Following the example of Abraham, who entertained the angels of God who came to his dwelling [Q. 51:24-27]; hospitality has always been a hallmark of Muslim society. Travellers are counselled to make for the mosque when they enter a new settlement, where they will be found and entertained when the community comes to pray and in which they have a right to sleep if no other place can be found. Food is taken to neighbours who are sick or bereaved and every family celebration entails sharing food with neighbours, such as when a child is named or a boy is circumcised.

Following the principle that all things come from God and are to be shared with God's people, Muslims are forbidden to hoard food in times of shortage. It is reported that a man came to the Prophet with his neighbour to request him to punish the man for stealing food from his store. Muhammad investigated the matter and it transpired that there was hunger in the area where they lived. The neighbour had come to the man to ask him to share some of his stored surplus food with him as he had nothing to give his children. The request was turned down and the man returned repeatedly to renew the request, always meeting with the same reply. Eventually, the desperate neighbour broke into the man's storeroom and took food to feed his family. Upon hearing the circumstances, Muhammad punished the man who hoarded and refused to share his stores. Such extreme circumstances meant that the punishment for theft was lifted for as long as they endured; the responsibility was on the people with food to share with those who were in need.

### **Festival time**

The festival at the end of Ramadan, 'Id al-Fitr, is marked with a celebratory feast at which festive food is shared and presents are exchanged. Before Muslim householders can celebrate this feast, they are required to make a gift to their neighbours to ensure that they have sufficient funds to buy presents for their children and join in the festive spirit. This *Zakat al-Fitr* is calculated at the cost of a meal for each person in the household, which should be passed to neighbours in need whilst

respecting their dignity. How could a Muslim celebrate a feast whilst neighbours have not enough to eat and treat their children?

At the Festival of Sacrifice, 'Id al-Adha, Muslims sacrifice an animal and share the food with family, neighbours and the poor. In the modern world, where many live with an abundance of food and others go hungry, many Muslims in such circumstances will send money to a place where there is not enough to eat to pay for an animal to be purchased and sacrificed with all the food going to those in need in that place; this is often called *qurbani*, which is derived from the Arabic for sacrifice. Indeed, in a time of migration, when some members of a family have left their traditional homes and gone in search of work and a better life in a more industrialised country or city, it is only the money that they send back to their families on a regular basis that enables them to survive.

### **A duty to all humankind**

Just as with the often misquoted Jewish principle, “Charity begins at home but must not end there,” so Muslim responsibilities to suffering humanity know no boundaries. The recently formed Islamically-inspired British charity, Al-Mizan, dispenses most of its funds to non-Muslims who are facing hardship. Similarly, when there were devastating floods in the extreme south-west of England, an area in which few Muslims live, thus depriving the local people of clean drinking water, the charity Islamic Relief took the initiative immediately to load lorries with bottled water and drive down there from their base in the Midlands so that the recipients might have their needs met and experience the Islamic principle of *sadaqa*. Many Shi'a centres have interpreted the willingness that they feel to shed their blood after the spirit of Imam Husayn at Karbala by setting up blood donation clinics during the month of Muharram. The blood goes into the common blood banks destined for all patients in need of a transfusion.

### **International relief**

The principle of *sadaqa* can be seen in the work of Islamically-inspired relief agencies, who work for the relief of suffering people worldwide. They are not mutual welfare organisations, going to the help of suffering Muslims, but Islamic bodies, working to relieve the sufferings of all human beings. When the Tsunami struck on the coast of Indonesia in December 2004, Islamic Relief went immediately to the help of the inhabitants of this, the largest Muslim population in the world but they went on precisely the same day to Sri Lanka, an overwhelmingly Buddhist and Hindu population who had been devastated by the other side of the Tsunami, to make clear that it is an Islamic humanitarian organisation and not one that serves Muslims alone. Similarly, during the civil war in the Sudan before the south became a separate country, they went to both sides and not to the predominantly Muslim north alone.

Just as Christian Aid would not be Christian if it went to the help of Christians alone, so also with Islamic relief agencies. It is not sufficiently well known that religiously-

inspired organisations work together on training and field projects and, where one is better equipped to deliver aid on the ground, the other will enter into cross-funding agreements to assist in the most effective way.