

Spiritual Poverty and Spirituality of the Poor from an Islamic Perspective

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Introduction

Among the many problems of today's world, the problem of poverty in its different forms is specifically appalling. Insufficiency and lack of food, shelter, sanitation, jobs, and education are everyday issues facing a great number of people. According to Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in 2010, a child died every six seconds because of undernourishment and its related problems and about 925 million people worldwide suffered from hunger.¹⁸ This problem is especially acute in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa which have the highest levels of hunger in the world. But the situation in Sub-Saharan Africa is the worst, with an “extremely alarming” level of hunger in parts of that region.¹⁹

The shocking extents of world poverty require worldwide attention. It needs the engagement of all people of the world and not the spotty involvement of humanitarian organizations and charitable institutions. Religious people, however, should be more active in this regard, because

¹⁸ “925 million in chronic hunger worldwide,” visited 1/12/2011, <<http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/45210/icode/>>

¹⁹ Ania Lichtarowicz, “Hunger index shows one billion without enough food,” visited 1/12/2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-11503845>

they are inspired by their respective faiths, all of which institute the obligation to help the poor. Yet the ways in which religious people can engage in eradicating poverty may be various. One way in which religious people can play a role is through compiling and expounding the rich teachings of their respective faith traditions regarding poverty that can help the poor cope with their problems, and urge others to help and care about them as much as they can.

This paper, deals with Shiite Islamic approach to this issue, with a focus on two themes: spiritual poverty and spirituality of the poor. By “spiritual poverty,” I mean the spiritual state in which one is devoid of selfishness and finds oneself totally dependent on God. This is a state close to what Matthew calls “poor in spirit.” This discussion starts with an explanation of the essential Islamic belief, in which everybody and everything in the world is totally poor and dependent in their entire existence on God. Then I will explore the impact of this reality on one's spiritual and moral life, as well as on the relations between the rich and the poor.

Then, there follows a brief analysis of the problem of suffering. Islam views suffering as one of the ways in which God tests people. Those who pass this test will receive great rewards and mercy from God. Islamic tradition specifically addresses the poor and the great rewards that God has prepared for them. It also speaks about what the poor need to do in order to retain their special place in the eyes of God. These points are covered in the third section of my paper.

Spiritual Poverty

Before discussing spiritual poverty from an Islamic viewpoint, it is necessary to take a look at the theological foundations upon which it is based—most importantly, the belief that God is the absolute owner of everything. This belief is a key Islamic doctrine, one the Quran repeatedly stresses to its readers. The formula, “Unto Allah belonged whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth,” or, “[U]nto

Him belonged whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth,”²⁰ is stated twenty-eight times in the Quran.

Everything belongs to God; thus, there is nothing left for anyone else to own. Consequently, everything and everybody is fundamentally poor: “O mankind! Ye are the poor in your relation to Allah. And Allah, He is the Absolute, the Owner of Praise” (35:15). Although this poverty is an “existential poverty,” paying attention to it leads to a “spiritual poverty,” which impacts on our moral and ethical lives. First, it creates a strong relation between us and God. We realize that we are God’s “guests” in this world: Although we “possess” what we have, He is the real owner who has bestowed on us all this. We need Him for everything and can see His love and mercy in everything. This increases our thankfulness and love for Him as well. Moreover, this attitude plays a great role in eradicating moral vices like arrogance and pride: we cannot take credit for anything we have. Those who truly believe that their possessions belong to God know that they do not own anything to be arrogant about; they will always be humble.

This understanding of poverty, moreover, has a particular effect on the relations between the rich and the poor: The rich have to see themselves not as the ones who *own* more than the poor, but as the ones who are more *indebted* to God, and, by extension, have more responsibilities than the poor. Second, helping the poor no longer can be seen as giving away one’s belongings. What we “own” belongs to God, and we are obliged, morally, to spend it according to His will. He has given us great freedom of will to spend what we have the way we want; but, at the same time, He also has imposed restrictions and regulations on that freedom. Among these regulations is the assignment of a portion of what the wealthy have—which in reality belongs to God—to be given to the poor. By this assignment, that portion no longer is considered as the wealthy person’s possession. Helping the poor, thus, is not doing them a favor; it is giving them what they are entitled to; it is giving them their right: “Save

²⁰ See for instance, 2:84, 3:109, 2:255, and 16:52. All Qur’anic quotations in this paper are from Pictal’s translation.

worshippers, who are constant at their worship and in whose wealth there is a right acknowledged for the beggar and the destitute.” (Quran 70:22-25)

Spirituality of the Poor

In this section, we treat the spirituality of the poor. However, because poverty is a form of suffering, we first address the “spirituality of suffering” from an Islamic viewpoint. The Quran presents, at least, three explanations for why people suffer in this world. First, it affirms that human beings, having free will and misusing it, can cause suffering for other people.²¹ Second, it emphasizes that the sins that people commit can bring about suffering and evil.²² Finally, it introduces suffering as a way through which God tests people, which in turn provides a great opportunity for spiritual growth. Tests are so important that, according to the Quran, it was in fact God’s purpose of creation: God is the one “[w]ho hath created life and death that He may try you which of you is best in conduct; and He is the Mighty, the Forgiving.” (Qur’an 67:2)²³

²¹ All the verses that affirm free will and the ones that speak of oppression in human history, can be cited here. See for instance, Qur’an 6:148; 76:2-3; 2:49; 85:4-8.

²² See, for instance, Qur’an 6:6; 30:41.

²³ The issue of the purpose of creation from the Islamic viewpoint is an interesting topic. In brief, the Qur’an speaks of three reasons why God created us. According to surah 11, God has created us in order to have mercy on us: “And if thy Lord had willed, He verily would have made mankind one nation, yet they cease not differing, save him on whom thy Lord hath mercy; *and for that He did create them*” (11: 118-19). In surah 51, worshipping God has been introduced as the purpose of our creation: “I created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me” (51:56). And according to surah 67, as mentioned above, He has created death and life to test us. Perhaps, we can understand these three explanations in this way: God has created us so that He tests us. In the tests that we face, we are supposed to have the best conduct and follow the way of worshipping Him. Those who pass this test will receive God’s

One of the ways in which God tests people is through sufferings. We read in the Quran, “And surely We shall try you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth and lives and crops.” (2:155) Sufferings provides special opportunities for reaching higher levels of spirituality and greater rewards. Those who pass this test will receive “blessings from their Lord, and mercy” (2:157). That is why, according to Islamic tradition, “when God, the Blessed and Most High, loves a servant, He will immerse him in affliction.”²⁴ The afflictions that God causes believers go through are like the gifts sent by a man to his family.²⁵ Indeed, the more one gets closer to God, the more one's afflictions will increase:

The messenger of Allah was asked: “Who is afflicted with the toughest afflictions in this world?” He responded, “The prophets, then those more similar [to them], then those more similar [to the latter]. The believer will be afflicted according to the extent of his faith and goodness of his deeds. Whoever has the right faith and good deeds will have tougher affliction, and whoever has faint faith and weak deeds will have lesser afflictions.”²⁶

According to one narrative, the Prophet (s) was invited to eat at someone's home. There, an egg fell from above a wall, but to the surprise of the Prophet (s), it did not break. The host told the Prophet (s) that he had never experienced any afflictions in his life. When the Prophet (s) heard this, without eating anything, he stood up to leave and said, “Whoever is not afflicted, God has no interest in him.”²⁷

ultimate mercy. Being tested, therefore, is the first step in moving towards the final purpose of our creation—being included in God's ultimate mercy.

²⁴ Muhammad b. Ya'qub al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, vol.2 (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 1997), 253.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 256.

As quoted earlier, the Quran mentions poverty among the different kinds of sufferings with which God tests the people: “And surely We shall try you with something of fear and *hunger*, and *loss of wealth* and lives and *crops*” (2:155). The theme of poverty as test has reverberated in the Islamic tradition—a test which is not only for the poor, but also for the wealthy. In a *hadith*, it is narrated that God said,

I did not make the wealthy rich because of their nobility to me. Neither have I deprived the poor because of their insignificance to me. It is one of the ways in which I try the wealthy with the poor. If it was not for the poor, the wealthy would not deserve [entering] the Paradise.²⁸

Poverty, like other tests, prepares the ground for spiritual growth. Successfully passing this test brings about great rewards from God: The poor will be rewarded when they see something in the market and want, but cannot afford to buy.²⁹ There is, sometimes, a high status of closeness to God assigned for a person, but they cannot reach it except either by losing their wealth or by an affliction in their body.³⁰

Moreover, on the Day of Judgment, when all other people have a hard time being called to account by God regarding their deeds in this world, the poor will have no difficulty: “The poor Muslims will ramble in the gardens of the Paradise forty years before the wealthy Muslims ... the parable of that is the parable of two ships that were taken to a tax collector. He looked into one of them and did not see anything in it, so he said, ‘let it go,’ but looked into the other and it was full, so he said, ‘keep it.’”³¹ In another *hadith*, we read:

On the Day of Judgment, a group of people will rise [and go] until they reach the door of Paradise and knock

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 265.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 264.

³⁰ Ali b. Hasan al-Tabarsi, *Mishkat al-Anwar* (Najaf: Kitabkhani Haydariyya, 1385), 293-4.

³¹ Al-Kulayni, 260.

on it. They will be told, “Who are you?” They will say, “We are the poor.” They will be told, “[Are you trying to enter] before being called to account?” They will say, “You did not give us anything to call us to account for.” Then, God, the Most Majestic the Most Holy, will say, “They said the truth. Enter Paradise.”³²

There are some wonderful *hadiths*, in which God is even said to be apologizing to the poor on the Day of Judgment: He will turn to them, “like a person who is apologizing,” and tell them, “I did not make you poor in the world because you were insignificant to me. You will see how I will treat you today: whoever helped you in the world, take their hands to the Paradise.”³³ One person from among the poor, who does not seem to be satisfied with this offer, will say, “O my Lord, the people of the world competed in their world; they married the women, put on soft clothes, ate food, inhabited the houses, and rode the best animals. Give me the like of what you gave them.” God, then, will respond, “You and every one of you will have the like of what I gave the people of the world since the world began until the world ended, seventy times as much.”³⁴ In another hadith, God “will indeed apologize to his believing servant who was poor in the world, like a brother apologizing to his brother.” When the poor person sees what God is going to give him as compensation, he will tell God, “What you didn’t give me was not a loss, considering what you have given me in compensation.”³⁵

Because of all the spiritual blessings that poverty entails, God afflicts believers more than other people. When a person reaches higher levels of faith, their provision becomes more and more limited;³⁶ if it was not that

³² *Ibid.*, 264-5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 261.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 261-2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 264

³⁶ Al-Tabarsi, 126.

the believers persistently ask God for an expansion of their livelihood, God would constantly decrease it.³⁷ It is even said that,

There were no believers among the descendants of Adam but that they were poor, and no faithless but that they were wealthy, until Abraham came and said, “Our Lord! Make us not a prey for those who disbelieve.”³⁸ God, then, created wealth and need in these and wealth and need in those.³⁹

Poverty is, thus, “more adorning for a believer than a cheekpiece on the face of a horse”;⁴⁰ it is indeed “the sign of the righteous,” in contrast to wealth, which might be a sign of “a sin whose punishment has been precipitated.”⁴¹

Of course, these blessings and rewards that poverty brings about are not unconditional. First, Islam requires all members of *society to fulfil their proper social responsibilities. Those who are responsible for providing for their families are required to do so to the best of their abilities*. And this is not just a social responsibility, but also a spiritual duty. According to Islamic traditions, those who strive for making a living for their families in permissible ways are “like those who do jihad [strive] in the way of God,”⁴² and their reward in the hereafter is even greater.⁴³ Those who, on the other hand, do not fulfil their responsibilities and make themselves a burden on *society without any acceptable reasons are harshly rebuked: “Damned are, damned are, those who put their burdens

³⁷ Muhammad b. Hammam al-Iskafi, *al-Tamhis* (Qum: Madrasa Imam Mahdi, 1983), 49.

³⁸ This is a quotation of one of the verses of the Qur’an (60:5).

³⁹ Al-Kulayni, 262.

⁴⁰ Al-Iskafi, 49.

⁴¹ Hasan b. Shu’ba al-Harrani, *Tuhaf al-Uqul* (Qum: Intisharat-i Jami’a Mudarrisin, 1983), 493.

⁴² Al-Shaykh al-Saduq, *al-Faqih*, vol.3 (Qum: Intisharat-i Jami’a Mudarrisin, 1992), 168.

⁴³ Al-Kulayni, vol.5, 88.

on the people.”⁴⁴ Second, the poor are required to maintain their patience. Poverty in Islam is not a justification for stealing, theft, or any other illegal and impermissible action.⁴⁵ Those who lose their patience and end up committing forbidden actions fail the “test of poverty.” In a hadith, comparable to Luke 6:20, the Prophet is reported to have said, “Joy is for the poor because of [their] patience; they are the ones who will see the kingdom of the heavens and earth.”⁴⁶ Finally, Islamic teachings encourage the poor to try to stand up to high moral standards and not let their difficult situation lower their character. The Quran praises those poor people who “do not beg of men with importunity” (2:273) and maintain their dignity to the extent that “[t]he unthinking man accounted them wealthy because of their restraint” (2:273).

Conclusion

This paper explored poverty from a Shiite Muslim perspective with a theological approach. The focus was on two themes: “spiritual poverty” and “spirituality of the poor.” The first theme explained the fundamental Islamic belief that God is the owner of everything, a belief whose direct corollary is that everything and everybody, except God, is essentially poor. Then, the paper looked at the impact of believing in this essential poverty on our spiritual and moral lives: the establishment of a deep bond between God and us as His guests in this world, eradication of moral vices such as pride and arrogance, and changing the dynamics of wealthy-poor relations.

The second theme, regarding the spirituality of the poor, began with the Islamic perspective on suffering in general, and then went on to discuss

⁴⁴ Al-Shaykh al-Tusi, *al-Tabdhib*, vol.6 (Qum: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, 1986), 327.

⁴⁵ Emergency situations are excluded from this ruling. When a person is in danger of death or other considerable harms, they can use whatever they find in order to save themselves.

⁴⁶ Al-Shaykh al-Mufid, *Al-Muqni'a* (Qum: Kungiri Shaykh Mufid, 1992), 374.

poverty in particular as an aspect of suffering. Poverty is seen, at least partly, as a way in which God tests people, which in turn creates a great opportunity for achieving higher levels of spirituality and greater rewards in the hereafter. However, these blessings come with some conditions: The poor, like anybody else, are required to fulfil their social responsibilities to the best of their abilities; “putting one’s burden on the others” without reason is harshly rebuked in Islam. Likewise, the poor are required to maintain their patience and trust in God, and not let their difficult situation lead them into any kind of illegal or impermissible action. Finally, Islam encourages the poor to stand up to high morals and not let their difficult situation harm their morality in any way.

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