



Islamic Ethics and the Foundations of Human Dignity, Justice, and Social Responsibility

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Abstract:

Islamic ethics offers a comprehensive moral framework that upholds human dignity, justice, and social responsibility as foundational principles essential for individual and societal well-being. Rooted in the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and the broader objectives of Islamic law (Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah), Islamic ethics presents a holistic vision of humanity grounded in moral accountability, compassion, and social balance. This paper examines the ethical foundations of human dignity (karāmat al-insān), emphasizing Islam's recognition of the inherent worth of every human being irrespective of race, gender, class, or cultural background. It further explores the Islamic conception of justice ('adl and qisṭ) as a multidimensional principle encompassing legal, social, economic, and moral domains, positioning justice as a divine mandate and a cornerstone of social harmony.

The study also highlights the concept of social responsibility (mas'ūliyyah ijtimā'iyah), through institutional mechanisms such as zakāt, ṣadaqah, and waqf. By engaging with contemporary challenges including social inequality, human rights discourse, globalization, and moral crises. The analysis situates Islamic ethics within the broader humanities discourse, arguing that its value-based and integrative approach can contribute meaningfully to interdisciplinary debates on justice, dignity, and social cohesion in the 21st century. The paper concludes that Islamic ethics provides a timeless and universal moral vision capable of guiding humanity toward a more just, compassionate, and responsible global society.

Keywords: *Islamic Ethics; Human Dignity; Justice in Islam; Social Responsibility; Qur'anic Values; Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah; Social Justice; Contemporary Humanities; Islamic Moral Philosophy.*

Introduction:

In the contemporary world marked by moral uncertainty, social inequality, political conflict, and humanitarian crises, ethical frameworks that promote human dignity, justice, and social responsibility are urgently needed. The humanities, as an interdisciplinary field, seek to explore values that shape human existence and social harmony. Within this context, Islamic ethics offers a comprehensive and deeply rooted moral vision that addresses individual conduct, social justice, and collective responsibility. Far

from being confined to ritual observance, Islam presents a holistic ethical system that governs personal morality, social relations, economic justice, and political accountability.

Islamic ethics is grounded in divine revelation, articulated primarily through the Qur'an and the Sunnah (Prophetic traditions), and further developed by classical and contemporary scholars. Central to this ethical framework are the principles of *karāmat al-insān* (human dignity), *'adl* and *qisṭ* (justice), and *mas'ūliyyah ijtimā'iyah* (social responsibility). These

principles are universal in nature and transcend boundaries of race, gender, class, and geography. This article aims to examine the ethical foundations of human dignity, justice, and social responsibility in Islam and to highlight their relevance in addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

Foundations of Islamic Ethics:

In Islam, ethics is defined as Akhlaq (plural of khuluq) which means character, nature, and disposition. Islamic ethics derives its authority from multiple interconnected sources: the Qur'an, the Sunnah, *ijmā'* (consensus), *qiyās* (analogical reasoning), and the broader objectives of Islamic law known as *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*. Unlike secular ethical systems that are often rooted in human reason alone, Islamic ethics integrates divine guidance with rational inquiry. This synthesis ensures moral objectivity while allowing adaptability across time and space.

The Holy Quran is the last heavenly book of Allah presents ethics as inseparable from faith (*īmān*). Moral behavior is not merely social conduct but an act of worship accountable before Allah. There are many verses in the Holy Quran that instructed on issue related to ethics. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasized ethical excellence (*akhlāq*) as the essence of Islam, stating: *"I was sent to perfect noble character."* (al-Muwatta' 1614) Thus, Islamic ethics seeks to cultivate moral individuals and just societies simultaneously.

Human Dignity in Islam:

Concept of Human Dignity (*Karāmat al-Insān*):

One of the most profound contributions of Islam to ethical thought is its emphasis on inherent human dignity. The Qur'an declares: *"And We have certainly honored the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and*

preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference." (Qur'an 17:70)

This verse affirms that dignity is divinely bestowed upon all human beings by virtue of their creation, not by race, wealth, gender, or social status. Islam rejects all forms of dehumanization, exploitation, and discrimination, affirming equality before Allah.

Human dignity in Islam is linked to moral responsibility and free will. Humans are regarded as Allah's vicegerents (*khalīfah*) on earth, entrusted with moral agency and accountability. This worldview establishes a strong ethical foundation for respecting human life, honor, and freedom.

Equality and Non-Discrimination:

Islamic teachings strongly oppose racial, ethnic, and class-based discrimination. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), in his Farewell Sermon, proclaimed that an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also, a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety (*taqwā*) and good action". He explicitly rejected racism. This ethical principle challenges modern forms of racism, casteism, and xenophobia, emphasizing moral merit over social hierarchy.

Furthermore, Islam upholds the dignity of women, orphans, the poor, and marginalized groups by granting them legal rights and moral recognition at a time when such protections were largely absent in many societies.

Justice as a Central Ethical Principle:

Meaning and Scope of Justice (*ʿAdl and Qiṣṭ*):

Justice occupies a central position in Islamic ethics. The Qur'an repeatedly commands believers to uphold justice even when it conflicts with personal interests:

O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, Allah is more worthy of both. So follow not [personal] inclination, lest you not be just. And if you distort [your testimony] or refuse [to give it], then indeed Allah is ever, with what you do, Acquainted. (Qur'an 4:135)

Justice in Islam is comprehensive, encompassing legal, social, economic, and moral dimensions. It is not limited to courts and laws but extends to fairness in trade, honesty in governance, and compassion in social relations.

Social and Economic Justice:

Islamic ethics emphasizes economic justice as a means to preserve human dignity and social balance. In Islam, *Ribā* (commonly translated as usury or interest) is strictly prohibited as a form of financial exploitation. It is categorical ban and the Holy Quran mention:

Those who consume interest cannot stand [on the Day of Resurrection] except as one stands who is being beaten by Satan into insanity. That is because they say, "Trade is [just] like interest." But Allah has permitted trade and has forbidden interest. So whoever has received an admonition from his Lord and desists may have what is past, and his affair rests with Allah. But whoever returns to [dealing in interest or usury] - those are the companions of the Fire; they will abide eternally therein. (Quran 2:275).

The prohibition of exploitation (*ribā*), encouragement of fair trade, and obligation of *zakāt* reflect Islam's commitment to reducing inequality and ensuring social welfare. Wealth is viewed as a trust from Allah, not an absolute private possession.

The Qur'an condemns hoarding wealth and neglecting the poor, emphasizing equitable distribution and social solidarity. In this sense,

Islamic justice aligns with contemporary concerns about economic inequality and social injustice.

Social Responsibility in Islamic Ethics:

Concept of Collective Responsibility:

Islamic ethics places significant emphasis on social responsibility (*mas'ūliyyah ijtimā'iyyah*). Individuals are morally accountable not only for their own actions but also for the welfare of society. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ stated:

"Surely! Everyone of you is a guardian and is responsible for his charges: The Imam (ruler) of the people is a guardian and is responsible for his subjects; a man is the guardian of his family (household) and is responsible for his subjects; a woman is the guardian of her husband's home and of his children and is responsible for them; and the slave of a man is a guardian of his master's property and is responsible for it. Surely, everyone of you is a guardian and responsible for his charges." (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 7138, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1829).

This concept underscores the interconnectedness of individuals within a community (*ummah*). Social responsibility in Islam includes caring for the poor, promoting education, protecting the environment, and ensuring justice for all.

Institutions of Social Welfare:

Islam institutionalized social responsibility through mechanisms such as *zakāt*, *ṣadaqah*, *waqf*, and charitable endowments.

Zakat (*Poor alms*) is an obligatory annual religious tax for all eligible Muslims who meet a minimum threshold of wealth, known as the *nisab*. It is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, making it a foundational element of a Muslim's faith and practice. It is a mandatory payment (typically 2.5% of one's total accumulated wealth, savings, and assets beyond basic needs) and its

primary objective is to purify the payer's wealth and distribute resources to those in need, thereby preventing wealth concentration.

Sadaqa (*Charity*) is a broader, voluntary form of charity that is highly encouraged but not mandatory. It encompasses any act of giving or kindness performed with the intention of seeking Allah's pleasure.

Waqf (*Donation*) is a permanent endowment, typically of property or assets, dedicated to religious or charitable purposes in perpetuity. The principal asset is held in trust, and only its income or usufruct is used for the specified charitable cause.

These three institutions form a comprehensive and self-sustaining ecosystem of social welfare within Islamic framework: Zakat addresses immediate, mandatory poverty relief; Sadaqa encourages continuous, voluntary acts of kindness; and Waqf ensures long-term, structural support for community development and public good.

Islamic Ethics and Human Rights Discourse:

Modern human rights discourse often emphasizes individual freedoms, sometimes detached from moral responsibility. Islamic ethics, while affirming fundamental rights, balances them with ethical duties and communal harmony. Rights in Islam are inseparable from obligations toward Allah, society, and the environment.

Islamic perspectives on the right to life, freedom of belief, protection of property, and human honor align with universal human rights principles. However, Islamic ethics critiques moral relativism and unchecked individualism, advocating instead a value-based approach grounded in justice and accountability.

Contemporary Relevance of Islamic Ethical Principles:

Addressing Global Challenges:

The ethical foundations of Islam offer meaningful responses to contemporary global challenges such as social inequality, environmental degradation, political injustice, and moral disintegration. The Qur'anic concept of stewardship (*khilāfah*) promotes environmental responsibility, while Islamic principles of justice and compassion encourage peace-building and conflict resolution.

Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue:

Islamic ethics promotes coexistence, dialogue, and mutual respect among diverse communities. The Qur'an acknowledges pluralism as part of divine wisdom and encourages cooperation in righteousness. These teachings provide a strong ethical basis for interfaith dialogue and global peace initiatives.

Islamic Ethics within the Humanities:

Within the broader field of humanities, Islamic ethics contributes a moral and spiritual dimension often overlooked in secular frameworks. By integrating reason, revelation, and moral accountability, Islamic ethics enriches philosophical, sociological, and cultural discussions on human values.

In a globalized and technologically driven world, Islamic ethical principles serve as a counterbalance to materialism and moral relativism, emphasizing purpose, compassion, and justice as essential components of human progress.

Conclusion:

Islamic ethics presents a comprehensive and coherent framework for understanding human dignity, justice, and social responsibility. Rooted in divine guidance and human rationality, it affirms the inherent worth of every individual,

promotes justice in all spheres of life, and emphasizes collective responsibility for social welfare. These ethical principles are not only relevant to Muslim societies but offer universal insights applicable to contemporary global challenges.

In the 21st century, marked by ethical crises and humanitarian concerns, revisiting Islamic ethical foundations can contribute significantly to interdisciplinary dialogues within the humanities. By fostering dignity, justice, and social responsibility, Islamic ethics provides a timeless moral vision capable of guiding humanity toward a more just, compassionate, and sustainable future.

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