

The Ethics and Pro-Social Values of Judaism, Christianity and Islam

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Jewish Values

Pro-social Values: *Ethical Monotheism*

Abraham was the first to link individual belief and worship in the one God to social values and responsibilities. The ethical principles of monotheism recognize “that there is one Creative Source of the one creation, but that this very unity conveys a moral imperative concerning ethical treatment and conduct” in creation itself (Genesis 18:19). Study and practice of these ethical principles not only constitute individual worship, but lead to the establishment of just social systems and the promotion of the common good.

Many of the Jewish virtues (*midot*) are also commandments (*mitzvot*), the practice of every one of which brings one closer to God and fulfills God’s purpose for humanity. Of the 613 Jewish laws, 248 are positive commandments (things to do), and 365 negative commandments (things *not* to do). While many concern the individual’s relationship with God (*Mitzvot Bayn Adam La Makom*), more than half of the mitzvot that apply today govern interpersonal relations (*Hilchos Bein Adam L’Chavero*), and relate to a comprehensive range of everyday social interactions. These form the basic moral guidelines and ethical parameters of how Jews are commanded to treat others.

The Hebrew Prophets and Talmudic Rabbis have made clear that while commandments between individuals and God are extremely important, God commanded that ethical behavior toward one another is of greater importance and concern. King Solomon asserted that “To do righteousness and justice is preferred by God above sacrifice (Prov. 21:3) Self-cultivation and scholarship are not only forms of worship, but ways of apprehending the meaning and form of ethical living. Judaism is thus pre-eminently relationship-oriented, focusing on the relationship between God and humanity, God and the Jewish community, and social relationships.

Rabbi Akiva famously observed that the greatest principle in Torah is to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Palestinian Talmud, Nedarim 9:4). Famed scholar Hillel added to this by summarizing all of Judaism in the sentence: “What is hateful to you, do not do to others,” adding that “the rest is commentary. Now go and study.” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a) The understanding is that Torah is an explication of the manner of living an ethical life.

The “ethical life” in Judaism is celebrated as a source of *simhah*, which Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes as “the happiness we share,” or “the happiness we make by sharing.” (Sacks, 5)¹ It is understood that our deeds – our values and responsibilities reflected in

¹ Sacks, Jonathan. *To Heal a Fractured World*.

our behavior – are what concretely link us to our larger community as well as to God. “Faith” and “works” are not distinguished in Judaism, as it is “by our deeds that we express our faith and make it real in the life of others and in the world.” (Sacks, 5)

It is telling that God’s commandments for the Jewish people and good deeds are given the same word: *mitzvot*. These practices are not simply for expedient or feel-good purposes, but rather represent obligations at the heart of Jewish belief, worship and community.² These are laid out in specific detail in Scripture and laws, and Jews are commanded by God to “Learn them and be careful to perform them” (Deut. 5:1; Yevamoth 109b). After all, Judaism affirms that the study of Torah is only truly meaningful when it leads to actual observance of the *mitzvot* (Avot 1:17; Kidushin 40b; Yayikra Rabba 35:6; R. Judah Loewe, *Netivot Olam, Gemilut Chassadim*, ch. 2.)

The Covenantal Community: Abrahamic Fraternity

The emphasis on ethical practice speaks to a strong sense of mutual responsibility (*Averut; Kol Yisrael Arevim; Shavuot 39a*) and community identity (*Klal Yisrael; Kehillah*).³ Jews are asked to not hate fellow Jews (Lev. 19:17) and to love one another (*Ahavat Yisrael*) (Lev. 19:18), including converts (Deut. 10:19).

God’s covenant with the Jewish people is not based on individual commitments but rather with the community. The Jewish community as a whole is asked to repent to God (Rosh HaShanah 17b-18a), is subject to God’s punishment or forgiveness (Berachot 12b). In the covenantal relationship, the community is God’s partner in the improvement of creation and the perfection of the world. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls this “ethics of responsibility...one of Judaism’s most distinctive and challenging ideas...” (Sacks, 3) He adds, “Life is God’s call to responsibility.” (ibid)

The individual thus adds merit to his or her community or sin based on their deeds (Yuma 87a) and is asked to strive for, even suffer for the sake of his or her community (Ketuvot 8b). Separation from or harm to the community is viewed with grave concern (Rosh HaShanah 17a). Moses provides a paradigmatic example of individual commitment to the welfare of the community. The Talmud states:

“When the community is in trouble do not say, “I will go home and eat and drink and all will be well with me.”...Rather, involve yourself in the community’s distress... as was demonstrated by Moses (Exodus 27:12) In this way Moses said, “Since Israel is in trouble, I will share their burden.” Anyone who shares a community’s distress will be rewarded and will witness the community’s consolation.” (*Ta’anit 11a*)

² Jewish worship thus concerns the contemplation and practice of immutable, definite rules concerning personal behavior and social values emanating from God. The Mishnah outlines all of Jewish law and the technical details of observance. The Torah articulates absolute truths while establishing guidelines, priorities and values for Jews to live by.

³ The song *Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Lazeh* summarizes the meaning of *arevut: Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Lazeh* (“All Jews are responsible for each other”), *Kol Yisrael achim* (“All Jews are “brothers”), *Am echad lev echad* (“One people with one heart”), *Am echad shteym echad* (“One people, each pair is one”), *Am echad ke-ish echad* (“One people, as if they are one person”), *Shmah Yisrael, am echad* (“Hear Israel! One people”).

Mutual and collective responsibility is a deep, ethical concern. The Talmudic sage Hillel explains the importance of social welfare by asking "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself alone, what am I?" (Ethics of the Fathers 1:14). The active involvement in the community is also strongly encouraged on spiritual grounds:

If a person of learning participates in public affairs and serves as judge and arbiter, he gives stability to the land. But if he sits in his home and says to himself, "What have the affairs of society to do with me?... Why should I trouble myself with the people's voices of protest? Let my soul dwell in peace! – if he does this, he overthrows the world. (*Tanshuma To Mishpatim*)

At the same time, community activism is also central to the commitment to social justice at the heart of the covenant with God.

JUSTICE, JUSTICE SHALL YOU PURSUE

In one of the rare occasions where a word is repeated twice in Torah, God commands for emphasis that "Tzedek, tzedek tirdof" (Justice, justice shall you pursue.) (Deut. 16:20) The practice of justice and the seeking of a just society are divine commandments for Jews. While cultivating a pious life through study and contemplation is at the heart of Jewish worship of God, Torah makes clear that that piety must necessarily translate in society through a striving for justice. The pursuit of justice itself, or the striving against injustice is a path to piety in Judaism.

Even the righteous and those that practice other *mitzvot* can be punished by God for failure to protest against injustice. Silence or passivity in effect communicate compliance or acquiescence to what is wrong.⁴ As Holocaust survivor Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself." Jews are to pursue justice no matter how remote the possibility of achieving it or overcoming injustice: Rabbi Tarfon famously explained in the Mishnah that "It is not your obligation to complete the task. But neither are you free to desist from it."

It is in the name of righteousness that the symbolic betrothal of the Jewish people and God is made:

And I will betroth you unto Me forever; and *I will betroth you unto Me in righteousness, justice, loving kindness, and compassion.* And I will betroth you unto Me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord. (Hosea 2:21-22, italics added)

Rabbi Meir adds that the purpose of the verse "And you shall know the Lord" is "To teach that whosoever has in himself all these attributes knows the will of G-d. (Avot de Rabbi Nathan, ch. 37)."

⁴ The Babylonian Talmud states that: "Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of his own family and does not do so is punished [liable, held responsible] for the transgressions of his family. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the people of his community and does not do so is punished for the transgressions of his community. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the entire world and does not do so is punished for the transgressions of the entire world. (*Shabbat 54b*)

Empathic Justice

Rabbi Emanuel Rackman observed that Judaism teaches a “special kind of justice”, an *empathic justice*, which

“...seeks to make people identify with each another – with each other’s needs, with each other’s hopes and aspirations, with each other’s defeats and transformations. Because Jews have known the distress of slaves and the loneliness of strangers, we are to project ourselves into their souls and make their plight our own.”⁵

Jewish history teaches that God is deeply moved by the plight of the suffering and the oppressed. Exodus was “the decisive event in the creation of the chosen people,” a “momentous occasion” showing “that the Lord of the universe was at work correcting oppression and liberating the poor.” (Sider, 44)⁶ God proclaims that

“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.” (Exodus 3:7-8)

Jewish history and teaching also make clear that God is actively involved in the righting of wrongs and intervening in history: “The Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.” (Deut. 26:5-8) God is also mindful of his covenantal relationship with the people of Israel (Exodus 6:5-7):

I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant [with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob]... I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burden of the Egyptians.”

It is clear from the Bible that God “wanted his people to know him as the One who freed them from slavery and oppression.” (Sider, 43) God begins the Ten Commandments with the reminder that “I am the Lord, your God, who took you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” (Deut. 5:6; Ex. 20:2) Sider writes that “The God of the Bible wants to be known as the liberator of the oppressed.” (Sider, 43)

Isaiah proclaims that “The Lord of Hosts shall be exalted in justice, The Holy God shows Himself holy in righteousness.” (Isaiah 5:16) For Jews, emulating God in worship also means following the command “you shall eradicate evil in your midst” (Deut 13:6; 17:7; 21:21; 24:7) in the struggle to create a just and moral society. The Bible carries a number of commandments in support of this effort. Exodus affirms the importance of equal justice for the poor (Exod. 23:6; Deut. 16:18). The Psalms speaks to the role of the just ruler who would receive divine aid: “That he may judge Thy people with righteousness

⁵ In Schwartz, Richard H. *Judaism and Global Survival*; Lantern Books, NY. (2001), p. 27.

⁶ Sider, Ronald. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*.

(*tzedek*) and Thy poor with justice (*mishpat*).” The verse goes on to add: “May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.” (Psa. 72:2, 4).

The pursuit of justice (*Dirshu Mishpat*) and establishing a system of justice (*Shoftim*) are thus at the heart of the covenantal relationship, and the practice of it “is considered among the highest demands of prophetic religion.” (Schwartz, 26). Samson R. Hirsh writes that

Tzedek, ‘right’, ‘justice’ is the firm, incorruptible right as proclaimed by God in His Law. ‘*Mishpat*’ is the lawful order deriving therefrom. These two concepts constitute the prime indispensable basis for the state founded upon Divine Law.” (In Sicker, 92).⁷

Justice involves securing the right to something that an individual is entitled to, giving according to proper merits, and protecting and upholding these principles for the most vulnerable in society. Along these lines, Hirsh writes that

“*Mishpatim*, therefore, are God’s pronouncements concerning those things which each man has a right – merely because God has created him a man – to demand of you, that is, to which he has a claim because he is a man. Hence every infringement of a *mishpat* is a sin not only against man but, for this very reason, also a sin against God; for you mock God by denying to a man that which God has allotted to him.” (In Sicker, 92)

The measure of the community’s righteousness, then, can be found in the status and care of the poorest and most powerless. It is on their well-being, and on the righteousness of society, that God has judged and carried out divine blessings and punishments (Shabbat 139a). The significance of the pursuit of justice for the people of Israel becomes clear in the full verse of Deuteronomy (16:20): “Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may live, and inherit the land which the Lord your God gave you.”

The Hebrew Prophets:

Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Malachi, Jeremiah

Jewish history also demonstrates that God’s punishments for the failure of the community to uphold its covenantal responsibilities can be severe. Rabbinic tradition has it that the absence of fair judges led to the destruction of Jerusalem, and the passivity and silence in the face of oppression, or the failure to constructively criticize, led to the destruction of the second temple.

The Prophet Amos was one of the first to plead with the Jewish people to restore themselves to virtue. In the 8th century BCE, during times of great political successes and prosperity, shocking extremes of wealth and poverty had manifest after fairly egalitarian beginnings. Wealth had inured some to the plight of the poor (Amos 6-1-7), and courts were no longer a refuge for justice (Amos 5:10-15). The prophet Amos soon declared that as the rich “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth” (2:7), God had

⁷ Sicker, Martin, *The Political culture of Judaism*

decreed that the northernmost part of the kingdom would be destroyed, and the people taken into exile (6:4-7; 7:11, 17), which soon came to pass.

Where in Judaism every act is in service to God, matters of individual worship are often irrevocably tied to ethics and social justice. Leviticus (5:21), for example, exemplifies the unity of the religious to the ethical in stating that “If a person will sin and commit a treachery against God by lying to his fellow...” and “no one deals falsely with his fellow unless he repudiates the cardinal principle [of the existence of God].”

Most powerfully and dramatically of all, the Hebrew Prophets throughout history have proclaimed that authentic worship of God cannot coexist with the perpetration of injustice or unethical treatment of others. Rejecting the pretence or show of piety while the powerless suffered, God in Isaiah (1:11-15) asks: “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?”

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation - I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

Isaiah is commanded by God to “Cry aloud, spare not, lift up your voice like a trumpet, and declare unto My people their transgression” (Isaiah 58:1). Isaiah challenges the Jewish people to consider emptiness of their outward observance of worship while the purpose of worship is lost:

Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the chains of wickedness, to undo the bonds of oppression, to let the crushed go free, and to break every yoke of tyranny?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

The Prophet Amos (5:21-24) echoed the sentiments of Isaiah in God’s revulsion at the hypocrisy and incongruity of acts of religious worship with the persistence of pervasive social injustice:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Moreover, the Prophets issued stark warnings about God's punishments for mistreatment of the poor. Amos (5:11-12) explicitly linked God's wrath with the treatment of the poor:

Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.

For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins - you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.

Jeremiah castigates the Jewish people for their failure to protect orphans and plead the cause of the poor (Jeremiah 5:28). He denounces an entire generation for having "in your skirts is found the blood of the souls of the innocent poor" (2:34), and the whole nation for "using oppression, robbing, defrauding the poor and the needy, and extorting from the stranger" (22:29) Isaiah (10:1-3) also declared that

... that the destruction from afar would befall Judah because of its mistreatment of the poor: Woe to those who decree iniquitous deeds... to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people to their right...

What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away?

To avert God's impending judgment, Isaiah implores his community to:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

The Prophet Micah (2:2) similarly denounced Israelites who "covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance." He warned that Jerusalem would soon become "a heap of ruins" – and for a time, his warnings were heard. The Prophet Malachi (2:11) pleaded: "Have we not all one Father? Hath not one God created us? Why, then, do we deal treacherously with one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?"

Jeremiah, a hundred years after Isaiah, once more condemned the oppression of the poor and the indifference of the wealthy to the needy and to orphans:

Wicked men are found among my people; they lurk like fowlers lying in wait. They set a trap; they catch men. Like a basket full of birds, their houses are full of

treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek.

They know no bounds in deeds of wickedness; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things?" says the Lord, "and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?" (Jeremiah 5: 26-29)

Jeremiah laments the loss of righteousness at the heart of the bond between the Jewish community and God:

How the faithful city [Jerusalem] has become a harlot, she that was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross, your wine mixed with water... Every one loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them.

Therefore the Lord says, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: "Ah, I will vent my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes. I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy.

And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city." (1: 21-26)

Amos (5:14-15) implores the Israelites to change their ways, linking ethical conduct to their very survival, and to the return to God's favor:

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

God yearns for the reform of His people, promising them that

"If you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan, and the widow... then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever." (Jeremiah 7:5-7)

SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS: CHARITY – TZEDAKAH

In Judaism, being a just community also means being a compassionate community. Rabbi Emanuel Rackman argues that "the greatest contribution of Judaism to the concept of benevolence "is that it grafted the notion of justice on the notion of charity. In the Bible one invariably finds the two words 'charity and justice' as a compound phrase – both words almost always appear together."⁸

Yet the Hebrew word for 'charity', "*Tzedakah*" is drawn from the root word *Tzadei-Dalet-Qof*, meaning righteousness, justice or fairness. The connotation is less about magnanimity or generosity of the privileged toward the underprivileged, but rather is a

matter of justice; the social obligation and responsibility to give the poor what is rightfully theirs.

In Judaism, poverty is viewed as exceedingly destructive to the human personality and negatively influences one's life experiences: "The ruin of the poor is their poverty" (Prov. 10:15). The Talmud notes that "The world is darkened for him who has to look to others for sustenance." (Betza 32a) Recognizing the damage done to individual esteem by poverty, the Talmud encourages actions that would prevent such a descent (Rashi on Leviticus 25:35) "be he stranger or settler", the homeless or neighbor (Lev. 25:35). These actions give force to the admonition of God that "you are to have no joy so long as a brother suffers by your side." (Horeb 17:126)

Sider notes that Hebrew words for the poor most commonly connote someone with low economic status that is "usually due to some calamity or some form of oppression."⁹ (Sider, 41) So great a tragedy is hunger that the Prophet Jeremiah stated: "Happier were the victims of the sword than the victims of hunger, who pined away, stricken by want of the yield of the field" (Lamentations 4:9)

Feeding the hungry (*Ha'akhalat Re'evim*) is a mitzvah, particularly as hunger drives people to make harmful decisions, and neglect spiritual needs and values: "The sufferings of poverty cause a person to disregard his own sense (of right) and that of his Maker." (Eruvim 41) The Talmud also states that "Where there is no sustenance, there is no learning." (Ethics of the Fathers 3:21) The implications for society are clear: the Talmud states that "The world will not be at peace before God until people are generous and provide food for the poor." (Eruvin 86a).

Not only does *tzedakah* help alleviate the conditions of social inequality, but it is also a strengthened and empathic commitment to the well-being of the community: "If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers... you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand. Open your hand generously and extend credit to him" (Deut. 15:7). Simon the Just famously observed that "Because of charity the world abides." (Pirkei Avot)

The Torah made a number of provisions to care for the community's poor: "The Levite must set aside a tenth of his tithes" (Numbers 18:26, Deuteronomy 18:4, Exodus 22:28), understood as meaning one-tenth of one's income after taxes to be set aside for the poor. *Tzedakah* includes giving aid, assistance, clothing, food, time and money to the poor, needy or to education institutions, hospitals or synagogues, and are not confined to the Jewish community alone. Jewish sources also describes the provision of temporary shelter as a means of *tzedakah*, as Isaiah cried out, "take the poor into your homes." Helping the homeless is thus a religious duty and act of righteousness that is preferable to God than observance of rituals or sacrifices (Prov. 21:3).

Specific Torah laws are designed to help alleviate the suffering of the poor: the corners of the field are to be left uncut for the poor to pick (Leviticus 19:9); the gleanings of the

⁹ For an examination of the distinctions of "poor" in Scripture (from sloth, calamity, exploitation and voluntary choice) see R.C. Sproul, "Who Are the Poor?" in *Tabletalk* 3.

wheat harvest and fallen fruit are to be left for the poor (Leviticus 19:10); during the sabbatical year, the land is to be left fallow so that the poor (as well as animals) may eat of whatever grows freely (Leviticus 25:2-7). Deuteronomy (24:19-22) states that

When you cut down your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go again to fetch it; it shall be for the stranger, for the orphan, and for the widow; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands... And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this thing.

The feeding of the needy and vulnerable is also found in Deuteronomy (19:28-29):

At the end of three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce in that year, and shall lay it up inside your gates...and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are inside your gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.

As performing deeds of justice are considered by some the most important obligation of Jews (Deut. 16:20), it has even been argued that “*Tzedakah* is equal to all the other commandments combined.” (Bava Bathra 9b) Acts of righteousness, ethical practices and good deeds are forms of *tzedakah*, as is the belief and faith in God (Genesis 15:6), for which merit is given. Deuteronomy (6:2) adds that “It shall be *tzedakah* unto us if we take care...”, and the returning of a pledge “shall be a *tzedakah* unto you (Deut. 24:13). In Genesis (18:19) God declares, “For I know him that will command his children to do *tzedakah*”.

The command to perform charity is so central to Jewish worship, ethics and community that those who refrain from doing so are likened to idol-worshippers. Proverbs 14:31 states: “Anyone who withholds what is due to the poor blasphemes against the Maker of all, but one who is gracious unto the needy honors God.” The Talmud references a number of sanctions against those who fail to fulfill pledges of charity (including the death of a spouse, Succah 29b; Tos. Rosh HaShanah 6a; the visitation of drought, Taanit 8b), as well as rewards (such as the Redemption of Jerusalem through charity, Shabbat 139a; increasing one’s wealth, Taanit 8b-9a, Gittin 7a; overturning a divine judgment for death, Rosh HaShanah 16b, Proverbs 10:2; saving one from Hell, Gittin 7a).

So great is the spiritual value of acts of charity that the needy are believed to be doing the giver a favor by providing the opportunity for *tzedakah* (Vayikra Rabba 34:8. Cf Baba Batra I Oa-b; Zohar II:129a.), while recipients of charity are expected to perform *tzedakah* themselves (Gittin 7b). The Talmud teaches that “One who causes others [to give] is greater than one who simply gives” (Bava Batra 9a). It is also believed that performing *tzedakah* is one of three acts that can gain forgiveness for sins, along with *teshuvah* (repentance) and *tefilah* (prayer).

As early as the first century Rabbinic Judaism had established a “principal rule” that “no pious Jew could live in a community that had no organization for public charity.”¹⁰ This concept had become so developed by the twelfth century that the great scholar Maimonides once remarked that “Never have I seen or heard of a Jewish community that did not have a charity fund.” If a community had to choose between building a shelter for the poor and a synagogue, they are required to first build a shelter for the poor.

Widows, Orphans and Strangers

Those to whom alms are to be given include “the orphan, and the widow” (Deut. 26:12), as well as the poor, the wayfarer and converts. John F. Alexander noted that orphans, widows and strangers “each have about forty verses that command justice for them. God made it very clear that in a special sense he is the protector of these weak ones. Strangers are to be treated nearly the same as Jews, and woe to people who take advantage of orphans or widows.” (in “The Bible and the Other Side,” *The Other Side* 11, no. 5 (September-October 1975: 57; cited in Sider, 56)

God commands that foreigners be treated justly out of a sense of empathy, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Deut. 22:21) But God takes particular exception to mistreatment of widows and orphans, as demonstrated by the pleadings of the Hebrew Prophets and Exodus (22: 22-24):

You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

Rabbi Emanuel Rackman points out that the Torah commands in at least 36 places the ethical treatment of the stranger in the Jewish community. Leviticus (19:33) states that “if a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not wrong him.” Jews are commanded not to wrong a stranger (Exod. 23:9), fellow man (including convert) (Leviticus 15:17), and are prohibited by three commandments not to oppress him or her (Exodus 22:20; 23:9 and 22:24).

Moreover, Torah states that one should do more than not oppress the stranger, but actually *love* him or her. Maimonides pointed out that this is supported by two Biblical commandments:

One because he is considered to be within the category of ‘*reyim*’ (a friend) and one because he is a stranger, and the Torah states “And you shall love the stranger...” The Holy One commanded that we should love the stranger just as He commanded that we should love Him, as it is written: And you shall love the Lord your God. The Holy One himself loves the stranger, as it is written: And He loves the stranger.” (Maimonides “The Laws of Behavior Chapter,” 6:4)

GEMILUT HASADIM – Acts of Loving Kindness and Good Deeds

¹⁰ Dalin, David. “Judaism’s War on Poverty,” in *Policy Review*, Sept/Oct. 1997. (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3647/is_199709/ai_n8769822)

The other Hebrew word for charity is *gemilut hasadim*, often translated as “loving kindness”. Whereas *tzedakah* is focused on monetary assistance and the poor, *Gemilut hasadim* is performed spontaneously out of a spirit of generosity and benevolence, given to both rich and poor, living and dead (Succah 49b), and is not confined to material assistance but involves a personal, sympathetic engagement with another’s suffering, with no minimum or maximum standard (Mishneh Peah 1:1). For these reasons, the Talmud considers *gemilut hasadim* as greater and more comprehensive in scope than *tzedakah* (Talmud Succah 49b).

Maimonides described the rabbinic commandments of *gemilut hasadim* as positive, proactive ones

... ordained by the rabbis, to visit the sick, to comfort mourners, to bury the dead, to provide for a bride, to accompany guests, to arrange for burial, to bear the bier on one's shoulder, to go before the coffin and to mourn, to dig the grave and to bury the dead. Also to gladden a bride and groom and to provide for all their needs.

... Although these are rabbinic commandments [i.e., commandments ordained by the rabbis], they are included in the Biblical commandment "You shall love your fellow person as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). Everything that you want others to do for you, do for anyone who is your brother [in that he is similarly obligated] by the Torah and the commandments." (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Mourners, chapter 14.)

This expression of compassion and love of one’s neighbor (Lev. 19:18) encapsulated by *gemilut hasadim* is found at the beginning of Torah (with God clothing Adam and Eve) and ends with generous behavior (God burying Moses). (Sotah 14a) Rashi points out that when the heart is engaged with the mind with a point of view of the well-being of another, compassion emerges from the relationship and the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” is fulfilled (Mishneh Torah, chapter 14).

The root word *g-m-l* suggests reciprocity and actions in the context of relationship. According to the Talmud, the reward for this kind of personal service is in the here and now, and not in the world to come (Shabbat 127a). God is mindful of these acts, as “Heaven grants compassion to those who give it, deny it to those that withhold it.” (Shabbat 151b) After all, as the Prophet Hosea declared 2,700 years ago: “For I desire kindness, not sacrifice; attachment to God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6)

Personal involvement, attitude and effort are the determinative factor of the compassion and value of the *mitzvah*. The Babylonian Talmud states that “The reward for charity depends entirely upon the extent of the kindness in it.” (Sukkot 49b)

The Talmud states: “It does not say ‘happy is he who gives to the poor’, but ‘happy is he who considers the poor’. (Psalms 41:2) (Yerushalmi, Peah 8:9; Vayikra Rabba 34: 1. Cf Midrash Tehilim 41:2f.) One Talmudic source equates acts of loving kindness to Jewish identity itself:

...if a person exhibits impudence, cruelty, or misanthropy, and does not perform acts of loving-kindness, one should strongly suspect that he is of non-Jewish descent; for Israel, the holy nation, has the three distinctive traits of 'modesty, mercy, and loving-kindness' (Yevamot 79a).¹¹

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel (Simon the Just) said, "On three things does the world stand on: justice, truth and peace, as the verse states: 'Truth and [judgments of] peace judge in your gates.'" (Zechariah 8:16). In *Ethics of the Fathers*, it is stated this way: "The world stands on three things: Torah, worship, and acts of loving kindness." (Pirke Avot 1:2)

God provides the ultimate model for compassion, and the Talmud abounds with ways in which to emulate God in acts of loving kindness. One Talmudic statement addresses this: "Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina taught: How can one 'walk in the ways of God' (as Deuteronomy 13:5 demands)? (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a). The response is that "as God clothes the naked... as God visits the sick... as God comforts mourners... as God attends the dead... as God attends brides and grooms... so you are to do also" (Sotah 14a; Sifre, Eikev, par. 49; Midrash Tehilim 25:10; Kohelet Rabba 7:6f ; Pirke deR. Eliezer, 12 and 16f; Avot deR. Nathan ch.4.) These acts of loving kindness are not only authentic forms of worship and promote a sense of community, but they also bring compassion to the pursuit of social justice.

Abraham also provides a paradigmatic model for compassion and acts of loving kindness in his overriding concern for the welfare and well-being of others. Abraham's compassion is demonstrated by his hospitality to strangers despite his own discomfort, his pleading with God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as his test for a suitable daughter-in-law- one who would quench the thirst of his animals as well as his own.

The Talmud teaches the importance of other significant acts of *gamilut hasadim*, all of which can be found in the examples of God and the Patriarchs: "These are the deeds which yield immediate fruit and continue to yield fruit in the time to come: honoring parents, doing deeds of kindness, attending the house of study, visiting the sick..." (Shabbat 127a)

So important is the personal engagement with loving kindness, that the Talmud teaches that those who busy themselves with Torah only, "to the exclusion of *gemilut hasadim*, is as though he has no God." (Avodah Zara 17b)

The Talmud states that "Jews are compassionate children of compassionate parents," and that "one who is merciless toward his fellow creatures is no descendant of our father Abraham." (Bezah 32b) In a similar way, Rabbi David Rosen writes that "to be authentically Jewish means to emulate Abraham's compassionate conduct toward others." (Schwartz, xiii) Maimonides remarked that "The purpose of the laws of the Torah is to promote compassion, loving-kindness and peace in the world." (Maimonides, Yad Hazakam, Chilchot Shabbat 2:3)

¹¹ Alternative citation: Maimonides, HilchotIssurei Bi'ah 19:17, and MatnotAniyim 10:2. Cf Betza 32b.

DIGNITY OF THE POOR

Maimonides established eight degrees of *tzedakah* and ranked them in order of superiority. The lowest level of *tzedekah* involved the begrudging giving of charity for others, while the highest degree “is one who upholds the hand of a Jew reduced to poverty by handing him a gift or a loan, or entering into a partnership with him, or finding work for him, in order to strengthen his hand, so that he will have no need to beg from other people.” (Maimonides, Mishnah Torah, “Laws Concerning Gifts to the Poor”, 7:7).¹²

The development of interest-free loans to the poor was an act of *gemilut hasadim* (and over time became synonymous with free loans, at least colloquially), in part because it is viewed as a way of preventing the fall into poverty, thus preserving the dignity and esteem of the borrower. Deuteronomy 15:9 deals strictly with those who withhold loans from the poor, and Exodus (22:24) warns that “If you lend money to My People, to the poor man among you, do not behave like a creditor to him.” Proverbs (22:22) similarly warns “Do not rob the impoverished because he is impoverished.” The Talmud teaches that “It is better to lend to a poor person than to give him alms, and best of all is to provide him with capital for business.” (Shabbat 63a) Moreover, the Talmud observes there are blessings for those who forgive debts (Ketuvot 19a).

The emphasis on promoting self-sufficiency and anonymous giving¹³ in Jewish teaching not only instills a charitable social ethic, but also demonstrates a sensitivity to the dignity and feelings of those in need, and the importance of self-respect and self-confidence (Avot deR. Nathan, ch. 41. Cf. Tossefta, Peah 4:12; Yerushalmi, Peah 8:9; Vayikra Rabba 34:1). The Bible decrees that the merit and value of charitable acts can be nullified by insensitivity, and warns that when performing charity “their heart shall not be grieved when you give it to them.” (Deut. 15:10)

The emphasis in charity invokes the concern for the humanity of the poor, apart from his or her immediate financial circumstances. In the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Yannai remarked to a man who had publicly given money to a beggar that “It would have been better for you not to give him money than to give him money and embarrass him” (Hagigah 5a). Talmudic traditions affirm the importance of a “cheerful countenance” in giving to the poor, and if unable to give, it would still be as if “all the good gifts in the world had been given.” (Avot de Rabbi Nathan, ch. 13. Cf. Bava Batra 9b). Maimonides enjoins giving to the needy

... with a pleasant expression and happily, while commiserating with the needy person about his suffering... If a needy person asks for money and one has nothing to give him, one should make him feel better by speaking nicely with him. (Mishneh Torah, “Laws of Gifts to the Poor”, 10:4f)

¹² From lowest to highest, Maimonides ranked the levels of *tzedakah*: level eight, giving grudgingly with a sour countenance. Level seven, giving less than you can afford, but doing so pleasantly. Level six, giving generously, but only after being asked. Level five, giving before you are asked. Level four, the recipient knows the giver, but the giver does not know the recipient. Level three, the giver knows the recipient, but the recipient does not know the giver. Level two, giving anonymously, where neither giver nor recipient knows the other. Level one, helping someone become self-sufficient.

¹³ The Talmud teaches that “Whoever gives in secret is greater than Moses.” (Bava Bathra).

Speaking kindly to the poor (charity through speech) is praised by other sources as meriting God's blessing (Yereim, par. 48. Cf Tossefta, Peah 4:17; Sifre, Re'ey, par. 117; R. Jonah, Shaarei Teshuvah, 3:54; Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 97:1). The Talmud relates that one who gives a *prutah* (small coin) to a poor person is blessed with six blessings, but one who consoles a poor person is blessed with eleven blessings (Baba Bathra 9b). Proverbs (17:5) states that "one who mocks the poor blasphemes one's Maker." Conversely, Proverbs (19:17) states that "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord."

It is also found in Rabbinic teaching that repudiation of *gemilut hasadim* is the equivalent to a repudiation of the preeminent doctrine of God's existence (Kohelet Rabba 7:4. Cf Tossefta, Peah 4:20; Sifre, Re'ey, par. 117; Yalkut Shimoni, 11:64.). This is because repudiating *gemilut hasadim* similarly repudiates both Torah (since it enjoins it) and the status of humanity in the world as rightful claimants of God's creation. It was taught: "Give to Him of that which is His own, for you and whatever is yours are His. Thus it is said by David: 'For everything is from You, and from Your own we have given You' (I Chronicles 29:14)(Avot 3:7.). This has been understood to mean that all wealth is God's bounty, and performing acts of *gemilut hasadim*, one is taking from God's bounty to give to those most in need of it (Shemot Rabba, 31:15; Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy 15:10.).

It is also commanded that wealth first be distributed to family ("Ignore not your flesh", Isaiah 58:7) and then in outward concentric circles to one's own city, then larger community. Lending to family or a colleague to keep them financially viable is considered as an act of loving kindness.

Concern for the dignity of the poor also reflected in the development of the Gemah, which is a repository of useful items from which people may borrow and return, without assuming any sense of shame for borrowing or needing. It is believed that the comingling of compassion and the pursuit of justice creates an ethical standard by which to treat others in the image of God. In this way, human beings have the greatest promise for individual and personal restoration.

Social Activism, Repairing the World: Tikkun Olam

From the tradition of engaging the community and the importance of compassionate loving kindness developed a distinctive Jewish understanding of social activism in "*tikkun olam*" (literally, world repair).

It has been told to you, O human being, what is good
 And what the Lord requires of you:
 Only to do justly, love *chesed* (mercy, kindness)
 And walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

Christian Values

Human Nature and the Need for Salvation

Like Jews, Christians believe that humankind was created in the image of God. Yet in the Christian tradition, humanity suffers from a “fallen” nature, debased and hopelessly flawed. Doomed by the disobedience and subsequent punishment of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, humankind is forever weakened by evil inclinations within and ever-present temptations without. The allures of the world’s temptations are no match for the souls of humanity, who in their estrangement from God live dark and brutal lives, and whose soul remains in danger of perishing for eternity in the afterlife.

Christianity teaches that the only hope for humankind is complete faith in God, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) All of humanity is fallen, and each individual is capable of redemption through faith. More specifically, it is the complete faith in the redemptive power of God in the person of Jesus Christ to restore humanity from its fallen state (Matthew 1:21; 26:27-29; Luke 1:76-78; 24:46-48). Left to ourselves and our intrinsically violent, self-interested natures, humanity cannot hope to create just civil systems and build ethical relations.

The Christian creed maintains that faith in the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ – his forgiveness of his persecutors after having experienced every form of human evil and violence - provides the model of forgiveness and compassion that makes it possible for humanity to rise above our flawed natures and live in peace in this life and the next (John 3:15-17; Colossians 1:13-14, Hebrews 9:12).

In this sense Christianity shares the Abrahamic ethic of human equality, since all of humanity is created in the same image, descended from Adam, all are fallen and in need of salvation through faith, and God loves all among his creation equally. The Abrahamic vision of spiritual liberty is understood by the moral choice given to individuals to accept or reject faith in Christ and to repent and atone for wrong-doing. The Epistles of Paul “exalted the example of the man who broke with the established church.” (Sandmel, 316)¹⁴

Christian Values:

Love and Universal Humanity

Christianity inherited Judaism’s concern for the individual relationship with God and the importance of manifesting that love in relations with others. When Jesus was asked which of God’s commandments was most important, Mark records Jesus’ response: “The most important one is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’” (12:28-30, citing Deut. 6:4) He then added: “The second is this: ‘Love

¹⁴ Sandmel, Samuel. *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament*.

your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:31)¹⁵

According to this Great Commandment, every other law and commandment, then, is secondary to the law of love, or is fulfilled in the act of love (Luke 10:25-37). Paul views the love of neighbor as fulfillment of the law, as well as individual commandments of the Torah (Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:13-15). Paul makes this point particularly clear:

“Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment are summed up in this command, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14).

When pressed about who the neighbor was, Luke records Jesus as answering in the form of a parable: when a man was robbed, beaten, stripped and left to die, two religious people passed the victim by without help. Then an “impure outsider” –a Samaritan, came to the victim’s aid, tending to his wounds and bringing him to safety. Jesus thereby makes the argument that a neighbor is anyone, regardless of status or piety, who is in need. This was a self-conscious effort to broaden the sense of community beyond traditional boundaries to a universal standard.

Elaborating on Biblical ethics, Jesus proclaims that “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). Like Judaism, Jesus asks believers to love all others as God loves creation: God sends sunshine and rain on the good as well as the bad (Matthew 5: 43-48) As God does not distinguish among his creation, nor should his believers.

Love

Love is one of the most central themes of the New Testament. The depths to which God loves humankind is attested to in what is probably the most oft-quoted verse in the New Testament: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

God’s love for humankind is likened to a father’s love, demonstrated most famously in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), where the father waits patiently for the wayward son to return home. When he does, he is embraced and accepted completely in an expression of God’s unconditional welcoming of the repentant sinner. Love is not merely an attribute of God, but what God fundamentally *is*. The New Testament states that “the very nature of God is love, and that is why it is possible to say “God is love” (I John 4:8, 16).

¹⁵ Matthew’s version is as follows “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Upon these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22: 37-40)

Individuals are called upon to love God in return for his love for us (Mark 12:30), though this does not take the form of a command or a duty. John writes that “We love because he first loved us.” (I John 4:19). Christians are therefore enjoined to be mindful of the heart, and are asked to “do everything in love.” (1 Corinthians 16:14) In this way, their deeds and actions are pious and empathetic, imitating God and reflecting God’s will for humankind. Jesus tells his followers to “take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:29).

Inner Purification

In Christian teaching, the heart plays a prominent role in the individual relationship with God and with others. What is in the heart has the power to manifest into reality (Mark 11:23). An open heart allows Christians to perceive and imitate God’s qualities of mercy, compassion, forgiveness and empathy: Love is the “fruit” of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22) “and that which is poured into the hearts of those who believe in Jesus the Christ (Romans 5:5). Matthew adds: “Blessed are the pure at heart, for they shall see God.” (5:8)

Conversely, wrong beliefs lead to bad actions (Mark 7:14-22). Jesus makes it clear that God’s concern is with the heart, as it is “out of the heart” that “come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19, Mark 7:21, see also Matthew 9:4 and Mark 2:8). As Luke (6:45, also Matthew 22:33-35) explains,

“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”

One well-known passage in the New Testament distinguishes the role of love in worship of God, and the kind of love to be celebrated in the Christian community (1 Corinthians 13: 1-7):

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

St. Paul’s eulogy on love expresses the love that humanity needs with one another: “If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but not have love, I gain nothing... And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three: and the greatest of these is love.” (I Corinthians 13:13) In loving God and loving others, humanity elevates itself and unites in purpose with God.

Love and Ethics in Community

Correcting one's inner beliefs and purifying the heart, then, is the first task for Christians in order to be reconciled with God and with each other.¹⁶ As 1 John 1:5-8 writes,

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

As the Hebrew Prophets had proclaimed, there was a fundamental contradiction between authentic worship of God and mistreatment of others. Early Christians pointed this out in embedded Christian values of love in community, 1 John 4:19-21 writes:

We love because He first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."

Christian Fellowship: Agape

Early Christians used the term *agape* to mean "Christian love", the kind of self-sacrificing love of God for humanity that Christ exemplified. *Agape* is an expression of love that exists in the context of relationship, though doesn't require knowledge of the other nor any expectation of reciprocity. In many Bible translations, *agape* is translated as charity (from the Latin *caritas*).¹⁷ The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. described *agape* as

¹⁶ There is tension in the Christian tradition on the role of salvation by righteous works and salvation by faith alone, which is particularly emphasized in Protestant Christianity – particularly Calvinism. The New Testament binds beliefs to actions, such as when Matthew (7:16-20) writes:

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

James (2:14-24) is even more explicit about the relationship between faith and deeds:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

¹⁷ Augustine reserved the word *caritas* for the love of God for humankind and for human love motivated by the divine.

meaning “understanding, redeeming goodwill for all men... it is the love of God working in the lives of men.”

Christians are called to practice the kind of unconditional, volitional, respectful love for God with one another (1 Corinthians 10:24; Ephesians 4:1-6). Paul urges the imitation of Christ as authentic worship to believers: ‘Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.’ (Ephesians 5:1,2) This was intended to inform all social relations, from family and marriage (Ephesians 5:25; 6:1-4) to friendships (John 15:13).

John records Jesus as proclaiming, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:12, 13) Jesus’ subsequent death on the cross represents for Christians the ultimate act of compassion and love. Paul writes that “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) According to 1 John 3:16-19:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him.

Paul talks at length about brotherly love (1 Thessalonians 4:9; Romans 12:10) and its significance to the community (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8: 12-14). As a divine gift, *agape* “appears to be a dynamic force that is conterminous with the presence of the Spirit of God, engendering the practical realities that make harmonious communal life possible (I Corinthians 13; Galatians 5:14)” (Switzer, Vol. II, 637).¹⁸

Brotherly love becomes the litmus test for the follower of Christ: “By this all will know that you are my disciples... if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Thanagaraj writes that the “human response to God’s love is expressed not only through one’s love of God with one’s entire being; it is primarily expressed through the love of neighbor.” (Thanagaraj, Vol. II, 451) For Paul,

love is not only a theological concept but also an ethical prescription preventing corrosion of early Christian communities in times of communal discord and factional bickering (Galatians 5:15). For Paul, those who live in God’s Spirit by baptism are enabled in their capacity to love fully. (Switzer, 637)

Schramm notes that neighborly love is associated with the practice of a number of good and charitable deeds, including “table-fellowship, first aid, and release from debt or

¹⁸ In Greenberg, Yudit Kornberg, ed. *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*. II volumes.

healing.” (Schramm, in Vol. II, p. 381).¹⁹ Paul encouraged local church concern with the wider human community.

Christian social values, while centrally based in the cardinal principle of love, also carry over many of the ethical precepts found in Judaism. As Hebrews 13: 1-3 explains:

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Ethic for Enemies

Christians understand God’s desire to see a love of ‘the other’ regardless of their religious, tribal or other identity markers. Christian love went so far as to emphasize the love for enemies and praying for persecutors (Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 12:14; 17-21). Luke (6: 32-36) elaborates this principle explicitly:

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners’, expecting to be repaid in full.

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Transformation and Social Change: Nonviolence and Forgiveness

Jesus undertook “transforming initiatives” to respond to violence (Glen Stassen, *Just Peacemaking*) Transformational because they changed expected roles and status.

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Matthew 5:38-41)

Paul’s twelfth letter to the Romans has a number of ethical verses expounding on the manner of living a pious life that is “holy and acceptable to God” based on Jesus’ teachings (Romans 12:1). These include: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them (Verse 14)”, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil” (Verse 17) and “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18). Paul concludes:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by

¹⁹ Ibid.

doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12: 19-21)

Christianity teaches that God chose to send Jesus as a mercy to humankind instead of punishing them for their transgressions. In fulfilling God’s will (Matthew 26:39) and in forgiving others, Jesus provides Christians with the ultimate example of the transformation of evil into good. Jesus’ actions and principles of nonviolence were a source of inspiration and empowerment for early Christians. In particular, Christians drew from Jesus’ remark to Simon Peter, who rushed to defend him and he was being arrested: “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” (Matthew 26:52; see also John 18:11). Jesus enjoined his followers not to harm those who harm them:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” (Matthew 5:38-40)

Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan²⁰ explains the theme of nonviolent transformation as “the Law of the Cross”:

“the suffering of Christ does not pay a debt of suffering to God as is often supposed; rather, the suffering and death brought into the world through sin is transformed through the power of Christ, for in Christ, God has taken up the suffering of the world and transformed – not through violence, but through the power of love.”

Key to the success of nonviolence strategies for social change is the basic belief in the value and dignity of all human life, which includes a principled love for adversaries and oppressors. It is this moral principle and ethic for dealing with enemies which often transforms social dynamics and systems of oppression.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:43-45)

The power of nonviolence, Buttry notes, is that these acts demonstrate that the ego-gratification of oppressing another is taken away, while the “‘powerless’ person has the power to act outside of accepted scripts of the oppressive relationships. By taking a transforming initiative, the person claims his or her own humanity, while at the same time not denying the other. A moral mirror can be held up which exposes the evil of the system, or at least refuses to accept the definitions under which the oppressor operates.” (Buttry, 17)²¹

²⁰ In McMahon, Christopher. “Suffering in Christianity,” in Kornberg, op. cot. Vol. I. p. 616.

²¹ *Christian Peacemaking: From Heritage to Hope.*

Paul demonstrates a similar understanding of the transformative power of the powerless in describing the purpose and calling of the members of the early Christian community, who were not

...wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

Redemption and Redemptive Suffering

While love is a central virtue of Christianity, love is understood to involve both cost and consequence. The birth and death of Jesus are both considered signs of God's love, and the profound suffering of Christ is described as necessary to his salvific work (Luke 24:26). Rigney writes that Christian love is reconciled with the notion of pain: the "conjoining of painful suffering and atoning sacrificial death is a distinctive feature of Christianity." (Rigney, Vol. II, 455)²² It is from this final sacrifice that Christians themselves are asked to relinquish themselves and become "born again".

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the principle which brings together the Christian values of love, agape, compassion, humility, mercy and redemptive salvation together. Forgiveness is a defining virtue and practice of Christianity, which follows from the recognition that humanity is deeply flawed and yet always within reach of redemption and God's mercy. More than an ideal, forgiveness is central part of Christian worship and identity, and is prominently and frequently stated in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Having faith in God is related directly to God's forgiveness of one's sins, and one's ability to forgive others (Luke 5:20; 7:47-50; Matthew 18:35) As God forgives, so are Christians expected to forgive. The Bible is clear on this point: Mark (11:25) warns that "when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." Matthew reinforces the point:

"If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins."
(Matthew 6:14-15)

Jesus' many examples of forgiveness provide models for Christians. Jesus begs God to forgive those who had physically harmed and were killing him, for "they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). For those that *do* know what they have done, Christians are expected to confess their transgressions in full sincerity and repent of their actions in order to be assured of God's forgiveness and reward. It is the promise of God's merciful forgiveness for the sincere repentant that distinguishes Christian belief.

²² In Greenberg, op. cit.

The transformation of the heart, being so important to Christian faith, is essential to forgiveness. Matthew 18:35 asks Christians to “forgive your brother from your heart” if they are to receive the blessings of God’s forgiveness and find peace. So important is this principle that to be Christian *means* to forgive when asked by another in sincerity. Luke (7:47-50) describes the relationship between love, faith and the forgiveness of sins:

“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.” Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.... Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

When Jesus was asked whether there were limits to such acts, if after the seventh time of bestowing forgiveness to a repeat offender that was enough, Jesus replied, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:22). Luke (17:3-4) reaffirms this:

So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him.

Repentance

As forgiveness is a central value, so is the belief in the power of redemption. If all of humanity is fallen, then the ability to perceive one’s errors and sincerely seek a change in one’s heart is a sacred process denied to no one. Sincere confession of transgressions (Matthew 3:6; 18:15-17; Acts 19:18; James 5:16-18) and other hidden sins is a key feature of this process of transformation.

It is expected that right actions will invariably follow such a profound internal realization and transformation of the heart, and it is a commandment from God not to withhold forgiveness from a sincere repentant in order not to obstruct the workings of God. Mark (9:42) warns followers: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” In the same way, Jesus praised those who strive to reconcile among others and resolve their conflicts: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

A Christian is required then to demonstrate “good faith” through sincere forgiveness and a willingness to facilitate such transformations, which entails a ‘rebirth’ or renewal of the relationship and individuals involved. Such ‘clean breaks’, ‘clean slates’ and leaps of faith are necessary for a society of fallen individuals to live in peace and obey God. Christians are promised God’s forgiveness if they sincerely ask for it and have faith, and so it becomes the responsibility of a Christian to do the same (Luke 15:11-32).

The ability to forgive and make amends (Luke 19:8-10) is understood as the ability to restore relationships with God and within the community (Galatians 6:1-3), and underscores all of the other virtues articulated by Jesus (Ephesians 4:32). As Colossians 3:12-14 explains,

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other

and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Hypocrisy

The emphasis on purity of motives and right belief makes the charge of hypocrisy an issue of particular concern to Christians, which the Gospel of Matthew particularly notes (Matthew 6:2; 6:4-6; 6:15-17; 7:4-6; 15:6-8; 22:17-19; 23:12-16; 23:22-30; Romans 2:21-24). Within his community, Jesus often hurled charges of hypocrisy against religious and other Jewish leaders. In the tradition of social criticism, Jesus railed against leaders he condemned as abandoning their more important obligations to social justice while making outward appearances of piety. Matthew (23:23-28) writes that Jesus exclaimed,

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Other verses underscore a deep frustration at the failure of community leaders to live up to their duties to defend the causes of the weak (Matthew 23:23; Mark 7:9-13). Jesus was particularly scornful of the “unengaged piety” of religious leaders. Luke (20: 46-47) writes:

Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.

Early Christians strongly encouraged the doing of good works in private, so as to avoid the temptation and fate of the hypocrites, who perform their good deeds “with trumpets” and for the admiration of peers. As Matthew (6:1-6) writes:

Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Generosity

Jesus particularly singled out love of wealth as a false god (Matthew 6:24, Luke 16:13). Greed, covetousness, arrogance, gluttony and pride are understood in Jewish and Christian Scripture alike as being idolatrous (1 Samuel 15:23). Matthew (6:21) records that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Those like Zacchaeus, however, who equitably shared their wealth were assured salvation (Luke 19:8-10). The New Testament reminds Christians, “give, and it will be given to you” (Luke 6:38).

The New Testament also speaks to the importance of generosity, remarking “Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again (Luke 6:30).” The Christian manual *Didache* (ca. 100 CE) claims that the true Christian must give to everyone who asks, without looking for repayment. Jesus is understood by Christians as a paragon of generosity and self-sacrifice (Matthew 20:25-28; Acts 5:31): “Though he was rich... yet for your sake he became poor” (2 Corinthians 8:9)

While Jesus emphasized the importance of the spiritual over the material, he nevertheless strongly advocated for social justice and generosity for the poor. This includes just lending practices (Luke 6:33-36) where Jesus reminds followers to

Lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Special place for “the least of these”

Jesus’ ministry was devoted to the poor and the vulnerable in his community. Not only were the needy the most deserving of love and fellowship, but that their piety and faith was closest to God. Jesus’ message of worldly renunciation and God’s special blessings to those steadfast in the face of hardship gave particular dignity to the poor. James records that Jesus said:

“Listen my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?” (James 2:1-7)

Jesus particularly singles out the needy and the vulnerable for special blessings by God. Luke 6:20-23 records that Jesus

looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of

the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

In the tradition of Jewish prophets, Jesus devoted his energy to speaking out and addressing the plight of the poor and the powerless. His ministry focused on the suffering class – lepers, despised women, the sick, the blind, the hungry, the persecuted, and other marginalized peoples (Luke 4:18-19, 7:18-23; Matthew 11:2-6) at a time of tyranny and occupation. As others throughout Jewish history had done, Jesus warned his community of the consequences of corruption, injustice and God’s judgment in this life and the next (Sider, 47).

Jesus himself had been a refugee (Matthew 2: 13-15), with no regular income during his public ministry. He sent his disciples out with very little to sustain their work, relying on God for their well-being. Jesus emphasized that God had no care for one’s worldly claims or accomplishments, but rather it was the state of their heart and faith which would determine their fate in the afterlife. He also taught that those that those who imitated God by loving and caring for the neediest would be rewarded by God:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me...

He goes on to say that on Judgment Day, Jesus will testify that “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these My Brethren, you did it to Me.” (Matthew 25:40) For those who did not clothe, feed, quench, heal, visit the sick or those in prison, God would pronounce “You that are accursed, depart from me into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” whereas the righteous will find eternal life (Matthew 25:41,45)

Jesus’ own actions with the needy and vulnerable provide a paradigmatic model for believers: he personally washed the feet of the outcast and downtrodden, he gave to the poor, fed the hungry, blessed the children, associated with social outcasts such as tax collectors, Samaritans, women and non-Jews and resisted retaliation. He cast himself in the role of servant. Matthew (9:10-13) describes an incident where Jesus was asked why he dined with “sinners”: On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus proclaimed the merit of caring for the poor by feeding the hungry: “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors... But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.” (Luke 14:12-14; Hebrew 13:1-3)

Humility

Humility, love, mercy and compassion are key Christian values drawn from Jesus’ teaching. According to Matthew (18: 10), Jesus said "See that you do not look down on

one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

Humility before God (since all are sinners) was one such way to find right belief and God’s mercy (Galatians 6:3). For those “who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else,” Jesus told the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, where he concludes that “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14, see also Matthew 23:12).²³

Once Jesus remarked that “unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3,4). James (4:6) writes that "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humility was essential for Christians living in community (Matthew 20: 25-28; Mark 9:35; Philippians 2:2-8). To early Christians, Peter wrote, “all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.” (1 Peter 3:8)

Self-Righteousness

Speaking to social ethics and universal compassion, Jesus warned against self-righteousness in judging others:

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye?

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.” (Matthew 7:1-5)

In one of the New Testament’s more famous stories, Jewish leaders asked Jesus what the punishment should be for an adulterous woman for whom the law had stipulated the punishment of stoning. Jesus replied “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8:7) Paul of Tarsus, or St. Paul, was even more explicit:

“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.

²³ The parable is as follows: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" (Romans 2: 1-4)

Christians are reminded that accountability – final judgment – is God's domain. James (4:12) pointedly asks, "But you – who are you to judge your neighbor?" In Romans 14:10-12:

You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God." "So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Since only God understands what lies in human hearts, Christian founders emphasized the importance of correcting one's own inner beliefs while refraining from judging others. According to 1 Corinthians 4:5:

Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

Mercy

If all are sinners, Christians are then asked to not only be humble, love others and refrain from passing judgment, but also to be merciful with the struggles of others. Matthew (5:7) records Jesus as saying "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Romans 14:1 encourages Christians to "accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters." James 2:12-13 reminds believers to

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

Early Christians were very concerned with the way in which Christians relate to one another, as 2 Timothy 2:22-25 illustrates:

Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.

And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth...

Self-deception and 'ends justifying means' paradigms are denounced in Christian teaching (Galatians 6:7-8; James 1:26; John 1:8), as holiness is a way of living itself (Matthew 4:8-10, 16:26). By focusing on righteousness and the inner kingdom, they

could find comfort and sustenance from God through faith, God would reward them for eternity in the afterlife, and their needs on earth would be met. Matthew (6:31-34) writes:

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

The bedrock of Christianity is absolute faith in God, from which appropriate, ethical and righteous actions will follow. Through faith in Christ, and faith in the belief that Jesus died for our sins and thereby atoned for our natures, Christianity promises God's mercy and their salvation in this life and the next (Ephesians 1:6-8), and affirms that their deeds would comport with their faith. Faith in God rescues believers from worldly temptations, while those who trust in God's mercy repent of their transgressions, forgive others, and open their heart to do God's bidding on Earth will be saved (Matthew 13:15; Acts 2:38, 10:42-44; 13:37-39).

Ethics and Prosocial Values in Islam

Human Nature

In Islam, God endowed humanity with a good, purposeful nature and with a deep inner awareness of God. At this most basic level, humankind has an in-built ability to naturally and independently perceive what is right, good and ethical. Muslims understand their faith as *din al-fitrah* (natural religiousness), which at its purest level is in a state of instinctual and natural surrender to God (30:30). By heeding this deeply-seated calling of conscience, humankind pursues the highest good for self and others, and thereby fulfills the purpose of creation in service and worship of God (51:56).

The challenge for humanity is to remember their “pure heart”²⁴ and act in faithful accordance: the consequences of having an innate sense of right and wrong, in addition to the blessings of critical reasoning and free will, means that individuals will be strictly judged by God on the basis of their actions. The central message of Islam is one of uncompromising moral accountability (103, 82; 15:92-93; 35:18). While humankind may be inherently decent and compassionate, we are also most prone to forgetfulness, willfulness and distraction.

To help live authentically and consistently with our true natures, and to remind humanity of the consequences of our actions, Muslims believe humanity has been given divine guidance through the Qur’an, as revealed through the Prophet Mohammed. The Qur’an is understood as a “mercy” to humankind, enjoining Muslims to use their gifts and act on their innate sense of decency in service and obedience to God through the creation of a just and peaceful society (6:157; 21:107, 6:165). The Qur’an is replete with reminders for Muslims to remember God frequently in their lives, in thought, word and deed (76:25, 4:103, 3:41, 33:41-42, 2:198-200, 5:4, 6:118, 7:201; 8:2-4; 13:26-28; 14:24-27; 20:14; 20:33-34; 24:1; 29:45; 33:35; 35:10; 39:9; 50:37; 51:55-58).

This abiding awareness of God in human nature (*al-fitrah*) is a core truth on which religion and society are based. The Qur’an therefore concretely and repeatedly links “right belief” with “right action” as most pleasing to God, as a fulfillment of God’s highest aims for humankind, and as representative of the meaning of being a “Muslim” – one who submits to God. This also aligns the pursuit of the highest individual good in Islam with the greatest collective good, serving as the basis of a just, ordered and peaceful society.

Being a Muslim implies not only a belief in the one God, angels, the prophets, the scripture and the Day of Judgment, but also actively upholding a set of personal obligations to community and abiding by a clearly defined codes of social and moral

²⁴ The Qur’an states “And whomever believeth in God, He guideth his heart. And God is Knower of All things.” (64:11) Other verses state that the Day of Judgment is “The day when wealth and sons avail not (any man), save him who bringeth unto God a whole heart.” (26:88-89) Hadiths report the Prophet saying that “Within every body is a piece of flesh: when it thrives, the whole body thrives, and when it rots, the whole body rots, and that is the heart.” (Bukhari, no. 52, Kitab al-Iman, and Muslim, no. 4178, Kitab al-Masafah)

conduct. The Qur'an "emphasizes the mutual expectations and relations fostered by a universal parentage" (4:1-2), connecting individual belief in God to social responsibilities:

Humankind, be aware of your duties to your Lord, who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered many men and women; and be aware of your duties to God [through whose relationship] you demand of one another, and the wombs [that relate you]; surely God watches over you. (4:1-2)

Sachedina²⁵ writes that the Qur'an specifically "promotes human sociability and positive bonds between people because of their common ethical responsibility toward one another." (2001: 76) When the Prophet Mohammed was asked, "Who among men is most favored by God?" He replied: "A man who does the most good to people."²⁶ Chief among these are deep ethical commitments to equality and justice, and social obligations to the poorest and least powerful in the community.

Translating beliefs into action: Creating a Just Society

As God revealed Himself to the Jewish and Christian communities in times of extreme oppression, Islamic tradition holds that God's revelation to Muslims came in a period of oppression by ignorance, corruption and internecine violence tearing apart the fabric of Arabian tribes. This time of *al-jahiliyya* (ignorance) was ended with God's revelation of the Qur'an through the Prophet Mohammed, whose leadership ultimately united the disparate, warring tribes of Arabia into a unified Muslim community (*ummah*).

The most important Islamic social ethics articulated in the Qur'an are reinforced by the example and leadership of the Prophet in Medina, the first organized Muslim community. Muslims throughout history view this period as a time of righteousness, human affirmation, dignity and social justice, and a model for the ideal implementation of Islamic social ethics.

The Abrahamic Ethic: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Social Justice

Islamic values are derived primarily from the Qur'an and the corpus of writings that follow the words and personal example of the Prophet Mohammed (the *Hadiths*) in Mecca and in the first Muslim community, from which different legal schools of thought are based (33:21). These also form the basis of the *Sunnah*, the Muslim way of life. Both the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* reflect a great preoccupation with issues of social justice and social ethics, as the very purpose of Islam is to bring individuals in harmony with God's will for creation, which for Muslims means creating a just society to stand as a model for the rest of the world.

The core beliefs in liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice – the “Abrahamic ethics” – are foundational religious values which carry significant social and political

²⁵ Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, 2001.

²⁶ Reported by Al-Tabarani and others on the authority of Ibn Umar, see *Al-Makasid Al-Hasanah*, pp. 200-201.

implications.²⁷ Beliefs rooted in human dignity and freedom of conscience influence social values on how society is structured. Some of the social values that emerge from these fundamental principles in Islam include those emphasizing *Ta'aruf* (knowing one another), *Ta'awun* (cooperation, mutual assistance, in transactions), and *Takamul* (complementarity and completion).

Equality and Justice

The Constitution of Medina promulgated a new set of laws in accordance with the Islamic vision of equality and human dignity, doing away with traditional forms of justice which long privileged the powerful (Sachedina, 2001). By reformulating the tribal retributive ethos with laws based on fundamental equality and restorative justice²⁸ (2:179; 2:194), the Prophet introduced a radically new model for society where a principled, overarching vision of justice serves as a centrifugal, uniting force.

The preeminence of justice in Islam informs all aspects of theology as well as individual behavior and social values. God's very purpose for creation and for the Muslim community itself is deeply intertwined with the concept of justice: "We sent aforesome our messengers with clear Signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance, that men may stand forth in Justice." (57:25) Justice provides the very basis and rationale for human free will, reason, and the need for divine guidance.

The Qur'an makes clear that justice itself is a command from God (16:90, 5:8), enjoining believers to that which is just and kind (16:90), as well as forbidding that which is unjust (72:15; 60:8). The primacy of justice among Islamic values is demonstrated by God's command to pursue it above all other considerations:

"O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even if it be against yourselves, your parents, and your relatives, or whether it is against the rich or the poor, for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do."(4:35)

Justice is to permeate all actions, thought and speech: "When you speak, speak with justice, even if it is against someone close to you..." (6:152) The Qur'an makes it equally clear that the practice of justice is as important with those with whom one is estranged or in conflict with:

"O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to Piety: and fear Allah. For Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do." (5:8)

Equality and Social Justice

Radical Egalitarianism and Human Dignity

²⁷ Faisal Abdel Raouf, *What's Right with Islam*.

²⁸ Sachedina notes that "Retributive justice, according to the Koran, should aim at redressing the wrong by making the offender acknowledge responsibility and encouraging the victim to consider alternatives to the perpetuation of violence." (2001: 112)

In Islam, social justice is rooted in a strong underlying egalitarian ethic, based on the Qur'anic principle that for God, the only differentiation among creation is in piety (*taqwa*) or righteousness (*birr*):

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things) (49:13)

Other verses reinforce this core of idea of equality: “It is neither their meat nor their blood that reaches Allah: it is your piety that reaches Him” (22:37). A number of Hadiths support this message: Abu Huraira reported that the Prophet said “Verily, Allah does not look to your faces and your wealth but He looks to your hearts and to your deeds” (Muslim, the Book of Virtue, Good Manners, and the Ties of Relationship, Hadith 6221; see also Sahih Muslim no. 6707, Kitab al-Birr wa'l-Silah wa'l Adab). In his final sermon, the Prophet famously reminded his followers:

All mankind is from Adam and Eve, 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 and good action...

The Prophet enacted a series of social reforms based on fundamental principles of equality and the dignity of God's creation, including undermining the practice of slavery and improving the status and rights of women. Early on, the Prophet outlawed one of the underlying causes for slavery in the Muslim community – the practice of usury, a commonplace practice of lending money at exorbitant rates, which further exacerbated wealth inequalities and led many to crushing poverty, and some into slavery.

The Prophet sought to ameliorate the condition of slaves by enjoining kindnesses and fairness, reminding believers that “slaves are your brothers”, and should be treated accordingly. The Prophet was specific as to what ethical treatment involved: one “should feed him of what he eats, and give him dresses of what he wears, and should not ask him to do a thing beyond his capacity. And if at all he asks him to do a hard task, he should help him therein.” Another Hadith reports the Prophet saying that “He will not enter Paradise who behaveth ill to his slaves.”

Slaves were accorded legal protections and basic human rights in Medina²⁹, and the practice of slavery itself was curbed by the generous rewards given to those who freed them. (Bukhari, 1/2, no. 29) The freeing of slaves was seen as the highest form of charity, and which also earned remittances for sins. The importance placed on the Prophet's own example also served to mitigate practice of slavery. Prophet Mohammed frequently freed

²⁹ Among the reforms and protections put forward by the Prophet on the issue of slavery included erring on the side of slaves on contractual disputes, inheritance rights and freedom for the children of slaves, the freeing of one's slaves as punishment for wrongdoing, and the right for slaves to earn enough money through their labors to buy their freedom.

slaves and gave them prominent positions in the Muslim community.³⁰ The Prophet declared that “Indeed it is obligatory upon the Muslims to free their captives or to pay their ransoms.”³¹

The most radical social reforms advanced by Islam regarded the status of women, who were given unprecedented rights and status in the Muslim community, where they emerged in all aspects of community life, including battle, where they fought alongside men. The principle of strict individual moral accountability to God gave an equal status to women as believers (or unbelievers). Numerous verses go to great lengths to support the principle of gender equality in the sight of God:

Men and women who have surrendered, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, enduring men and enduring women, humble men and humble women, men and women who give charity, men who fast and women who fast, men and women who guard their private parts, men and women who remember God often - for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty reward. (73:36)

The Qur’an makes clear that there is no gender difference where righteousness is concerned (4:1; 4:124; 9:71, 6: 97). Believing men and women “are leaders one of the other, they bid to honor, and forbid dishonor; they perform the prayer, and pay the alms, and they obey God and his Messenger. Those - upon them God will have mercy; God is All-mighty, All wise.” (9:73). Another verse notes: “I waste not the labor of any that labors among you, be you male or female - the one of you is as the other.” (3:194) The fate of unbelief for men and women was likewise equally shared: “That God may chastise the hypocrites, men and women alike, and the idolaters, men and women alike; and that God may turn again unto the believers, men and women alike.” (33:73)

Among the advances in women’s dignity are punishments for those accusing or defaming women (a false accusation of adultery becoming one of eight mortal sins) and added protections for women where their rights and status were concerned.³² So radical were these reforms³³ – deeply controversial during the Prophet’s time – that the progress of gender equality suffered from severe, consecutive backlashes and a prolonged rollback in rights after his death (Ahmed 1992).

Liberty and Freedom of Conscience

³⁰ Notable examples include Bilal, the first muezzin to call Muslims to prayer and who is still well-respected by Muslims today, and a Coptic Christian slave given to the Prophet whom he subsequently freed and married.

³¹ As narrated by Saeed through his chain from Hibban bin Jabalah.

³² These included the right of women to choose one’s spouse, the right of inheritance, the right of due process when charged with improprieties, the right to own property independently, the right to enter into business contracts and deals independently, the right to divorce, the right to recourse against husbands and male relatives, the right to travel independently, the right to guardianship of children, a ban on isolating women, a ban on arbitrary divorce, the right to teach, learn and advocate their views, the right to participate in community decision-making, and freedom of expression.

³³ In pre-Islamic Arabia, female infants were buried alive and women were regarded as property, with no independent status or rightful claims. In this sense, the independence, equality in legal and religious rights and duties accorded women in Medina was considered revolutionary.

Islam's core message of justice and strict moral accountability for believers not only speaks to equality, free will, and reason, but also to the absence of mediation in the individual relationship with God. In Islam there can be no "bearing the burdens of another". It also means that there can be no compulsion in religion on matters of faith, since true belief can only be known to God (2:256). This principle of freedom of conscience was enshrined in the founding document of the Muslim community, the Constitution of Medina.

Given the endowment of reason, free will and fundamental equality with others, humanity possesses at all times the freedom to accept or reject God and to choose actions that are good or bad. The Qur'an accords a tremendous amount of personal freedom in matters of religion: "The Truth is from your Lord; so let whomever wills, believe, and let whomever wills, disbelieve." (18:29)

The Muslim profession of belief in the Day of Judgment is a not-so-subtle reminder to use these God-given liberties well, as they are also "a test" from God (3:142; 18:7; 2:155). This freedom of thought in matters of ultimate belief not only underscores human choice, reason and dignity in Islam, but also forms the basis for diversity, pluralism and tolerance in Islam – essential building blocks for a just and peaceful society. The Qur'an explains:

"Had God willed, He would have made into one community (*ummah*); but [it was His will] to test you in what He gave you. So compete with each other in doing good works. To God you are all returning, and He will inform you about how you differed." (5:48)

Pluralism and Tolerance

The Qur'anic vision of pluralism is closely related to the belief in fundamental equality of humanity, the divine gifts of reason and free will, and God's plan for creation (49:13). The Qur'an states that God sent out different prophets to different people at different times to reveal the same truth of the oneness of God and of individual moral accountability (2:213).

Pluralism and diversity are therefore to be approached through the principles of justice and egalitarianism, where the doing of good deeds are the only forms of distinction acceptable to God. Diversity exists today as a call to know others, and "view with one another to attain your Sustainer's forgiveness... for God loves those who do good." (3:133-134). Where religious pluralism is concerned, the Qur'an states:

"Had God willed, He would have made you into one community; but [it was His will] to test you in what He gave you. So compete with each other in doing good works. To God you are all returning, and He will inform you about how you differed." (5:48)

Sachedina writes that "Religious pluralism is a prerequisite for a peaceful accommodation of the differences in the individual and the communal sense of the highest good." (2001: 77) From this understanding of pluralism and diversity, the Islamic concept of tolerance (*tasamuh*) was developed. The Qur'an and the Hadiths confer

legitimacy to and demonstrate a strong respect for the Jewish and Christian communities living within and alongside the Muslim community. The Qur'an states:

"Those who believe (in the Quran), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians...and (all) who believe in God and the last day and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." (2:62)

Islam offers "Peoples of the Book" a broad scope of religious freedoms, protections, and minority group rights within Muslim communities as a religious moral duty. In one Hadith recorded by Abu Daud, the Prophet warned,

"Beware! Whoever is cruel and hard on a non-Muslim minority, or curtails their rights, or burdens them with more than they can bear, or takes anything from them against their free will; I will complain against the person on the Day of Judgment."

Muslims are encouraged to invite non-Muslims into a "respectful" and "gentle" dialogue on religion, with "wisdom and beautiful preaching," (16:125, 22:67-69), though nothing more. Where disagreement or acrimony enters into dialogue, Muslims are instructed to part ways, saying "To you your beliefs, and to me mine" (109:6) (1:107-9). On interfaith disputes, the Qur'an reminds Muslims that only God can be the final arbiter on matters of ultimate truth: "God will judge between you on the Day of Judgment concerning the matters in which you differ." (22:76-69)

Fraternity

The individual in Islam is inescapably linked to his or her social context: it is *in* community that Muslims manifest belief, fulfilling God's purpose for humanity in the establishment of a just society. Seyyed Hossein Nasr observes that "community implies above all a human collectivity held together by religious bonds that are themselves the foundations for social, juridical, political, economic, and ethical links between its members" (Nasr, 160).³⁴

Of the five pillars of Islam, only one is accomplished by and for the individual alone (the *shehada*, profession of faith). The remaining four pillars involve individual participation or experience in the community, self-consciously linking belief to action. While individuals are to be judged on the Day of Judgment in Islam, Nasr explains that ... the human community is judged in the Qur'an according to the degree to which it allows its members to live the good life, in the religious sense, based on moral principles... a community as a whole can be judged and punished by God in this world, but a whole community does not enter paradise or hell as a collectivity (Nasr, 159-160).

The Qur'an also makes clear that the Muslim community is called upon by God to serve as a model of true human fraternity and social justice in this world (2:143). Far from suggesting superiority over other communities, the Qur'an makes clear that all

³⁴ Nasr, Seyyed Hussein. *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*.

communities have been given the same core theological message, and their own sacred rituals and institutions and prophets, by God's own design. (22:34)

Numerous verses in the Qur'an and Hadiths promote an ethic of social duty and responsibility toward fellow Muslims and non-Muslims. The Qur'an states that "Verily, the believers are brothers" (49:9), a message reinforced by various Hadiths:

Muslims are brothers in religion and they must not oppress one another, nor abandon assisting each other, nor hold one another in contempt.

The seat of righteousness is the heart; therefore that heart which is righteous, does not hold a Muslim in contempt; and all the things of one Muslim are unlawful to another: his blood, property, and reputation.

On a Muslim variation of the Golden Rule, with application for all *Ummahs*, the Prophet Mohammed once said that "no man is a believer until he wishes for his brother that which he wishes for himself." (Bukhari, Kitab Al-Iman, Hadith no. 12) When asked the "most excellent parts of *Iman* (faith)", the Prophet replied that in addition to worshipping God, it is "To do unto all men as you would wish to have done unto you, and to reject for others what you would reject for yourself."

Many of the Prophet's sayings reflect great concern with a compassionate community: "He is not a believer who eats his fill when his neighbor beside him is hungry," and "He does not believe whose neighbors are not safe from his injurious conduct." (Bayhaqi) Suhrawardi relates another Hadith where the Prophet observed that "Ye will not enter Paradise until ye have faith, and ye will not complete your faith until ye love one another."

The Qur'an and Hadiths reinforce the importance of overcoming old divisions and sharing a greater community identity rooted in worship of God:

And hold fast, all of you together, to the cable of Allah, and do not separate. And remember Allah's favor unto you: How ye were enemies and He made friendship between your hearts so that ye became as brothers by His grace; and (how) ye were upon the brink of an abyss of fire, and He did save you from it. Thus Allah makes clear His revelations unto you, that haply ye may be guided, (3:103)

The Compassionate Community: Mercy and Charity

The Islamic pursuit of social justice and the ideals of fraternity also manifests into a deep and long-standing concern for the plight of the poor and the oppressed. The Prophet was passionately committed to improving the status of the community's impoverished and powerless, introducing sweeping social and economic reforms deemed revolutionary at the time.

As Jesus declared that "Blessed are the poor," the Prophet said "Poverty is my pride." (Nasr, 171) The Prophet informed his followers that "He who helps his fellow-creature in the hour of need, and he who helps the oppressed, him will God help in the Day of

Travail.” When asked which actions were the most excellent in the eyes of God, Prophet Mohammed replied:

To gladden the heart of a human being, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the wrongs of the injured.

Feed the hungry and visit the sick, and free the captive, if he be unjustly confined. Assist any person oppressed, whether Muslim or non-Muslim.

The Prophet himself lived in great simplicity and was known for his humanity, fairness and generosity toward others, asking his supporters to “seek for my satisfaction in that of the poor and needy.” One Hadith reports the Prophet proclaiming, “O Lord! Keep me alive a poor man, and let me die poor; and raise me amongst the poor.” The dignity and divine favor associated with the vulnerable is also shown in the Hadith that echoes Judaism and Christianity’s reference to God among ‘the least of these’:

“O son of Adam, I fell ill and you visited Me not.” He will say: “O Guardian-Lord, and how should I visit You when You are the Lord of the worlds? God will say: “Did you not know that My servant so- and so- had fallen ill and you visited him not? Did you not know that had you visited him you would have found Me with him?”

[Then God will say]: “O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not.” He will say: “O Guardian-Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds?” God will say: “Did you not know that My servant so-and-so asked you for food you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found Me with him?”

[Then God will say]: “O son of Adam, I asked you to give Me to drink and you gave Me not to drink.” He will say: “O Lord, how should I give You to drink when You are the Lord of the worlds?” God will say: “My servant so-and-so asked you for drink, and you gave him not to drink. Had you given him to drink you would have surely found Me with him.”

Widows and Orphans

The Prophet was deeply concerned for the welfare of the poor and the powerless in his community, urging Muslims to be especially mindful that the treatment of widows and orphans be both just and kind. Having been orphaned at the age of six, in a highly tribal social context, the Prophet spent considerable time and attention on the issue of justice and proper care for orphans. Mentioning orphans twenty-three times in twenty-two chapters, the Qur’an instructs Muslims to “stand firm for justice to orphans. There is not a good deed which you do, but God is well-acquainted therewith” (4:127). Other chapters warn against unjust dealings with orphans in their care (4:2-8, 4:36, 6:152; 17:34; 89:17; 107:2), reminding Muslims to “treat not the orphan with harshness” (93:9), and threatening those who deal with them unjustly with “blazing fire” (4:10). In other chapters, the Qur’an notes that

“The best thing to do is what is for their good; if ye mix their affairs with yours, they are your brethren; but Allah knows the man who means mischief from the

man who means good. And if Allah had wished, He could have put you into difficulties: He is indeed Exalted in Power, Wise." (2:220).

Numerous Hadiths have the Prophet encouraging his followers to take considered care of orphans in their homes, look after their interests and property justly and educate them. He once told a group of Muslims that those who care for orphans are guaranteed a place in Paradise with the Prophet himself: "I and the person who looks after an orphan and provides for him, will be like *this* in paradise," and joined his index and middle finger together (Bukhari, italics added).

On several occasions, the Prophet reminded Muslims that mercy will be shown to those who demonstrate mercy themselves. When a man once told the Prophet that he had never kissed any of his ten children, the Prophet replied that "Whoever is not merciful to others will not be treated mercifully." (Bukhari no.6063, Kitab al-Adab) Another Hadith states, "The merciful are shown mercy by the Merciful. Be merciful to those on earth, and He who is in heaven will be merciful to you," (Al-Tirmidhi, no.2049, Kitab al-Birr wa'l-Silah) while Bukhari (no. 7465, Kitab al-Tawhid) reports that "God is not merciful to one who is not merciful to people."

Charity/Zakat: "and repel not the beggar" (Al-Duha: 93:9)

In the prophetic tradition, Mohammed warned against the attachment to material things at the expense of community and compassion. The Prophet warned believers that "the love of the world is the root of all evil," and that "It is difficult for a man laden with riches to climb the steep path which leads to bliss." The Qur'an rails against those who "amass wealth, hoarding it to himself" (104:1-6) and those who withheld things commonly used by others (107:1-7).

Therefore, believers should "be in the world like a traveler, or like a passer-on, and reckon yourself as of the dead," since "Cursed is this world and cursed is all that is in this world, except the remembrance of God and that which aids thereto." At the same time, Islam is not a world-renouncing religion, encouraging believers instead to honest labor and equitable accumulation of wealth. "It is no sin for you," says the Qur'an, "that you seek the bounty of your Lord (by trading)" (2:198). Another Hadith states that "Wealth, properly employed, is a blessing; and a man may lawfully endeavor to increase it by honest means."

The Prophet Mohammed was also well aware that inequalities of wealth and economic injustices, including the lack of economic opportunity, had consequences for both individual and community. One Hadith from Suhrawardi quotes the Prophet in saying, "Poverty may well become a cause of infidelity (to God's law)." The Qur'an also states that the path of the righteous involves conscientious charity: "Ye will not attain unto righteousness until ye spend that which ye love. And whatsoever ye spend, God is Aware thereof." (3:92)

The Prophet recognized that building a just and peaceful society required more than reformulated legal institutions and calls to heed moral conscience. The Prophet

Mohammed sought to manifest the spiritual equality of Islam in the *ummah* by institutionalizing practices of charity to make sure that wealth would be more equitably shared in the community. One of the most important ways of doing this was the making of alms-giving a core pillar of Islam and a central focus of Muslim life. “The payment of *zakat* [one of the Five Pillars of Islam] was seen as the primary means for achieving social justice by alleviating the sufferings of those in severe need and bridging the gap between the poor and the rich” (Cakmak, 112³⁵).

The Islamic concept of charity proclaims the right of the less privileged to have access to and receive community support (51:19). The Qur’an states: “The believers ... are steadfast in prayers, and in whose wealth there is a right acknowledged, for the poor and the destitute.” (70:22-24). Islamic teaching makes it clear that it is the duty of society’s privileged to care for the poor (2:273).³⁶ While dignifying the underprivileged through the assertion of their community rights, easing social tensions through a regularized rotation of wealth from richer members to the poorer members of the community, the Qur’an simultaneously rewards charitable deeds as among the greatest acts of piety.

In spirit, charity is an act of worship, on par in the Qur’an with *salat* (prayer). Indeed, the two are frequently used together in the Qur’an, representing both personal and social worship of God (2:110, 2:227). The Qur’an frequently extols the virtues of charity (2: 261-266), adding that the best use of charity is for caring for parents, kin, orphans, the needy, and wayfarers (2:215; 59:7; 76:8).

Charity in Islam is either obligatory (*zakat*) or voluntary (*sadaqa*). *Zakat* is derived from the verb *Zakah*, meaning “to thrive,” “to be wholesome,” or “to be pure”. The Qur’an speaks of alms-giving as a means of purification and sanctification (9:103). *Zakat* is fixed amount (2.5%) of net worth (after basic expenses are covered) every year.

The spending of one’s earnings on *zakat* is a material acknowledgement that God is the source of all bounty, and that believers are obligated to support certain categories of people in the Qur’an (2:177). These include the poor and destitute, travelers, the bankrupt, the needy, converts, captives, the collectors of *zakat* and the cause of God (which includes everything associated with general welfare, such as education, public works, etc).

Assuring wealthier Muslims that they won’t suffer for their alms-giving, the Prophet famously said that God declared, “Spend (on charity), O son of Adam, and I shall spend on you.” (Bukhari, Hadith Qudsi 11) In fact, the Qur’an makes clear that God rewards charity with a like bounty (2: 245, 2:268). One Hadith reports the Prophet Mohammed said,

³⁵ Cakmak, Cenap, “Charity in Islam,” in Greenberg, *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*, Vol. I.

³⁶ Abdullah Ibn Umar writes that the Prophet once remarked: “In one’s wealth there is a due (to God and His men) besides *zakat*.” Ibn Umar’s commentary reads that “If the *zakat* levy is insufficient to meet the needs of the poor, then it is the duty of the rich of every town to put the poor on their feet.” The fourth Caliph Ali understood this hadith in the following way: “God has ordained that the rich are to pay out of their wealth to that extent which is sufficient for the needs of the poor; so that if they do not find food and clothing, or any other need remains to be fulfilled, it would be because the rich are not doing their duty, and for this God will take them to task on the Day of Judgment.”

How excellent the wealth of the Muslim is, if it is collected through legal means and is spent in Allah's Cause and on orphans, poor people and travelers. But he who does not take it legally is like an eater who is never satisfied and his wealth will be a witness against him on the Day of Resurrection." (Bukhari, Book 52, Hadith 95)

Moreover, the Prophet also said that

A man's true wealth, as regards the Hereafter, is the good he does in this world to his fellow men. When he dies, people will say "what property has he left behind him?" But the angels will ask, "what good deeds has he sent before him?"

Sadaqat (meaning 'righteousness', from the root word *sadaqa*, "to speak the truth" or "to be true") is also a form of worship, understood to be spontaneous, sincere and direct forms of charity performed, which can include material gifts as well as any act or speech or even gesture which benefits another (17:23, 2:83, 4:8). These acts are also understood to involve 'moral learning', insofar as they inspire recipients to do well or reciprocate good deeds also. The Qur'an encourages believers to do acts of *sadaqa* privately and publicly, day and night to seek God's pleasure (2:274). Charitable acts praised in the Qur'an include: the emancipation of slaves (90:13; 2:177), the feeding of the poor (69:34; 90:11-16; 107:1-3), and taking care of orphans (17:34; 76:8; 89:17; 90:15; 93:9, 107:2).

So-called "permanent alms" (*sadaqa al-jaria*) include those acts of charity that help set up a business, pay for education, establish scholarships, and giving material aid to orphanages. These voluntary acts of inspired charity are due not only to Muslims, but to non-Muslims (2:272) and creation in general (51:19). Examples of this type of charity abound in Hadiths:

Charity is a duty unto every Muslim. He who hath not the means thereto, let him do a good act or abstain from an evil one. That is his charity.

The best of almsgiving is that which springs from the heart, and is uttered by the lips to soften the wounds of the injured.

Every good act is charity.

Charity that is concealed appeases the wrath of God.

The best charity is to satisfy a hungry person.

Doing justice between two people is charity; and assisting a man upon his beast, and lifting his baggage is charity; and pure, comforting words are charity; and answering a questioner with mildness, is charity; and removing that which is an inconvenience to wayfarers, such as thorns and stones, is a charity.

Your smiling in your brother's face is charity; and your exhorting man to virtuous deeds is charity; and your prohibiting the forbidden is charity; and your showing

men the road, in the land in which they lose it, is charity; and your assisting the blind is charity.

Voluntary alms-giving also facilitates the expiation of sins in Islamic tradition, which is urged upon anyone immediately after committing any transgression (Ihya-e-Ulumuddin, Al-Ghazzali, 1/298). *Sadaqa* also helps to protect believers from evil and punishments in the Hereafter (Ismail Hakki, Tafsir Ruh-alBayan, 1/418). In this way, it is believed to be preferable to give a little constantly than the occasional giving of much.

As an act of worship, the motives and intention of the giver of charity assumes greater importance. The Prophet said that “All deeds are based on the intention, and everyone will be rewarded according to what he intended (from his action).” The Qur’an makes it clear that “By no means shall you attain righteousness, unless you give of that which you love.” (3:92)

Cakmak argues that “Although it is voluntary, Islam is founded on the principle of charity in its broadest sense... Giving away willingly the things most valued and loved in the p. 111-112) The Prophet, when asked about the best of all charities, responded that “The best charity is what you give during your life while you are in need of it.” name of Allah is a pivotal concept in Islamic thought and practice.” (Cakmak, pp. 111-12.)

The highest praise was reserved for those who gave anonymously and without expectation: “And they give food (in spite of their love for it) to the poor, the orphan and the captive. Saying; we feed you seeking Allah's countenance only, we wish for no reward nor thanks from you.” (76: 8-9). The Prophet once remarked that “The best of alms is that which the right hand gives, and the left hand knows not of.” One tradition has the Prophet remarking that “The reward for giving voluntary alms in secret is seventy times that of giving it publicly.” (Al-Baydawi, Anwar al-Tanzil, 2/211).

At the same time, the Prophet warned Muslims against ‘false’ charity: “O you who believe, cancel not your charities by reminders of your generosity, or by harm.” (2: 264) Another verse warns (107:1-7):

Have you seen the one who denies the Religion? Such is he who repulses the orphan, and who does not urge others to feed the poor. Woe to worshippers, who are absent-minded to their prayer, those who make a show (of piety), and refuse to render small acts of kindness (towards others).

The Conquest of Self: The Greater Jihad

The Qur’an also seeks to cultivate internal personal fortitude and character among believers. The conquest of the self, or the struggle over the ego, is an effort eliciting the highest praise in Islam. As the Prophet Mohammed famously said, “The most excellent Jihad [struggle] is that for the conquest of the self” (Suhrawardy, 63).³⁷ Moreover, on leaving the battlefield victoriously, the Prophet remarked that Muslims were leaving “the lesser jihad” (the physical struggle against oppression) for “the greater jihad” (the internal struggle over the self).

³⁷ Al Suhrawardy, Abdullah Al-Mamun. *Sayings of Muhammad*.

As part of the conquest of self, or the greater jihad, Muslims are asked to curb their passions, appetites and impulses. When the Prophet Mohammed was once approached for general advice, he responded simply by saying: “Be not angry.” (Bukhari, no. 6184, Kitab al-Adab, and Tirmidhi, no. 2152, Kitab al-Birr wa’l-Silah). Subduing anger to please God and avoid errors with others was praised by the Prophet, who once said “May God fill the heart of that person who suppresses his anger with safety and faith.” For those in power, self-control is even more valued: “Whoever suppresses his anger, when he hath in his power to show it, God will give him great reward.”

One Hadith remarks on the greater power of self-control: “He is not strong and powerful who throws people down; but he is strong who withholds himself from anger.” Self-control is associated with faithfulness, trust and love of God alongside the practice of warding off evil with patience and humility.

Muhammad once said to Anas, "Son, if you are able, keep your heart from morning till night and from night till morning, free from malice towards anyone;" then he said, "Oh! my son, this is one of my laws, and he who loves my laws verily loves me."

Forgiveness and Humility

Conquering the self through God-consciousness and self-control involves more than the suppression of negative qualities. Muslims are asked to actively develop positive qualities and noble practices as well. Beyond non-retribution is forgiveness, a practice crucial to reconnecting with God and restoring relationships within society. The Qur’an states:

“And hold fast, all of you together, to the cable of God, and do not separate. And remember God’s favor unto you: How ye were enemies and He made friendship between your hearts so that he became as brothers by His grace, and (how) ye were on the brink of an abyss of fire, and He did save you from it. Thus God maketh clear His revelations unto you, that haply ye may be guided.” (3:103)

The Prophet declared that God had said: "Verily those who are patient in adversity and forgive wrongs are the doers of excellence." The Qur’an teaches that forgiveness is both a necessity and a commandment, frequently practiced by the Prophet Mohammed even with those who tormented and tried to kill him.³⁸ “The reward of the evil is the evil thereof, but whosoever forgives and makes amends, his reward is with God” (42:40). The Prophet was once asked, as Jesus was, about the limits of forgiveness:

"O Apostle of God!" How many times are we to forgive our servant's faults?" He was silent. Again the questioner asked, and [the Prophet] Muhammad gave no answer. But when the man asked a third time, he said, "Forgive your servants seventy times a day."

³⁸ Once when the Prophet was abused and tormented in the city of Taif so badly that “blood poured from his sandals”, he took refuge under a tree where the angel Gabriel appeared and announced that he could crush the city, with all of his inhabitants, for their actions. Mohammed “then prayed for the people’s forgiveness by saying, ‘O God, forgive them for they do not know.’” Sultan adds that it was “after this incident that God gave Prophet Mohammed the title of ‘mercy for all creatures’.” (Sultan, 54)

The Qur'an makes clear that while God will call humanity to strict accountability, God is also merciful and forgives often, beginning with teaching Adam the words of forgiveness in the Garden of Eden (2:37). According to Sahih Muslim (no.7146, Kitab al-Tawhah), "God says, Great and Glorious is He, 'My mercy outstrips my wrath'". The Qur'an (25: 70-71) states: "[Those] who repent and attain to faith, and act with righteousness – in their case God transforms their evil into good, for God is most forgiving, most merciful. And whoever repents and does good is turning to God repentant."

Two of the most oft-repeated qualities of God are gracious and merciful – the opening statements in each of the chapters of the Qur'an. Given the frequency of mention of these qualities of God, Muslims who are mindful of God seek to incorporate them into their own lives. In At-Talaq (65:4-5), the Qur'an speaks to mindfulness of God and forgiveness for Muslims:

"whoever is careful of (his duty to) Allah, He will make easy for him his affair. And whoso keeps his duty to Allah, he will remit from him his evil deeds and magnify reward for him."

As in Christianity, sincere repentance is key to God's forgiveness: "those who do ill-deeds and afterward repent and believe – lo! For them, afterward, Allah is Forgiving, merciful" (Al-Araf, 7:153) The Prophet once remarked that "A sincere repenter of faults is like him who hath committed none." God loves those who repent (2:222). One Hadith reports the Prophet saying,

"I would not have the whole wealth of the world in the place of this revelation. . . O My servants who have oppressed your own souls by sinning, despair not of the mercy of God." A man said, "What of him who hath associated others with God?" Muhammad remained silent for a while and then said, "Know that him also God forgives; but on repentance."

Once again, intentions, sincerity of God-consciousness and effort play an important role in influencing God's decision-making: "If ye love Allah, follow me; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (3:31). The Qur'an states that "Your Lord hath inscribed for Himself (the rule of) mercy: verily, if any of you did evil in ignorance, and thereafter repented, and amend (his conduct), lo! He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (6:54, see also 39:53).

Pride is the biggest obstacle to a Muslim's submission to God and a leading cause of sin and division, tempting believers to take refuge away from God, forget God, and close their ears and hearts to truth and guidance (2:206; 4:36; 16:23; 22:9; 31:7; 38:2; 40:56; 44:19; 45:8; 91:11). For this reason, the Prophet stated that

"He will not enter hell who hath faith equal to a mustard seed in his heart; and he will not enter Paradise who hath a single grain of pride, equal to a mustard seed, in his heart." (Sahih Muslim, no. 275, Kitab al-Iman)

Sahih Muslim reports the Prophet saying that "God is beautiful and loves beauty. Pride is to disregard the truth and to scorn people." (ibid) The Prophet Mohammed noted that "verily God instructs me to be humble and lowly and not proud; and that no one should

oppress another.” Following the example of the Prophet, one Hadith states that “Whoever is humble to men for God’s sake, may God exalt his eminence.” Muslims are called upon to enjoin humility in their relationship with God, as this is associated with virtue and harmony:

“O mankind! Call upon your Lord humbly and in secret. Lo! He loveth not aggressors. Work not confusion in the earth after the fair ordering (thereof), and call on Him in ear and hope. Lo! The mercy of God is near unto the virtuous.” (7:55-56)

Modesty and Patience

Patience (*sabr*) is a key virtue in Islam, as a one of the paths laid out by God that brings humanity from darkness to light (14:1), and is rewarded and loved by God (3:158). It is patience which gives dignity to the striving for self-conquest: “O you who believe! be patient and excel in patience and remain steadfast, and be careful of (your duty to) Allah, that you may be successful.” (3:200) Another verse reminds Muslims to “Seek help in patience and prayer; and truly it is hard save for the humble-minded.” (2:45) The Qur’an states, “O you who believe! seek assistance through patience and prayer; surely Allah is with the patient. (2:153) The Qur’an describes those who are patient as among the God-fearing, righteous and sincere in belief (2:177; 16:126-127).

Righteousness

Through worship, acts of piety and charity, a Muslim is to be identified not only by faith, but by their actions. Submitting to God is in effect the pursuit of the highest personal good, which also advances the good of the community. A Muslim is therefore a believer who worships God, and one who does so in the pursuit of the collective good. Each commitment brings about the peace, the *slm* root word for peace, from which both *Muslim* and *Islam* are derived.

The Qur’an is unequivocal in emphasizing the link and balance between religious beliefs and righteous actions, and not only through ritual. One verse (2:177) particularly demonstrates the integration of inner values with social outcomes, reminding believers that adherence to form is not true worship:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces Towards East or West [in prayer]. Rather, truly righteous are those who believe in God and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Scriptures, and the Prophets; *and* who give material gifts out of love for God, even of what they care for, to relatives and orphans, and the poor and the traveler and the needy, and for the freeing of slaves; and who establish prayer and give alms; and who fulfill their promises which they have made; and those who are patient in misfortune, affliction, and hardship – such are the people of truth, and they are the God-conscious ones.

While righteousness is found in the purity of one’s own heart, in one’s original state before distractions, willfulness and ignorance lead believers astray, the Qur’an also makes it clear that it is a path of striving. The Qur’an (90:8-18) describes the virtues of the righteous as those who “brave the steep uphill road”:

And what will explain to you what the steep uphill road is? [It is] freeing the slave, or the giving of food on a day of hunger to the orphaned relative or a needy stranger lying in the dust. Then will he be of those who believe, and enjoin patience and enjoin compassion. Such are the companions of the right hand.

A Prophetic Hadith emphasizes the effort behind righteousness: “This life is but a tillage for the next, do good that you may reap there; for striving is the ordinance of God and whatever God hath ordained can only be attained by striving.” (Suhrawardy, p. 74)

Conclusion

While God endowed humankind with a decent and God-fearing nature, the Qur’an also makes it clear that God’s purpose for creation is to test humanity in the application and manifestation of our greatest potential and ideals. The Qur’an asks, “Do you think that you will enter the garden while Allah has not yet known those who strive hard from among you, and (He has not) known the patient?” (3:142) The Prophet Mohammed once remarked that

“A servant of God will remain standing on the Day of Judgment till he is questioned about his life on earth and how he spent it, and about his knowledge and how he utilized it, and his wealth and how he acquired it and in what did he spend it, and about his body and how he used it.”

Islam seeks to provide the moral and spiritual guidance through the Qur’an and the Prophet’s example for individual believers to fulfill their divine purpose in worshipping God and establishing a just and peaceful society. Given the human capacity to know God and choose moral actions accordingly, the Abrahamic ethic speaks to fundamental human dignity. The Abrahamic principles of liberty, equality and fraternity also serve as important moral guideposts to structure and evaluate progress in society. The Qur’an asks, “And who turns away from the religion of Abraham but such as debase their souls with folly?” (2:130) The path of Abraham not only provides a means of ennobling the soul, but also bringing believers in harmony with one another, and in proximity to God:

“And who better in faith than the one who willingly surrenders his being to God, and is a doer of good, and follows the way of Abraham the rightly oriented? For God took Abraham as a friend.” (4:125)