



VOLUNTEERISM FROM ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

By

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Abstract

Volunteerism is a great virtue that is grounded in the teachings of both revealed and non-revealed religions and in all cultures. Since time immemorial, people have been spending time and money to help others without any expectation of compensation. All Prophets were volunteers and they emphatically stressed the need for volunteerism. Billions of hours are devoted to volunteer activities and some world leaders have also called upon their subjects to volunteer their time and money to help others. The aim of this work is to highlight the concept of volunteerism from the Islamic perspective. No religion or law gives volunteerism as much importance as Islam does. Islam encourages its followers to voluntarily share their time, wealth, knowledge and acts of kindness with others. The work is divided into two sections dealing with discussions on the meaning of volunteerism, its different forms and ethics.

Biodata

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The Concept of Volunteerism

Volunteerism is a great virtue that is grounded in the teachings of both revealed and non-revealed religions and in all cultures. Since time immemorial, people have been spending time and money to help others without any expectation of compensation. All Prophets were volunteers and they emphatically stressed the need for volunteerism (Qur'an 21:72-73). Billions of hours are devoted to volunteer activities and some world leaders have also called upon their subjects to volunteer to their time and money to help others. For example, President John F. Kennedy is quoted to have said to the American people: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." (Wiener, Gary (ed.), 2008, p. 12)

A. Meaning of Volunteerism

In Islam, volunteerism is a very broad concept that encompasses whatever one does for the benefit of others for the sake of Allah.

A. 1. Literal Meaning

The Arabic concept for volunteerism is *al-Tatawwu'*, which etymologically is derived from *tawa'a*, an Arabic verb that conveys the meaning of performing an action willingly (ibn Manzur, n.d., p. 343). The volunteers are called *al-Mutawwi'ah*, meaning those who fight in the *jihad* (al-Jurjan, 1412 A.H. /1991A.D., p.69) or *al-Mutawwi'un* (Qur'an 9:79). According to Lafi, a close look at the Arabic Lexicons reveals that the literal meanings for *al-Ta'awwu'* are centered around: *al-Tabarru'* (contribution or giving donation), *al-Takalluf* (take upon oneself), *al-Lin* (leniency) and *al-Ta'ah*, (Lafi, 1429A.H./ 2009 A.D.), p. 17) meaning compliance (*al-inqiyad*), surrender (*al-Istislam*) and submission (*al-Khudu'*).

There are several terms in Arabic which have the same meaning as that of *al-Tatawwu'*. They are: *Al-Tanafful* (supererogation), *al-Ihsan* (philanthropy) and *al-Ithar* (unselfishness or preference). These terms require elaboration.

Al-Tanafful is derived from *al-Nafl* which means ‘supererogatory performance’ or what is additional to an obligation (*al-Fara’id* or *al-Wajibat*), also known as *al-Mandub* and *al-Mustahabb* (al-Jurjan, p. 273). *Al-Nawafil* (sing. *Al-Nafilah*) are the additional ‘*ibadat*’ (sing. ‘*ibadah*’) i.e. acts of worship in Islam. These are *salat*, *zakat* and *hajj*. Allah advises the believers to strive together (to compete one another) towards all that is good (*al-nawafil* or supererogatory acts) (Qur’an 2:148, 3: 133). According to Lafi, competition in the attainment of the good is confined to *al-Nawafil* (supererogatory acts). It is not required in performing *al-Fara’id* (obligatory acts) because they are limited to time (Lafi, p.41). Meaning they cannot be performed before or after the specified period of time.

Al-Ihsan is a basic theme in the Qur’an. Etymologically, it is derived from *husn* (beauty/loveliness) which is the opposite of *al-Isa’ah* (offense/injustice). Like many concepts in Islam, *al-Ihsan* is a concept with comprehensive meaning. Thus, hard to translate into any language in a single word. It denotes doing things perfectly or nicely. Technically it means, among others, “doing beautiful things”. This is commanded by Allah. He says:

“Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He instructs you, that ye may receive admonition.”(The Qur’an 16: 90)

A person who practices *ihsan* is called *Muhsin*, the plural form of which is *muhsininun*. They are those who have the following qualities:

- They forgive the faults of others (The Qur’an 5:13, 3:134).
- They spend their wealth for the welfare of humankind (The Qur’an 2:195, 3:134).
- They strive against evil in the way of Allah (The Qur’an 29:69, 9:120).
- They are generous (The Qur’an 2:236).
- They are humble (The Qur’an 2:58, 9:91, 5:82-85, 7:56).
- They are righteous, have *taqwa Allah* (they fear Allah by doing what He commands and abstain from doing what He forbids), and are patient (The Qur’an 12:90).

- They establish *salat* and pay *zakat* (The Qur'an 31:3, 11:114-115).

Hence, it is clear from the above that *muhsinun* are also known as *mutawwi'un*; they involve in the involuntary actions.

Al-Ithar is derived from the three letters' verb *athara* which means 'to prefer (to)' or 'to favour'. Technically, it is 'to give preference over oneself in terms of benefit or repulsion (al-Jurjan, p. 49). Allah says:

“But those who before them, had homes (in Medina) and had adopted the Faith,- show their affection to such as came to them for refuge, and entertain no desire in their hearts for things given to the (latter), but give them preference over themselves, even though poverty was their (own lot). And those saved from the covetousness of their own souls,- they are the ones that achieve prosperity.”(The Qur'an 59: 9).

The reason for the revelation of this *ayah* is stated in the following *Hadith*:
Narrated by Abu Hurayrah: “A man came to the Prophet. The Prophet sent a messenger to his wives (to bring something for that man to eat) but they said that they had nothing except water. Then Allah's Apostle said, “Who will take this (person) or entertain him as a guest?” An Ansari man said, “I.” So he took him to his wife and said to her, “Entertain generously the guest of Allah's Apostle” She said, “We have got nothing except the meals of my children.” He said, “Prepare your meal, light your lamp and let your children sleep if they ask for supper.” So she prepared her meal, lighted her lamp and made her children sleep, and then stood up pretending to mend her lamp, but she put it off. Then both of them pretended to be eating, but they really went to bed hungry. In the morning the Ansari went to Allah's Apostle who said, “Tonight Allah laughed or wondered at your action.” Then Allah revealed: “But give them (emigrants) preference over themselves even though they were in need of that And whosoever is saved from the covetousness such are they who will be successful.” (al-Bukhari).

The above *hadith* tells us about a family that sacrificed to help others. The reason is because they took volunteerism as a priority. In other words, they were aware of the importance of volunteerism in Islam. A similar story is narrated by Huzayfah al-'Adawi. He said:

“On the day of the battle of Yarmuk, I went out to find my uncle on the battlefield, and I had with me a container of water. I said to myself that he had some life left in him, then I would quench his thirst with the water and wash the dirt from his face. Suddenly, I came across him, and he was

going in and out of consciousness. I asked him: “Do you want me to give you some water?” so, he nodded his head. Suddenly, he heard another wounded man in the distance calling out in pain. So, my uncle motioned for me to go tend to him. I went to him and saw that he was Hisham, the brother of ‘Amr bin al-‘As. I came to him and asked if he wanted me to give him some water, and suddenly, we heard the sound of another man calling out in the distance in pain. So, he motioned for me to go tend to him. I came to him to find that he had already died. So, I went back to tend to Hisham only to find that he had died as well. Then, I went back to tend to my uncle only to find that he, too, had died.” (al-Burusi, p. 4314)

Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali noted that “the highest degree of generosity is *al-Ithar*, which is to donate one’s wealth despite one’s need of it” (al-Ghazzali, n.d., p. 222). In the above hadith the Prophet’s companions gave away what they loved as an expression of the true love of a Muslim brother.

A. 2. Technical Meaning

Technically, volunteerism means offering one’s money or time (service) for the benefit of others for the sake of Allah. Here we note that one is not called a volunteer unless one fulfills two conditions. They are:

First, to act freely; i.e. to do something for the benefit of others based on one’s freewill. In the light of this condition it is crystal clear that volunteerism should not be made mandatory. According to Elswick mandatory volunteerism is “an oxymoron.” (Elswick, pp. 45 & 46)

Second, to perform an action for the sake of Allah. Seeking Allah’s pleasure should always be the primary motive for helping others. This, however, does not mean that a volunteer should not reap tangible reward for his services. Some little money given to a volunteer may ease his burden. For example, he may use it to pay for his transport and support his family.

It should be stated here that volunteerism is a beautiful loan to Allah to which He promises a big reward. He says:

“...and establish regular Prayer and give regular Charity; and loan to Allah a Beautiful Loan. And whatever good ye send forth for your souls ye shall find it in Allah’s Presence,- yea, better and greater, in Reward and seek ye the Grace of Allah for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” (Qur’En 73:20)

A deep deliberation on this *ayah* will reveal that the two pillars of Islam; namely, establishment of *salat* (regular Prayer) and giving *zakat* (regular Charity), are a prerequisite for one to spend time and money (other than *zakat*) to help others. Jhangeer Hanif in his ‘Spending in the Way of Allah’ explains the relationship between *salat* and *zakat* as follows:

“Prayer helps in developing a true relationship with the Almighty Lord, and charity inculcates a deep-rooted connection among the members of society. Hence, both play an unsurpassed role in nurturing and developing the person conceived by the Noble Qur’an. It is precisely for this reason that Prayer and *zakah* find mention in the Qur’an side by side.” (islamonline.net)

Both, *salat* and *zakat*, he adds, “constitute the foundations upon which the entire structure of people’s relationship with the Creator and with one another is erected (islamonline.net).

Keeping in view the foregoing description of the meaning volunteerism, one can assert that a Muslim volunteer is someone who contributes his or her money or time willingly to help others without receiving financial remuneration or material benefits for their work but they hope for Allah’s mercy or blessings. This means that the ultimate motive of a Muslim volunteer is not to earn fame, respect or reward from people but to receive Allah’s *Rahmah* (mercy). Allah says:

“Those whom they call upon do desire (for themselves) means of access to their Lord, - even those who are nearest: they hope for His Mercy and fear His Wrath: for the Wrath of thy Lord is something to take heed of.”(Qur’En 17:57)

B. Forms of Volunteerism

Volunteerism can take two forms: Sharing the fruits of one's labour (money and wealth) and spending time to help others; that is, involving oneself. The Qur'anic terms referring to these two forms of volunteerism are *al-Mujahadah fi sabil Allah bi al-Amwal* (striving in the cause of Allah with one's goods) and *al-Mujahadah fi sabil Allah bi al-Anfus* (striving in the cause of Allah with one's person) (the Qur'an 4: 95-96). Elaboration on the two forms of volunteerism in Islam is vital.

B.1. *Al-Mujahadah fi sabil Allah bi al-Amwal* (striving in the cause of Allah with one's goods)

One way to volunteer to help others is by spending money or offering physical support. Spending in the way of Allah is termed as *infaq* and it may be in the form of *zakat* or *sadaqah*. The two are forms of worship undertaken as means of spiritual purification (*tazkiyat al-Nafs*). While *salat* helps in developing a true relationship with the Allah, *zakat* and *sadaqah* inculcate "a deep-rooted connection among the members of society" (islamonline.net).

B.2. *Al-Mujahadah fi sabil Allah bi al-Anfus* (striving in the cause of Allah with one's person)

One can be of service and help other people without spending money in two ways: Firstly, by providing physical labour. For example, visiting the sick, being an attendant to the blind, collection and distribution of donations, constructing houses (for the homeless), schools (for the poor children), orphanages, retirement centers, nursing homes, hospitals and working in the Nongovernment Islamic Organizations that need volunteers due to limited resources. Secondly, by providing intellectual support, for example, being a teacher or tutor for the poor.

C. Ethics of Volunteerism in Islam

Volunteerism in Islam is not without ethics. Firstly a volunteer is required to avoid discrimination while rendering voluntary services. According to Islam people are as equal

as the teeth of a comb; they are created from a single (The Qur'an 4:1). Secondly, charity begins at home. Hence a volunteer is required to begin with his relatives. Allah says:

“They ask thee what they should spend (In charity). Say: Whatever ye spend that is good, is for parents and kindred and orphans and those in want and for wayfarers. And whatever ye do that is good,-(Allah) knoweth it well.” (Qur'an, 2:215)

Narrated Ishaq bin ‘Abdullah bin Al-Talha:

“I heard Anas bin Malik saying, “Abu Talha had more property of date-palm trees gardens than any other amongst the Ansar in Medina and the most beloved of them to him was Bairuha garden, and it was in front of the Mosque of the Prophet . Allah's Apostle used to go there and used to drink its nice water.” Anas added, “When these verses were revealed: -‘By no means shall you Attain righteousness unless you spend (in charity) of that which you love.’ (3:92) Abu Talha said to Allah’s Apostle ‘O Allah’s Apostle! Allah, the Blessed, the Superior says: By no means shall you attain righteousness, unless you spend (in charity) of that which you love. And no doubt, Bairuha’ garden is the most beloved of all my property to me. So I want to give it in charity in Allah’s Cause. I expect its reward from Allah. O Allah’s Apostle! Spend it where Allah makes you think it feasible. ‘On that Allah’s Apostle said, ‘Bravo! It is useful property. I have heard what you have said (O Abu Talha), and I think it would be proper if you gave it to your Kith and kin.’ Abu Talha said, ‘I will do so, O Allah’s Apostle.’ Then Abu Talha distributed that garden amongst his relatives and his cousins.” (al-Bukhari)

Thirdly, being a moderate religion, Islam discourages excess and teaches moderation in *'aqidah* (beliefs), *'ibadah* (acts of worship), *shari'ah* (laws) and *akhlaq* (morals and manners). Allah says:

“Thus, have We made of you an Ummat justly balanced, that ye might be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves” (The Qur'an 2: 143)

Commenting on this *ayah* Yusuf Ali writes: “The essence of Islam is to avoid all extravagances on either side. It is a sober, practical religion.” (Note 143 on 2:143)

Last, but not least, all human actions are motive-based. Narrated ‘Umar bin Al-Khattab:

“The reward of deeds depends upon the intention and every person will get the reward according to what he has intended. So whoever emigrated for Allah and His Apostle, then his emigration was for Allah and His Apostle. And whoever emigrated for worldly benefits or for a woman to marry, his emigration was for what he emigrated for.” (al-Bukhari)

According to this hadith, people are divided into two with regard to doing the good: those whose motive is to get worldly benefits and those whose motive is to please Allah. *Ikhlaʿ* (sincerity) in volunteerism means doing something exclusively for the pleasure of Allah alone. This means: First, the motive for volunteering should not be to win personal recognition but should be exclusively for the pleasure of Allah. It is one of many characteristics by which a believer is identified. Thus, when volunteering one should care nothing for the thanks and appreciation of one’s fellow men, instead one should volunteer with the pure intention of seeking reward from Allah (The Qur’an 76: 8-10). Thus, one should not embarrass or demean the person one volunteers to help as this is prohibited by Allah (The Qur’an 2: 264; 98: 5; 17: 18-19; 42: 20; 4: 114; 30: 38; 92: 14-21; 4: 134; 11:15-16 and 4: 38).

Conclusion

Volunteerism is vital for Muslim community’s growth and development. It is undeniable fact that Islam would not be where it is today without the tireless efforts of Muslim volunteers. Muslims in the early days of Islam worked together to achieve a successful community. They contributed in a tangible or intangible way to the spiritual and physical development of the Muslim community. Many of them sacrificed their lives to safeguard Islam and their fellow Muslims. They spent their wealth for the cause of Islam and the wellbeing of their fellow Muslims. It is clear from the foregone that: Firstly, Islam is a religion that cares for the welfare of all humans and calls its members to participate in volunteer activities without awaiting any reward from them but only from Allah; and secondly, seeking Allah’s pleasure should be the primary motive for volunteering one’s

time and money or goods to help others. Helping others is merely the means to attaining Allah's pleasure, the end of all actions carried out by Muslims.

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