

*Berkley Forum**Where is Justice? Islam, Equality, and COVID-19***By: Hossein Askari**

April 14, 2020

Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Social Welfare

Zarathustra was arguably the first to articulate a form of the Golden Rule some three thousand years ago, a rule that has never been followed on a scale to make a noticeable difference in our daily lives. If it had been followed, we would be practicing the principle that humanity is one and doing what we consider best for us as individuals for others. Kant calls humans to go even beyond the Golden Rule by emphasizing intention: to do the right thing and for the right reason.

Some twelve hundred years before the period of the Enlightenment, Islam recognized the equality of humanity and equal justice for all. In Islam, justice emerges within a system. The principles that are its guide include the Unity of Creation; availability of sufficient resources as long as humans share, downplaying the principle of scarcity that is the foundation of modern economics; freedom and equal opportunities to develop; and mandated distribution and redistribution for reasonable equity to prevail.

Western conceptions of justice ask little of humans, but Islam expects much of Muslims—to follow rules to produce a just world. Since the Enlightenment, conceptions of justice have “freedom” at their foundation. Islam also emphasizes freedom, but with differing roles envisaged for individuals and governments. Islam puts the burden on individuals: Members of society must develop themselves and ensure that justice prevails.

Western thinking took a giant leap much later during the course of the Enlightenment by recognizing that all humans are equal and deserve similar opportunities to develop, with contractual approaches and principles. They are in large part philosophical discourses that have little relevance to daily lives in a world of blinding inequality and pain.

Justice in Islam, emerging from a set of moral rules that are based on the unity of humanity, is to be contrasted with other well-known conceptions. These include justice based on outcome with a goal to maximize, based on outcome but with a principle to follow, based on the justness of the process no matter the outcome, and based on rules to follow.

Islam is justice and has justice embedded in each of its rules. If it is followed collectively, justice will emerge. Over one thousand verses in the Quran deal with justice-injustice.

While Islam’s system and rules are different from Rousseau’s conception of justice, both are optimistic as they envisage a sea change in human outlook at the foundation of a more just world. The more recent giants of philosophy have articulated theories of justice that focus on the plight of society’s poorest, albeit in different ways. John Rawls put forth an elegant contractual theory that condones inequality, even severe inequalities, as long as inequalities help the lot of the poorest. This

Rawls was willing to accept because the talented demand such rewards if they are to work hard, which in turn raises total output and helps the poorest. On the other hand, Amartya Sen advocates a system where all humans are given the capability to achieve their dreams.

It is difficult to conceive a just society without incorporating the interactions of the entire human race (as well as the animal kingdom) and the temporal dimension, as future generations have no vote today. Practically, a sound conception of justice should begin by acknowledging that all humans are equal and equally deserving and include as its premise political freedoms, economic facilities, opportunities to develop (nutrition, shelter, healthcare, education), transparency guarantees, and protective security.

Where is our society today?

The moral philosopher Adam Smith, the father of the system we coin as capitalism today, must be turning in his grave as the world attributes our unbridled capitalism to him. Smith argued for a market-based system, where markets through the price signal indicate what consumers demand and what producers should produce. It was a system with private ownership of capital, but which needed important guard rails to ensure that justice prevailed. This market system, if left to itself, could become a veritable jungle. Owners of capital could accumulate great wealth and even band together, or collude, leading to price gauging, impairing the market's price signaling function and exploiting labor who might have few employment options.

As important to Smith, a deeply religious man, was the belief in the natural equality of human beings. Yes, Smith believed in economic freedom enabling some to accumulate capital while others lagged behind, but he stressed equal opportunity to develop the self. He saw himself as not inherently very different from the person in Africa. The difference was that he had a much better opportunity to develop himself. The path for creating a better country and a better world was giving everyone good and equal opportunity to develop. Whether they took advantage of it or not was up to them.

If a person wants health care in the United States today, what choice does she or he have? Have the good fortune to find a job that provides good health care coverage or deplete any and all savings and hope for the best! More practically, in the face of high unemployment and the possibility of losing health care, the average American is forced to accept any employment that offers health care. This is tantamount to servitude and is not the system that Adam Smith could have supported. There are many definitions of what everyone casually refers to as "capitalism," even classifying it as a religion. But one thing is sure. What we see today in the United States has very little to do with Smith's vision of a sound economic system.

One thing is for sure. Many of our long-held beliefs will be trashed or at least modified in the aftermath of COVID-19. Our perception of justice and our economic and health care system will change. Capitalism as we know it cannot survive. The future will be vastly different from the past.

About the Author





Hossein Askari

Hossein Askari is emeritus Iran Professor of Business and International Affairs at the George Washington University. His recent books include *Reformation and Development in the Muslim World: Islamicity Indices as Benchmark*, *Ideal Islamic Economy: An Introduction*, *Conceptions of Justice from Earliest History to Islam*, and *Conceptions of Justice from Islam to the Present*. He is the founder of Islamicity Indices.

In the Series

[Jewish Law During a Pandemic](#)

Michael J. Broyde

[The Role of Religion in a Post-Pandemic Public Square](#)

Chris Baker

[COVID-19 Recovery: A Strong Safety Net is Needed](#)