

## Community Building, VI<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Having a shared identity working towards a joint cause is vital for a healthy community. In doing so, a community must share specific qualities to be successful. This series of papers offers a glimpse into the importance of community-building and Prophet Muhammad's efforts to implement it. Character traits such as truthfulness, trustworthiness, justice, unity, moderation, humbleness, enjoining good and forbidding wrong, and maintaining a healthy balance in working for this world to eventually lead to a blissful hereafter were illustrated. Another important quality of a successful community is their implementation of justice, also one of the principles of Shi'i Islam. The previous articles touched upon God's justice in the Qur'an, the necessity for establishing social justice, and having just leaders, as well as the status of rationality, knowledge and experience in an Islamic community. This article expands on the depth of our relationship with God, love for God's creation, acting as a channel for God's mercy in our daily lives in doing charitable work, being hospitable, and caring for the ill in the Islamic community.

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<sup>1</sup> This series is based on a nine-session course conducted by the author on Community Building at the Islamic Centre of England in London in 2009.

We have been studying the characteristics necessary for an Islamic Community. One of these qualities is that an Islamic community is a charitable one and which therefore shows the maximum amount of care possible towards its own members as well as those outside the community.

### **Depth of our relationship with God**

Before examining the various aspects of this quality, we should study the way our understanding of God and our relationship with Him form every aspect of our behaviour and conduct. Unfortunately, there are people who are believers in God but, because they do not have such a deep understanding of Him, they think the relationship between a human being and God is limited to, for example, the time spent worshipping God in prayer or fulfilling His commands, thus limiting the relationship to Him merely at a personal level. It is as if this is one part of their lives and the rest of their lives have nothing to do with God or their relationship to Him. They are completely forgetful of Him when it comes to other aspects of their lives.

However, from an Islamic point of view, our understanding of—and relationship to—Him should form and shape every aspect of our lives. To clarify, it can be said that if we believe in God as our Lord, Who has created us and Who exercised endless Mercy and Compassion towards us and towards His creation in general, we must therefore try as much as possible to resemble Him in His care, love, and compassion for His creation.

## All human beings are like the family of God

There is a divine saying (*hadith-i qudsi*), in which God says:

People are like My family. The dearest of them to me are those who are kindest to the others and make efforts the most to meet their needs.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Christianity, in Islam we seem not to have an example of God describing Himself as ‘father’ or ‘heavenly father’; however, the nearest thing we have is in this hadith where God describes the people He created as His family. In Arabic, *‘iyaal* means an individual or a group of people whose maintenance depends on a person’s support of them. For example, the wife and children of a man are his ‘iyaal, meaning the people who depend on him. A mother may look after her husband and children, or someone looks after their parents and then, those people are called their ‘aiyaal’. So it means those people who depend on someone for their livelihood, and indeed for their existence. It does not exactly mean family as such, but refers to whoever is under a person’s care and receives their financial support.

## God loves most those who love His people the most

God says that all of mankind are His ‘iyaal. They are like His family and in His view, the best people are those who show mercy and love to

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<sup>2</sup> *Al-Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 199. Divine Saying or ‘Hadith al-Qudsi’ is a sayings coming from God although not in the form of revelation. Sometimes God spoke to His prophets, such as Prophet Mohammad, Prophet Musa, and Prophet Isa, but not as part of the revelation of the Qur’an, Torah, or Injeel. Some of these conversations between God and His prophets are also conveyed to us and these are called ‘Hadith al-Qudsi’. There are technical discussions amongst scholars and in which they explain that in this case the meaning is conveyed, although not the actual letters and words, unlike Qur’anic or Biblical revelation.

His people more than other people do. For example, when a father sees that from amongst his friends and neighbours, a certain person shows the maximum possible care and attention to his family, he will then love him the most. God also expects us to be like this with regards to His people. If we want God to love us more, then we should implement more love towards other people. So, our love and compassion towards people is something which is required and demanded by our love for God.

### **Love for non-human creations of God**

This requirement also extends to non-human beings. When we look at an animal or a plant, we must realise that although they are not human beings, they are still created by God. They are signs of God, and according to the Qur'an, they glorify and praise Him, so we should love and care for them.

### **A believer should act as a channel for the Mercy of God**

It is not that necessary to mention Qur'anic verses or hadiths about being kind to the poor, elderly, parents and children, as will be explained later. Even if there were no hadith or verses on this subject, merely the above understanding of the world and the relationship that God has with His creation is enough to motivate us to be determined to show love and care towards everyone and everything. Therefore, a believer must be like a channel for the Mercy of God to be put into effect for the whole of creation.

### **Charity in the Qur'an and hadiths**

There are specific references to the principle of charity in the Qur'an and hadith. Firstly, we should define what is meant by charity, which is not only about giving money or financial support. In its fullest sense, charity includes caring for and loving others. If we really did so, we would realise that sometimes we need to give our money, sometimes our time, sometimes our attention, and sometimes making sacrifices.

In the verses 2:262-265, God mentions the importance of charity. Interestingly, in this part of the Qur'an, there are several verses related to the concept of 'infaq', the Arabic term for spending money on people who are in need.

### **Manners of giving charity**

These verses begin at verse 261, a beautiful verse explaining how sometimes God rewards 'infaq' seven hundred times more than the amount which has been given.

Then verse 2:262 starts:

*Those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah and then do not follow up what they have spent with reproaches and affronts, they shall have their reward near their Lord, and they will have no fear, nor will they grieve.*

This can be money given to the poor, as well as that which is spent for other Godly purposes, such as spending money on one's family or spending for charitable causes such as making a public school, a public place of worship, or a public hospital. All expenditure of money for the sake of God can be included in this.

Sometimes people give money to others but then always keep reminding them about having done this. It is not good to remind them in this way or to tell them something that hurts their feelings.

### **Reward for giving charity is only from God**

*Those who give their wealth by night and day, secretly and openly, they shall have their reward near their Lord, and they will have no fear, nor will they grieve. (2:274)*

It means that it is only their Lord who can reward them. No one other than God can reward them or is expected to reward them. They do not expect any reward from people.

In Surah Insan, there are verses about the Ahlul Bayt. Imam Ali, Lady Fatimah, Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn were once fasting and did not have much food with which to break their fast. Every night when they were close to breaking their fast, a needy person would knock on their door for help. On the first day there was a beggar (*miskeen*), the second day an orphan (*yateem*) and the third day a captive (*aseer*). They used to give all their food with which they wanted to break their fast to the needy, saying:

*We feed you only for the sake of Allah. We do not want any reward from you nor any thanks. (76:9)*

We are not giving to the needy person as such; rather, we are giving something back to God. Indeed, we are merely giving back to God what He has given us. These are not things which belong to us. They are all from God and now we are giving them back to Him. Therefore, we do not need people to thank us. Of course, it is the responsibility of people

who receive things to give thanks, but our responsibility as people who have given something is not to expect thanks.

Once, Imam Sajjad gave some charity to a person and then thanked the needy man, saying to him that he would be carrying the Imam's reward for him until the Day of Judgement because the money given to him now will be returned to the Imam on the Day of Judgement in the form of reward. So indeed, the recipient is carrying this for the Imam and helping him. Thus, the Imam said that he should be thankful to that person because he has given him not only the honour of being able to do something, but furthermore he will then receive recompense for this as reward on the Day of Judgement.

We should not expect anyone else to reward us and indeed no one else is able to reward us. Something which is done for the sake of God becomes so valuable that it is only God Who can reward us for it. Who can reward a pure act of charity? No one can reward it adequately and properly except God.

### **Benefit on the Day of Judgement for giving charity**

We see that in the verse 2:262, God says that these people would not have any fear nor any grief on the Day of Judgement. Furthermore, according to one interpretation, their fear and sadness will also go away in this life.

### **Manners of giving charity re-emphasized**

Then in verse 2:263, God continues by saying:

*An honourable word with pardon is better than a charity followed by affront. Allah is all-sufficient, most forbearing.*

Therefore, we are advised not to give charity in a way that by giving it would harm the recipient either by a) making them feel ashamed or b) hurting their feelings in the future by reminding them about what we gave. If this could be the case, then it would be better to use kind words with them, forgive their mistakes, or cover up or hide any faults they may have done.

Then again in verse 264 God talks about charity and asks us not to spoil it by reminding people about what we have given them or by hurting their feelings with unkind remarks. The verse reads as follows:

*O you who have faith! Do not render your charities void by reproaches and affronts, like those who spend their wealth to be seen by people and have no faith in Allah and the Last Day. Their parable is that of a rock covered with soil: a downpour strikes it, leaving it bare. They have no power over anything of what they have earned, and Allah does not guide the faithless lot (2:264).*

Therefore, it is important to note from verses 262 to 264 the emphasis placed on giving charity without causing any kind of harm to the recipients, particularly regarding their feelings or sense of honour and dignity.

### **Multiple benefits of giving charity**

Then in verse 265, God continues talking about charity by saying:



*The parable of those who spend their wealth seeking God's pleasure and to confirm themselves, is that of a garden on a hillside: the downpour strikes it, whereupon it brings forth its fruit twofold: and if it is not a downpour that strikes it, then a shower, and God sees best what you do.*

We are like a garden, high up on a hillside, with fruit trees in it – an already fertile garden that becomes more productive with heavy rain. When we give charity, it is like rain pouring on this garden, enabling the trees to bear fruits either in a multiplied way or at least double the amount.<sup>3</sup>

### **Right of the needy over part of our wealth**

Furthermore, in praise of believers the Qur'an says:

*and in whose wealth there is a known right for the beggar and the deprived. (70:24 & 25)*

This verse beautifully describes the right of the needy (*haqqun ma'loom*). We may possess some money, but the needy have a right over that amount which can help them and save them from destitution. It might also mean that true believers fix a portion of their income for giving to the needy. So those who give alms should not consider that they are doing a favour.

### **Extra blessings for giving charity at certain times**

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<sup>3</sup> This discussion about charity (infaq) continues in the following verses, up to verse 274. So more than ten verses are gathered together in the same place describing charity and thus we can conclude that this is a very important principle in Islam.

Indeed, there are more fruitful seasons for giving charity, such as in the month of Sha'baan and the month of Ramadhan. Of course, it is important to give it throughout the year, but there are certain times and periods in which giving charity is more greatly rewarded by God. For example, there are some people who, on the night of Qadr, separate the amount of money they want to give throughout the year and put it aside so that the reward for this money will be calculated according to the reward given during the Night of Qadr, and then they gradually spend it as needed throughout the year.

### **Giving charity purifies us**

Giving money as charity is a way to purify ourselves:

*Felicitous is he who purifies himself, celebrates the Name of his Lord, and prays. (87:14 & 15)*

In another verse, God says:

*The one who gives his money seeking purity. (92:18)*

This is a very beautiful concept whereby we give money and then we are purified. God also says to the Prophet:

*Take charity from their possessions to cleanse them and purify them thereby, and bless them. Indeed your blessing is a comfort to them, and God is all-hearing, all-knowing. (9:103)*

## **Charitable work**

There are other kinds of charitable work apart from giving money. For example, in an Islamic community, we are to care for people who are vulnerable or those who need moral support, respect, or attention.

## **Caring for the elders**

One way we can judge the value and strength of a community is to discover how much they care for the elderly. The elders of a community are those who have been doing their best for the community, families, and children throughout their lives, but are now no longer able to do many things, for example, to generate money or volunteer their physical help. So how should we treat them? Do we think them to be a burden and therefore try to somehow isolate them or rid ourselves of them? Or, on the contrary, do we show them maximum respect and understanding, as if precious gems of our community? This is of utmost importance. A community that does not show love and respect towards its elders is not a healthy community. Such a negligent situation deeply concerns people, even the youth, rendering some to wonder whether this is how they would be treated in the future. Some elderly folks share the times they were respectful towards their parents, although they are treated with disrespect by their own children. They then wonder about their future, and how they will be treated in turn by their own children. In the worst-case scenario, their own children will not even put them in a nursing home – they will instead abandon them on the street.

Therefore, it is very important to show love to our elders so that firstly God considers us as the thankful—as having thankfulness is not only shown by thanking God; it is by thanking anyone who has given us

help or service, and the elderly have helped and served the community. Secondly, it is also important that everyone feels a heartfelt sense of security. Thirdly, when we have elders in the family, we benefit from their wisdom and experience, and they bring the blessings of God into the family. Of course, in certain circumstances there may be a need for a nursing home, but this should not be the first choice we make as soon as our parents become old.

Prophet Muhammad (s) said, “It’s not one of us, the one who does not show mercy to our children and the one who does not respect and honour our elders.”<sup>4</sup>

From this—as well as from the vast corpus of hadith—we can conclude that a Muslim community is a community in which elders receive respect, and children receive love and compassion.

### **Caring for the sick**

Another group in a community that must receive care, love, compassion, and support is those who are ill. The first thing we can do is attempt to offer them some form of treatment. They themselves may be able to afford it, although for those who are unable, this then becomes the responsibility of the Islamic community, and therefore compulsory for other people or government officials to pay for the treatment. If we see that our fellow brother or sister in faith, or indeed any human being, needs treatment and cannot afford it, we all have a responsibility to pay towards the cost of the treatment.

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<sup>4</sup> *Mustadrak Wasa'il al-Shi'a*, vol. 8, p. 393.

The sick persons also have the responsibility of undergoing treatment. When we become sick, especially if a life-risking one, we must go for treatment; and if it is a serious illness, we cannot say we want to die and refuse treatment as this is comparable to committing suicide. We must try to find a way to be cured, and the society also has a responsibility to help anyone who is ill to receive appropriate treatment.

Furthermore, medical staff must not regard their work merely to earn money. It is an Islamic and human responsibility to help the ill. There are even some Shi'a jurists who say that a medical doctor cannot receive money from patients for their work in curing them because they are simply fulfilling their obligations, and we cannot ask people to give us money for doing an obligation. So these jurists say that what medical staff should do is to charge for those treatments which are non-essential, for example, in the case of someone who has a non-threatening cold, but for someone who, for example, has cancer and whose life is therefore at risk, it is the medical staff's Islamic responsibility to treat them, and they should not be charged for that treatment. However, in this case the government must pay the medical staff, instead of the patients.

### **Teaching the members of a community**

According to many jurists, just as doctors should not charge patients with serious illness, scholars (*ulama*) who teach people their obligations and religious duties should not charge as well.

Similarly, a teacher should not charge people for teaching them necessary subjects. They should only charge them for teaching that which is not obligatory. The suggestion is that only the government or

the Bayt al-Maal (the public treasury house) should be responsible. In any case, what is important is that medical staff and teachers regard their jobs as vocational as well as an Islamic and humanitarian duty; therefore, they do them with the intention of pleasing God.

### **Hospitals and schools can become places of worship**

Our hospitals and centres of education become like masjids because in our hospitals, medical staff are worshipping God by helping patients, and in our centres of education, our teachers are worshipping God by teaching. In addition, patients are accepting treatment because it is their responsibility; similarly, students are learning because it is their responsibility. Furthermore, if this is the understanding of the medical staff, patients, teachers, and students, then surely the chance of receiving healing or acquiring knowledge is much greater than when such work is merely regarded as a business.

### **Saving one life is like saving all of humanity**

In Surah al-Ma'idah, verse 32, God says:

*That is why We decreed for the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul, without (its being guilty of) manslaughter or corruption on earth, is as though he had killed all mankind, and whoever saves a life is as though he had saved all mankind.*

After referring to the story of Cain and Abel, God says that because of that event, He instructed the Children of Israel (the children of Jacob) that whoever kills an innocent person who has not committed murder or caused mischief, it is as if they killed all human beings. On the other

hand, if someone saves the life of another person, it is as if they have saved the lives of all human beings.

If we can help save the life of a single person, it is as if we have saved all of mankind because when we show respect to a human being simply because they are a human being, indeed we have shown our respect to all of mankind. On the other hand, if we treat one human being without respect we are indeed humiliating all human beings. This is a perfectly rational idea. For example, if we insult someone just because they are white or black or from the east or from the west, then we are indeed insulting all people in that category. If we insult a white person just because they are white, or a black person just because they are black, then we are insulting all white people or all black people because we had no personal issue with that person; they were insulted purely based on the colour of their skin. Therefore, it follows that if we insult a Muslim just because they are a Muslim or a Christian just because they are a Christian, so then we are indeed insulting all Muslims or all Christians.

In the same way, God says that if someone saves the life of one single person it is as if they had saved the life of all people.

### **Visiting the sick**

Just as it is important to help save sick people by treating them, it is also just as important to help them with financial or moral support. Sometimes people who are ill are not in need of us putting them in a hospital or giving them financial support, although they are very much

in need of moral support. There are many hadiths on the merits of visiting those who are ill;<sup>5</sup> the visitor will receive blessings and mercy from God. So when we feel that our heart is not soft enough or we are not in a good mood, we should visit someone who is sick to receive the His Mercy. We may also have someone at home who is ill and so we can show mercy to them.

There is also a hadith similar to a verse in the New Testament—in Matthew, Chapter 25, verses 31 to 46. Our hadith says that on the Day of Judgement, God will ask some people why they did not visit Him when He was sick, why they did not feed Him when He was hungry and why they did not give water to Him when He was thirsty. Then those people will ask God, “How could these things have happened to You? You are never in need of food or water and You never become sick.” Then God will reply, “Such and such a person was sick and you did not visit them. Such and such a person was hungry, and you did not feed them. Such and such a person was thirsty, and you did not give them water. Did you not know that if you had done so, you would have found Me with that person?” Therefore, if we visit a sick person or give food or water to a hungry or thirsty person, it is like doing these things for God, the Almighty.

Moreover, as mentioned in our hadiths, if a sick person prays for us and asks God to give us something, then it is very likely that this du’a will be answered. So it is very important for a sick person to pray for us.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, please refer to *Al-Kafi*, vol. 3, pp. 119-121.



## The importance of hospitality

Hospitality is very important in Islam. There is a mass transmitted (*mutawātir*) hadith—a hadith narrated by so many narrators throughout each generation that it is undoubtedly authentic—in which Prophet Muhammad is quoted as saying:

Whoever believes in God and the Last Day, must treat his guest with respect and courtesy.<sup>6</sup>

This is extremely important and is a requirement of faith. If we have a guest, we must show them hospitality. It makes no difference whether the guest was invited or not: we must be hospitable. Of course, if a guest is invited then we are expected to be more prepared and to show more attention. However, even if someone is not invited, we must be happy and welcome. From the Islamic point of view, we do not need to put ourselves under great pressure in showing hospitality. For example, if someone cannot afford to provide their guests with luxurious food, or a luxurious bedroom, there is no need for that. We do not need to go out of our way to provide things; but whatever we have available to us we should provide. Imam Ali is quoted as saying:

The best act of generosity is to offer what is available.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, if we have nothing at all available, it is good to borrow a little to buy something for our guest, bearing in mind not to make things difficult for ourselves by, for example, spending a great deal of money. We should just do as much as we can, and more than anything else, we

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<sup>6</sup> *Al-Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 667.

<sup>7</sup> *Ghurar al-Hikam*, hadith no 8642.

should show respect, kindness, hospitality, and warmth so that the guest does not feel that they are a burden or that we do not like them to be there.

Prophet Muhammad was so hospitable that both foreign guests as well as the Muslims of Madinah visited him to gain from his knowledge and wisdom, so much so that they did not leave his house at a suitable time. However, the Prophet did not ask them to go because he was busy and had things to do. He used to sit with them as much as they wished. Then God revealed a verse saying:

*O you who have faith! Do not enter the Prophet's houses unless permission is granted you for a meal, without waiting for it to be readied. But enter when you are invited, and disperse when you have taken your meal, without settling down to chat. Indeed such conduct torments the Prophet, and he is ashamed of [asking] you [to leave]; but God is not ashamed of [expressing] the truth... (33:53)*

Therefore, a guest has the responsibility not to cause inconvenience to their host and on the other hand, the host has the responsibility to show respect, care, and love to their guest.

### **Guests of the community**

The guests of a community can be tourists, asylum seekers, refugees, and so forth. An Islamic community is a community in which tourists feel at home. If they go to a shop, take a taxi, or walk down a street, we must show them full respect and kindness because they are our guests.

This does not necessarily mean that they must come to your house, but they are to be considered as guests of the community.

If there are refugees who leave their towns or countries due to factors such as war, persecution, or natural disasters, then we must show them respect and help them as much as we can.

Thus, hospitality is an important characteristic of every community, and we should remember that God treats those who show mercy to their guests with His special mercy.

### **Importance of offering necessary and appropriate help**

It is important to be prepared to offer help to those in need, which is not necessarily always a case of giving money. Giving help includes giving advice, time, moral support, and sometimes intervening in a matter. For example, it is highly recommended to help a single man and woman to get married; if someone we know wants to get married and we know of a good family with a suitable young man or woman and it needs help to facilitate the situation, we can talk to the family of the young man or woman and refer them to a good person. We may give moral and practical support to help someone get married. It is a very important service to find good spouses for those who want to marry. It is not good that in a community there are people who want to get married and cannot find a partner. Moreover, we should have arrangements, especially to help women, because usually the families of women do not find it correct to propose themselves.

Another example is that sometimes people need to do paperwork or visit some offices or officials and we can help them by giving advice, speaking on their behalf, or writing an appeal for them.

Thus, if we have in our hearts this spirit of helping, then we would learn how to help others.

Prophet Jesus made a beautiful statement:

وَجَعَلَنِي مُبَارَكًا أَيْنَ مَا كُنْتُ

*He has made me blessed, wherever I may be. (19:31)*

Imam al-Sadiq explains that it meant that God has made Jesus very beneficial [for people].<sup>8</sup>

This should be true about every one of us. Wherever we are, we must be a source of blessings for others. Wherever we are, whether it be at home, work, school, masjid or simply in the street or shops, we must try to be good and helpful to people, to be blessed so that we are a source of blessings to others.

Moreover, Prophet Muhammad said, “To believe in God and to benefit His servants are the two highest characteristics.” And in another hadith we read. “There are servants of God to whom people resort when in need. They will be safe from punishment on the Day of Resurrection.”

Therefore, when people come to us for help, we must not feel annoyed or feel our time is wasted or show exhaustion. If we can help, then we should be happy and should thank God that we have been given this golden opportunity. Of course, once again, we do not need to go out of

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<sup>8</sup> *Al-Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 165.

our way or, for example, disturb our family life in the process, but we should try to do so and serve them as much as we reasonably can.

Thus, it is clear that in Islam the principle of charity is very important and is a requirement of our love for God. When we love God, then we love His people and we love His creation. Since we want and expect Mercy from Him, then we should show mercy to others, because if receiving mercy is good, then we should firstly show mercy to others, so they receive it from us and then we can expect the Mercy of God to be directed towards us.

