Chapter 4
Philanthropic Virtue

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Introduction: Compassion in Muslim Theology

Both the charitable and the philanthropic motives can be traced to the Muslim moral philosophy concerning compassion. A compassionate person shows pity and tenderness of heart towards his fellow beings and first and foremost towards the weak and fragile members of the society. Compassion is a virtue that is emphasized through interaction with other people. It is thus not limited to clean living, abstinence, the performance of certain rituals, saying prayers or something similar. Rather, it is an honourable action that is brought out through active deeds towards other people.

Viewed from the reward-oriented perspective, charitable deeds control what happens to a person after death, in a future life. Charity is rewarded with a place in Paradise or other forms of reward. According to this perspective, a charitable act takes place in a deontological, ethical perspective where the principal value of the act lies in its being founded on a duty that in turn is based on a religious norm. The act can therefore be viewed as a kind of bargaining on the part of the doer, when the person who performs an act will be rewarded in some way or other.

An idea formulated by the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd, Averroës (1126–1198) opposed this conception. He played down the reward perspective in favour of the intrinsic value of the ethical norm. When people act on the basis of ethical norms, they contribute to the creation of a better world. Averroës thereby went against the reward imperative and emphasized intrinsic value of the ethical norm, which does not necessarily need to be based on religious norms. He said that ethical principles not only exist to determine the fate of people in what happens after death, but also have significance here and now. We know nothing of what happens after we die, but we know that these norms are very important as regards the life we live in the

Some parts of this article are historical overviews based on the author's previous research. These parts focus on examples and the development within the Shiite tradition in Iran.

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present. When people break ethical norms, this affects not only our own lives but the whole of society. And conversely, when we act on the basis of ethical norms, we contribute to the creation of a better world, Averroës said.

The philanthropic perspective is assumed to safeguard society's best interests and also protects humanity from cynicism, profit, egocentric consumerism, narcissistic self-absorption and last but not least discrimination on the grounds of financial standing, social status, ethnicity or other discriminatory factors.

In the Islamic theological tradition of ideas, however, compassion is not only represented as a human virtue. It is to an even greater degree a divine quality. This is not least made clear by the phrase with which every chapter, *sura*, of the Qurʿan begins. With the exception of the 9th*sura*, every chapter of the Qurʿan begins with the phrase: "In the name of God the Beneficent, *ar-raḥman*, and the Merciful, *ar-raḥim*". Both qualities can also be found among the 99 names that are used in Islam to refer to God.

The purpose of the recurring reminders about God's compassion in the Qurʿan seems to be to emphasize that which is most divine about God. Compassion is, however, not only described as a prominent quality of God but also as a human virtue that can bring out the most magnificent aspects of the person who has accepted the virtue. Compassion is also represented as a virtue that every human being can adopt if they want to live up to their human self or even the divine qualities they bear within themselves. This reasoning takes its starting point in the conceptions of the double nature of human beings that has its origins in the characterization of man that is found in the Qurʿan:

> Indeed We created man in the best form. Then We reversed him to the lowest of the low. Except those who believe and do good deeds, for whom there is never-ending recompense. (Qur'an, 95: 4–6).

The Islamic notion of man's double nature has its roots far back in history. It can be traced back to ancient Indian, Chinese, Persian and Greek world-views. It is also an established conception in the Abrahamic philosophical tradition that differentiates between man's earthly/material and spiritual sides. According to this tradition, man's spiritual nature derives from God, since God breathed His own spirit into man and created him in His own image. One side of man is the one we are considered to have in common with all other living creatures, i.e. man's material side. We thus share this side with, for example, animals and other living creatures and in this respect we are controlled by our instincts, our urges and our desires. That part of human nature that sets us apart from other creatures is the thinking, sensible, spiritual dimension.

Compassion is considered to be founded on this part of man's nature. This virtue allows us to rise above our material, earthly, animal side and unite with the divine. The relationship between the material and spiritual sides of human beings is characterized by a continuous struggle. A person who manages to acquire this virtue is regarded as having achieved an inner freedom which allows them to no longer be ruled by their own desires, instincts and material needs. Through compassion, man can counteract his material side, which will in turn lead to the spiritual aspects, fill-

ing the vacuum that occurs when the material aspects are driven back. Compassion allows man's spiritual side to grow and master the material side.

In the Islamic theological tradition, compassion is also described as a virtue that helps us as social beings to avoid putting ourselves in a dysfunctional or destructive position in our interaction with our fellow beings. The idea is that people must not focus on themselves, personal gain or group interests in their social relations. Compassion is consequently represented as an important basis for people's involvement in philanthropic activities, meaning the kind of volunteer work that is done without any thought of receiving something in return from the targets of the intervention or reward from a higher power.

Fundamental Respect for Human Beings

In the Muslim theological tradition concerning both charity and philanthropic volunteer work, personal experience of hardship and suffering has a central place. This experience is considered to increase an individual's degree of motivation to participate in both charitable and philanthropic activity. Personal experience of hardship increases the will to help people who find themselves in a similar situation. We can of course find out about these people's plight from various information channels but personal experience is considered to increase our awareness nonetheless. The starting point is that we feel greater affinity in a reality where we are present ourselves than in a world that we observe from a distance.

It is on the basis of this perspective that we view the month-long fast during Ramadan in the Islamic world. Suffering thirst, hunger and tiredness in conjunction with the fast is represented as a privation that we should undergo in order to gain personal experience of hardship and suffering, to be able in turn to understand the situation of distressed people and thereby become more willing to help them.

Charity, philanthropy and willingness to participate in volunteer work take their starting point in a virtue, compassion, through which people as individuals show empathy and solidarity with each other. Unselfish aid work, however, is not intended to remain an individual virtue. In addition to the individual relationships, compassion must form the foundation for building a functioning social network in society. Compassion seems to be used here as a basis for a mind-set of equality through which the very weakest in society will be given help to rise to the same level as other members of society. Viewed from this perspective, it is a virtue that constitutes a foundation for active measures that help people who find themselves in a kind of "situational inequality", meaning that they have involuntarily come up against various problems that have put them in an unequal position in relation to their fellow men.

On the basis of this perspective, it is interesting to note which people qualify for help according to the Qurʿanic basis for this collective compassion. It is primarily those who are closest to a person, their immediate circle of people, who are

included in this social care program. This circle consists of parents, family members and close relatives but is not limited to only those who have some sort of family relationship through blood ties. People who live in physical proximity and are part of the people's social network are also included. Neighbours in particular are an important group. Common to all these people is that they have, for various reasons, ended up in difficulties (Qur'an, 2: 83, 4: 36). In the next step, the circle is widened to encompass all vulnerable people who find themselves outside what society regards as a normal, equal level. These include orphans, people who can be categorized as distressed, the needy, heavily indebted people, etc. Common to all these groups is that they have, in one way or another, found themselves unable to pay their debts or are going through some crisis in their lives (Qur'an, 9: 60, 17: 26).

Social Safety Net

The discussions about the creation of a social safety net connect to a debate that goes far back in Islamic history. It was already going on during the formative phase of Islamic theology and philosophy in the eighth and ninth centuries (according to the Christian calendar) or the third and fourth centuries of the Islamic calendar. It was a time when rational-minded Muslim theologians and philosophers tried to emphasize rational arguments for the most central conceptions within the Islamic philosophical tradition alongside the strictly religious arguments. Their debate was not only limited to ontological and epistemological conceptions but was just as much linked to issues that concerned social life.

In their discussions of the Qurʿan's exhortations to be compassionate, Muslim theologians and philosophers tried to use rational arguments. They said that such exhortations should not only be interpreted as something that concerned life after death. According to these thinkers, the imposed actions would lead to the creation of a better world and people would therefore benefit from them already in this life. The debate also concerned the question of whether compassion should be regarded as a virtue, a religious duty for the pious and the virtuous to devote themselves to, or if it was fundamentally based on a rational argument about creating a social safety net, the purpose of which was to help one's fellow men who were enduring hardship in their life. This was an idea that in its turn had its origins in the notion that helping one's fellow men who found themselves in difficulties can also be regarded as a desire that people would wish to be treated in the same way in times of trouble.

The discussions about philanthropic and social aspects of compassion follow from these ideas. Philanthropic activities include a particular emphasis on taking care of the distressed and the weak in the lowest stratum of society.

Another group who are mentioned explicitly as people qualifying for collective compassion are those termed *Ibn as-sabil*—literally son of the road/wayfarer (Qur'an, 2: 177, 8: 41, 30: 38, 59: 7).[1] The term is used to refer to a stranger who

[1] See for example following verses: "It is not righteousness that you turn your faces toward the east and the west [in prayer], righteousness is rather one who believe in God, and the Last Day, and the

finds himself far from home, more precisely someone who, because of their circumstances, has insufficient means to survive. In a broader perspective, this also includes people who for various reasons cannot return home, e.g. refugees seeking sanctuary/asylum from political, religious or some other form of persecution.

Other groups mentioned include prisoners and slaves. The rules relating to these last groups take their starting point in the local conditions prevailing during pre-modern times and concern the efforts that should be made when fellow believers or people belonging to the same tribe or clan were captured during the recurring conflicts between different tribes and clans. The same applied to the slave trade since redemption of slaves was considered a compassionate and God-pleasing deed. These groups were a natural part of the social context in pre-modern times. What unites them with the other named groups is that they were classified as distressed and afflicted people who needed help from others.

As the legal discussion continues today, further categories have come to be included among those who should be included in social care programs, for example mentally handicapped people and minors who have no guardian or trustee, divorced women and widows who have no source of income, etc.

The conceptions concerning caring for the distressed are not unique to the Islamic theological tradition. According to French islamologist Louis Massignon (1883–1962), these conceptions can be traced to the Semitic and Abrahamic religious philosophical tradition. Referring to exhortations to take care of strangers and the oppressed in the Biblical tradition—for example Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:33 and Deuteronomy 27:19—Massignon considers the notion of compassion founded on respect for man's inner person to exist in all three Abrahamic religions. In the Muslim civilization, this philosophical tradition was given a functioning social and political form (Sandgren 2007, pp. 125–126).

Created of One Essence

In conclusion, we might say that compassion was intended as a virtue, the principal purpose of which was to safeguard fundamental respect for human beings. This applies in particular in circumstances where people find themselves in a weak and fragile position. The question is how the debates have run as regards living up to this virtue and all the ideas and conceptions associated with them.

One question that has dominated the discussions about compassion and philanthropic interventions in the Muslim context is that of who should have borne responsibility for ensuring that the needy and distressed would be taken care of from pre-modern times until the debates going on today.

The exhortations for everyone to do their utmost to live up to the recommendations associated with the virtue of compassion are an inseparable part of everyday

angels, and the Book, and the prophets, and give away wealth out of love for Him to the kindred, and the orphans, and the poor, and the wayfarer, and the needy, and for the emancipation of those in bondage and the slaves…" (Qur'an, 2: 177).

religiosity. People are constantly reminded of life's fragility and that it is every human being's duty to show compassion towards their fellow men. The thirteenth-century Persian poet Saʿdi of Shiraz (1184–1283/1291) believed that humankind's kinship constitutes a foundation for volunteer efforts and that people must involve themselves in the work of helping the distressed. In his collection of poems and prose *Golistan* (The Rose Garden), he expresses this through the following poem:

> The Children of Adam are limbs of each other,
> Having been created of one essence.
> When the calamity of time afflicts one limb
> The other limbs cannot remain at rest.
> If thou hast no sympathy for the troubles of others,
> Thou art unworthy to be called by the name of a man

The view of man that permeates Saʿdi's poetry stands out as the complete opposite of the individual-centred, modern view of man. The latter puts a focus on the individual and his/her individual needs. Volunteer work, both as an individual and collective philanthropic activity, loses its meaning in a view of mankind in which society consists of people who in their turn disintegrate into individuals with very disparate needs and where the individuals are constantly busy realizing their individual ideals and asserting their right to realize their egocentric targets. This view of mankind also differs from the social model in which support and help for the distressed is passed from the individual to a state or municipal level through the taxes that the working population pay. Philanthropic volunteer work does not necessarily need to mean abandoning our individual objectives in life or rejecting state and municipal responsibility in favour of non-profit-making charitable activities.

This is work that has its origins in a mind-set of equality, a social structure and a view of mankind that presumes that human beings will live in community and coexistence with each other and that they show consideration to each other and, not least, that they show consideration for the weaker individuals in society and the world around.

Institutionalisation

The social care issues that compassion included were, however, too extensive to be able to be dealt with at the level of the individual. The scale of the different measures that would be implemented meant that it was felt that the task would be too much for single individuals. Without depriving the individual of the opportunity to act on his/her own micro level, good soil was laid down for making demands for the establishment of social structures and interventions from society to realize the objectives of creating a social safety net. This in turn laid the foundation for the growing institutionalization of social care and coordination of voluntary work in this respect. In addition to action on an individual basis as a volunteer, the individual was also to assist in the work of creating structures. This would be done with the help of the religious tax that every Muslim has to pay, among other things, at

the end of Ramadan, *zakat al-fitr*. This task is specifically intended for aid to weak and distressed people.

Another important question, however, was who would take on the role/responsibility for organizing or monitoring the creation of the social safety net's institutionalization. The modern welfare state and its pretension to take on this responsibility were conspicuous by their absence.

The regulations concerning Islam's religious taxes made the ruling powers during the history of Islam get involved with various initiatives in this area but they were as a rule far from sufficient. This responsibility did not sit comfortably with the powers of the day. From the tenth century, the major Islamic empire, the Abbasids, had become more and more unstable. The rulers were all too occupied with the problems of holding on to their power, i.e. staying on the throne. This meant defending themselves against all external and internal threats directed against their positions of power. Caring for the weak and the vulnerable in society consequently was not a priority on the agenda of the earthly rulers. It was also a resource-intensive measure that was based on a mind-set of equality and caring. This way of thinking ran counter to the ruling powers' authoritarian form of government that was based on the unquestioning allegiance of their subjects in exchange for protection by the earthly rulers. Issues of social care and taking care of the weak were seen as an area of jurisdiction that could just as well be shifted to other principals who might consider involving themselves in charitable activities.

One group who were more than willing to take on this role were the scholars, the religious leaders. They felt that it lay within their field of responsibility to ensure that this central virtue was realized both at the personal/individual level and, most importantly of all, on a social plane. The scholars justified their commitment with a number of motives. On the one hand, they referred to strict religious arguments, claiming that the scriptures laid this responsibility upon the scholars. On the other hand, they claimed that, considering the significant needs within society, substantial social structures and their associated institutions were needed that could deal with these societal matters. Without institutionalization, there was a great risk that the work of creating a social safety net would be left to fate, or as the scholars put it, there was a risk that these issues would lie fallow.

It did not, however, go without saying that the scholars would view these issues as a self-evident part of their jurisdiction. We find fairly different perceptions of the matter at different times in Islamic history and in different branches of Islam. A number of other factors had also played a crucial role in this context; these are historical, social and economic circumstances and different interpretations of the Islamic scriptures.

In both the main branches of Islam, Sunni and Shia, the scholars involved themselves in the issues of social care. They did so, however, for different reasons. In the larger of the two groups, the Sunnis, it was viewed as a kind of distribution of work between the earthly leaders and the scholars as religious/spiritual leaders. Seen from this perspective, the earthly leaders were accepted as legitimate rulers since they had succeeded in usurping earthly power. Things were quite different in the Shiite branch. The Shiite scholars also believed that social care issues were

part of their jurisdiction but unlike the Sunni scholars, the Shiite scholars belonged to a vulnerable and often persecuted minority who, moreover, considered that the earthly powers were not legitimate. They took on the social care issues but refused to recognize the legitimacy of earthly rulers. Some went so far as to lay claim to the earthly power and considered challenging its representatives in order to take over this power for themselves.

The scholars' involvement in this question meant that a virtue had been institutionalized. They created institutions and structures to deal with the issues of social care. This was generally done on condition that there was no civil society with associated institutions to provide the social safety net. Even if the scholars mainly viewed their involvement from a religious perspective, the purpose of which was to maintain a central virtue in society, they were forced to involve themselves in the institutionalization of care activities. This required, among other things, systematizing routines and organizing the collection of donated real estate that ended up in the so-called waqf system.[2] In conjunction with this, volunteer efforts to help with the collection and administration of contributions and donations were of great importance.

Collections were to begin with local administration, but in some Muslim countries, for example Persia during the Safavid era (1501–1736), the work was centralized. Centralization of the collection of financial contributions and taxes meant that the scholars achieved economic independence that not only gave them financial muscle and the resources to carry on resource-intensive social activities, but also rendered them independent of the earthly powers. These increased financial resources and the economic independence opened up new possibilities for the scholars. They did not limit their efforts to helping the weak and the distressed in society financially, but began to act increasingly as public representatives who looked after these people's legal interests. People who considered themselves to be subjected to injustice by the ruling powers turned to the scholars for assistance. Their role developed into that of defender of legal security, an authority to turn to when one wished to make a complaint against the ruling power (Zargarinejad 1995, p. 120).

This development meant that compassion was not limited to financial aid for the distressed and the financially weak individuals and groups in society. Efforts to combat legal insecurity and provide support for people subjected to injustice or arbitrariness within the legal field, or what in today's terminology would be termed social activism, became just as self-evident a part of a spectrum of activities that went under the heading of compassion. The scholars' support of the socially vulnerable, the financially weak and those who were heading for a showdown with the ruling powers gave them even greater grass-roots support. Their increased popularity led in turn to more people paying their religious taxes to the scholars or donating

[2] The basis of the waqf system was that a person could donate real estate, wells, schools, hospitals, agricultural land, etc. for charitable purposes during their lifetime. A donation meant that the property was withdrawn from the market and could not be sold, pledged, inherited or confiscated by the state. It belonged to the waqf institution that acted as a foundation to manage the property and ensure that it was used or that income from it was used for various charitable purposes.

property for social care in the so-called waqf system that was being increasingly developed in Muslim countries.

Sociopolitical Factors

The group that distinguished itself as regards their involvement in issues of social care was the scholars. They found support for their role in, amongst other things, the prophet's tradition which pointed to the scholars as a group with a defined task. This applies first and foremost to the following pronouncement from prophet Muhammad: "The scholars are the heirs of the prophets and my congregation's scholars are like the prophets of Israel." (Fazlhashemi 2011, p. 104)

Based on this prophetic pronouncement, they considered that leading the congregation was one of the scholars' tasks. But despite the prophetic pronouncement and several other arguments that all underlined the scholars' tasks, there has never, not even today, been any consensus regarding the scholars' area of responsibility. There are groups that believe that the scholars' area of responsibility is limited to the spiritual area and to helping people in general to find their way around all the religious sources and traditions. Opposing this are those who believe that the scholars' responsibility includes both spiritual and earthly leadership. Here again, we find no consensus regarding the extent of the scholars' jurisdiction. All groups, however, agreed that the scholars should, in one way or another, take responsibility for the social care issues. The only detail that has caused any problems and where opinions have diverged was whether the scholars themselves should deal with the issue or whether they should monitor or delegate responsibility to others. In general, they agreed that they should act as administrators of the social safety net (Fazlhashemi 2011, p. 105).

The scholars' social involvement, and the organization of the volunteer work associated with it, has, however, been affected by political and social circumstances. For a long time, there has been an unwritten but de facto division of work between the earthly rulers and the religious institutions, where the latter were responsible for the social work and the voluntary activities associated with it.

The winds of change began to blow in the nineteenth century, as the central powers in the principal Muslim states of the time, i.e. the Ottoman Empire and the Persia of the Qajars, were becoming progressively weaker. This weakness had its origins mainly in internal circumstances such as political incompetence, widespread corruption, absence of legal security and a weakened economy. To this must be added the European colonial powers' challenge to the Muslim states both on the battlefield and in the political and financial arenas. The different factors had contributed to increased social, political and economic problems. There was a greater need for efforts that would safeguard society's social safety net.

The weakening of the central powers in Muslim countries and the increased social and financial problems opened up the field for the scholars and the religious institutions to play a greater role in the earthly area. This was most evident in Persia.[3]

[3] The country officially changed its name to Iran in the 1930s.

The scholars believed that the unsatisfactory situation in the country demanded their involvement. They wanted to assist their sorely tried compatriots. Their involvement was not, however, limited to issues of social care but also came to include political questions. Many of them involved themselves in the efforts to bring about a paradigm shift in the country, that is to say, a transition from autocracy to a constitutional form of government. The scholars found inspiration in the constitutional form of government that had its roots in the modern European form of government. They held high hopes that a transition to a constitutional form of government would lead to major political, social and economic improvements in the country. Among other things, it would work to counter the country's economic destitution, strengthen legal security, combat corruption and, last but not least, it would break the influence of foreign countries over the earthly powers, which in their vocabulary they had termed colonialism (Mahallati Gharavi 1995, p. 475). Here again, they justified their involvement in political questions by pointing to the need to create a social safety net to take care of the weak and the distressed. They believed that a transition to a constitutional form of government would give the social care issues a significant boost (Khalkhali 1995, p. 232, pp. 318–319).

One of the scholars who had been working actively for the introduction of constitutional government since the 1890s was Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Tabatabai. In one of his pronouncements, he justified his support for a constitutional form of government as follows:

> We have not seen for ourselves those countries that are led by constitutional governments. But from what we have heard and what people who have been in those countries tell us, a constitutional government leads to security and development. For this reason we wish to take action to establish constitutional government in this country. (Kermani 1992, p. 339; Kasravi 1977, pp. 85–86)

Tabatabai somewhat ironically writes that his ambitions to establish a constitutional form of government worked against the scholars' jurisdiction because in a country with legal security and in a sound economic position, fewer and fewer people would join them. But he had nothing against going down in history as the person who worked to establish a parliamentary, constitutional system and a constitutional state where social care issues did not lie fallow (Kasravi 1977, p. 76).

The scholars' efforts regarding social care issues were dependent on the financial contributions they could bring in through taxes, grants and donations. Alongside the religious taxes, the merchants were one of the biggest contributors. As their revenues shrank, the religious institutions' coffers also began to run dry. This was to some degree due to the general economic decline that had resulted from the mismanagement of the economy by the earthly powers. Another and more important reason was their clumsy handling of the awarding of concessions to foreign businessmen that excluded the domestic businessmen.

In the early 1890s, the English major G.F. Talbot was granted a monopoly on purchasing, processing and selling tobacco in Persia. Over the following 2 years, this concession gave rise to widespread opposition against the king and against what was perceived as foreign influence over the country's economy. The measure

caused great indignation among the merchants who were effectively excluded from the tobacco trade in the domestic market.

The merchants were driven by fears that the foreign tobacco company threatened their financial interests. Their appeals to the royal court had been in vain and they therefore turned to the Shiite scholars. The highest Shiite scholar of the time, Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi (1814–1896), wrote to the king complaining about his frivolous awarding of concessions to foreign states and companies. He demanded that the tobacco concession be annulled but the reply from the king's envoy was that the agreement with the English was binding and impossible to cancel. The highest spiritual leader's reply to this was that, if the state was unable to do so, then he would personally and with God's help annul the concession. This was followed by a serious demonstration of power on the part of the highest Shiite scholar.

The Ayatollah issued a fatwa through which he forbade the faithful to use tobacco. The fatwa was very concise but its symbolic value was all the greater. In the fatwa, the Ayatollah wrote that all use of tobacco was to be considered an act of war against Islam. In practice, the fatwa meant that the Ayatollah imposed a religious prohibition on tobacco. In addition to boycotting tobacco products, the fatwa gave rise to a series of extensive protests against the king and the foreign companies. The bazaars, which were the hub of the economy, were closed by general strikes and mass protest rallies were organized. In 1892, the king gave way and annulled the concession.

The Ayatollah's actions in the tobacco affair and the debates that followed showed how the religious leaders and the institutions advanced their positions as the central powers continued to weaken. The religious authorities not only spoke of the need to safeguard Islam but also touched upon other areas such as safeguarding the nation, the kingdom's sovereignty, independence from foreign powers and the public's interests and, last but not least, the necessity to protect the weak members of society. The scholars reserved the right to have opinions regarding the actions of the earthly powers and to curtail their authority. Their successful action against the royal family and the foreign companies made the scholars aware of the potentially enormous power that they had. These events marked the beginning of a series of other manoeuvres on the part of the scholars through which they advanced their positions still further. At the same time, it is interesting to note that, despite the Ayatollah's demonstration of his great power through the fatwa, he did not wish to proceed further. Despite his opposition to the king, he did not wish to go as far as to demand his abdication and that the scholars should take over his power while waiting for the secret imam. When the king had conceded to the Ayatollah's exhortation, albeit extremely unwillingly, and annulled the agreement with the English, the matter was closed (Kermani 1992, pp. 20–28).

The nineteenth century was also the era of constitutionalism. Increasing numbers of scholars fell in behind the demand for a transition from autocracy to a constitutional form of government. The main motive was that a transition to a constitutional form of government would enable issues of social care to be handled better. Their reasoning was that the constitutional form of government was not the most ideal form, but it was definitely second best and since it presented better possibilities to

deal with the social care, they were prepared to support such a transition. A constitutional form of government would also mean the final demise of autocracy in the country and, last but not least, it would mean the end of foreign influence over the state.

Earthly Power Ambitions

The transition from autocracy to constitutional government took place in Persia in 1906, but instead of better conditions and the realization of all the hopes that had been tied to the constitutional form of government, the country was thrown into political chaos. The power struggle between different political factions intent on filling the vacuum after the abolition of autocracy led to anarchy and political disarray. The economic situation worsened and the weak and vulnerable saw their circumstances deteriorate still further. The chaos frightened a large group of scholars who chose to withdraw their support for constitutional government. The final turning point came during the inter-war years, when the autocratic ruler of the time, King Reza Shah, inspired by Turkish dictator Ataturk, implemented a de-islamification campaign that clamped down on everything that had to do with Islam and focused in particular on its representatives. The campaign made Islam out to be an obstacle to modernisation of the political, economic, social and cultural areas. The religious leaders were now even more sceptical towards the constitutional form of government. In fact, there was not much left of the political reforms associated with the constitutional form of government (Fazlhashemi 2011, pp. 153–160).

We see the same trend in other countries. In Egypt, great hopes were pinned to the transition to constitutional government in the early 1920s. There, it was England as a colonial power that dashed all hopes by its refusal to relinquish its hold on the country. In the late 1920s, the first demands began to be voiced for the establishment of an Islamic form of government. In Iran, the demand was first voiced in the mid-1940s. It did not, however, meet with any great sympathy since support for political Islam was still weak. Support grew all the stronger in the 1960s and 1970s. The most important reason for this was the actions of the government which had suppressed all forms of political opposition.

The religious leaders accused the earthly powers of betraying the distressed when, at the same time, they and their immediate family were rolling in money, from, for example, the enormous oil revenues that were flowing into most Muslim countries. The oil revenues were spent on weapons and lives of luxury for those in power and their immediate families. The destitution of society's weak and distressed was one of the most important aspects that the religious leaders focused on in their criticism of the people in power.

It was in conjunction with this that a group of scholars put forward their demand for a transition to Islamic government. The religious leaders were, however, far from unanimous on this point. Most of them supported the demand for action in the social area and caring for the distressed but they did not wish to go so far as

to support the demand for a political takeover of power. Their interpretations of the scriptures and the regulations concerning compassion on the social plane were based on it being the scholars' responsibility to ensure that this virtue was realized in society. They also added that the task of scholars was to see to it that this task really was carried out and that this important issue did not lie fallow. This did not, however, mean that scholars would assume political power or that they themselves would intervene personally. They could just as easily delegate or transfer the task to the legal entities or institutions that were well equipped for the task.

From the early 1960s, demands to take over political power as an important prerequisite to be able to deal with the social care issues became increasingly vociferous. The most important component of the scholars' opposition to the earthly leadership was the fact that the earthly powers had reneged on their commitments. Not only had they submitted to foreign powers and mismanaged the economy. What was even more serious was that they were implementing a deliberate anti-Islam policy.

The generally unsatisfactory conditions involving widespread corruption, skewed finances and lack of an adequate social safety net for the distressed were taken as further evidence that the powers that were had not fulfilled their earthly duties. These circumstances were, in the final analysis, considered as disqualifying them as earthly leaders in Muslim countries (Fazlhashemi 2011, pp. 172–202).

Compassion in the Fight Against Religious Oppression

Endeavours to introduce an Islamic form of government had borne fruit in several Muslim countries. In Iran, a social revolution in 1979 led to the deposition of the despotic Shah. In Turkey, an Islamic party has won three general elections since 2002. In Tunisia, where the popular uprising in the wake of the Arab spring have led to old dictator being forced from power, an Islamic Party has won the electorate's mandate to rule the country. In all these countries, commitment to social issues to aid society's distressed and organize volunteer efforts in this respect have been anchored in the political context.

The form of government that has endured longest is the Iranian example. It is based on a specific and rather unusual political doctrine that goes by the name of the rule of the scholars. The many changes that took place in the country once the scholars had come to power include the establishment of a number of governmental and quasi-governmental institutions with the specific task of dealing with the issue of social care and organizing volunteer work. These institutions took stock of the country's households to identify the weak and the distressed. A large group of people among the country's weak and distressed have since then been enveloped by a social safety net that aids vulnerable groups in different ways, for example in the form of social security allowances. Alongside these governmental and quasi-governmental institutions, individual scholars and non-profit-making organizations run their own activities that involve volunteers in their work with financially weak families and other groups of citizens in need of extensive assistance.

Despite all the endeavours to meet the needs of the distressed, the debates concerning social care and a social safety net and the need for volunteer activities have not ceased; on the contrary, the debate has intensified and the religious leaders have been severely criticized for not having been able to create sufficient protection for society's neediest. Another problem was that the new political system proved to be extremely authoritarian and developed into a totalitarian form of government that showed no compassion at all towards political opponents or citizens who, in one way or another, deviated from the ethical, social, cultural and political norms that the state had set up. During the past three decades, prominent religious leaders have demanded that the powers that be live up to the compassionate norms. Their demands have not been limited to caring for society's financially weak individuals but have come to an increasing extent to encompass legal security and worthy, humane treatment of dissidents and political opponents. An illustrative example of the involvement of religious leaders in this respect is the events that followed the controversial presidential election of 2009. The popular protests against election rigging were brutally beaten down, causing vociferous protests from several high-ranking religious leaders, including Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri (1922–2009). He condemned the assaults on the protesters and people who had been imprisoned, the collective sham trials, the coercion of confessions in front of TV cameras, etc., as actions which were in glaring contrast to compassion.[4] In one of his pronouncements, he compared the sham trials after the presidential election in Iran with Soviet dictator Stalin's and Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's show trials and insisted that such sham trials and confessions obtained under coercion ran counter to Islamic beliefs.[5] Ayatollah Montazeri went so far as to say, with the support of his religious authority, that the regime in power in Iran lacked religious/Muslim legitimacy.[6] In his view, the right to demonstrate and express one's opinions was to be regarded as a civil right and underlined the fact that respect for human rights and fundamental civil liberties is an important aspect of compassion in Islam.

A Question of Personal Responsibility

Discussions concerning social care, caring for those in need of protection and the distressed, as well as volunteer work in the Muslim context, have been able to be linked to an ethical question or a religious obligation through the virtue of compassion. On the personal plane, the discussions have concerned both ethical questions and conceptions that volunteer efforts will be rewarded in one way or another. Another side of the debate has been the discussions about the role of religion in society

[4] He refers, amongst others, to the following sources: Wasail al-shia, (Shiite jurisprudence's handed down sources), vol. 18, pp. 497–498 and Daim al-islam, (The pillars of Islam), vol. 2, p. 466.

[5] www.amontazeri.com/farsi/ (topic 217, posted on 4 Aug 2009) and www.amontazeri.com/farsi/ (topic 223, posted on 22 Sep 2009).

[6] www.amontazeri.com/farsi/ (topic 219, posted on 26 Aug 2009).

and the attitudes of religious institutions to earthly questions and politics. Central to the discussions has been the question of whether compassion is to be regarded as a personal virtue or is to function as a societal virtue and, first and foremost, whether the representatives of the religious institutions are to play an active role when it comes to designing a social safety net and organizing volunteer efforts. It is important to note that the discussions about compassion have not been carried on in a social or historical vacuum, but have very much been coloured by social and political circumstances. Under certain historical and social conditions, the discussions about compassion have also come to encompass such questions as legal security and respect for fundamental civil liberties.

It can be seen that some kind of consensus has existed on personal responsibility. Every individual must strive to fulfil this virtue. The dividing lines have been drawn regarding the issue of realizing it on the societal plane. As the somewhat abbreviated historical account above shows, the scholars' entry into the social and political arena was motivated by the lack of institutions and players dealing with social care and the defence of legal security. In modern times, safeguarding the various aspects of this virtue has been used as an excuse to justify arrogating political power. In a modern welfare state and community founded on the rule of law, where an independent judicial system guarantees legal security and social authorities take care of weak and vulnerable people, there should not be any scope for religious leaders to intervene in these areas because realization of the public aspects of the virtue of compassion is a matter for the state and the judicial and social authorities. What remains, then, is personal responsibility, which is a matter for the individual. In this respect, volunteer work becomes a question for the individual who can justify his or her decision to participate in volunteer work for both religious and ethical reasons.

As regards the scholars and their role, the Shiite Ayatollah Akhund Khorasani (1837–1911) distinguished himself through the vision that he sketched at the beginning of the last century. He was a devoted advocate of the constitutional form of government but warned the scholars against involving themselves in politics because he did not consider this to be compatible with their responsibilities. On the one hand, he spoke about personal responsibility and based on this he reserved the right for the scholars to act as warning voices in society with the right to criticize politicians and statesmen who were not fulfilling their obligations. As individuals, the scholars were to watch, scrutinize and criticize the government and combat corruption and oppression. He compared this role to that of salt. The scholars would be the salt of the earth. In the same way as salt prevents decay, the scholars would counteract autocratic attitudes and the decay of power. They would act as defenders of compassion when the earthly powers committed transgressions against legal security and sound a note of warning when social care was neglected (Kadivar 2006, pp. 16–17).

Akhund Khorasani's point of departure was not any conception of the scholars' special standing in society. He saw no difference between the scholars and other people in the public sphere. Like everyone else, the scholars were to pursue the struggle against social injustice as individuals, a role that he described as the salt of the earth (Kadivar 2006, p. 19).

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