
Zakah

(Wealth Sharing)

LITERALLY, al-zakah means the sweetening. The idea it expresses is that it consists in justification, or making *ḥalāl* (legitimate, innocent, good) that which it is supposed to affect. The term can be used with a human being as object, in which case it means recommendation or acclamation. When used with wealth as its object – and that is the greater usage – it means making that wealth just, legitimate, innocent, good and worthy. Obviously, the worth zakah adds to wealth is not utilitarian, but moral.

Islam regards all wealth as belonging to God. Man may appropriate as much of it as he pleases, by all means which economic life makes possible, as long as such means do not infringe the moral law. Wealth gathering is legitimate activity as long as it implies no theft, no cheating, no coercion. Indeed, the pursuit of wealth is one of the primal concerns of man, demanded by survival (where it consists of the search for food, shelter, clothing and comfort) as well as by man's *khilāfah* or vicegerency (where its object is the planned satisfaction of one's own material needs and those of humanity.) Engagement in it fills the greatest portion of life and exhausts the greatest energies of all men, everywhere and at all times. It is the very stuff of which living consists. Its subjection to the moral law, i.e., its governance by the laws

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prohibiting the appropriation of any part of it without the free and deliberate consent of the other person involved in the transaction, is an absolute requirement. Without it, human life sinks to the level of the animals, of materialism and exploitation.

But even if every requirement of the moral law has been strictly observed in every step and stage of the process of wealth acquisition, the wealth achieved still needs justification on another level. This is what the institution of zakah seems to require. Granted, then, that I have violated no moral law in acquiring my wealth, *why* does Islam hold such wealth nonetheless illegitimate until I have justified it by means of zakah?

The answer is that whereas the moral law governs the acquisition of wealth, there is need for another law to govern its consumption and/or continued possession. Had there been no purpose to our life except its existence, no meaning to personal existence except the pleasure, comfort and satisfaction derivable therefrom, no demand could be made of the owner of wealth. *Laissez-faire* in wealth acquisition was the conclusion of political liberalism. *Laissez-faire* in the consumption of wealth is a necessary dictate of hedonism, utilitarianism, eudemonism and all moral theories which define the good in worldly or relative terms. Since Islam does define the good in terms of absolute laws which refer to a divine will and commandment, to a transcendent pattern which is the ultimate purpose of all moral action, it found necessary to regulate the consumption and possession of wealth.

Islam's tenet in this regard is that wealth, once acquired, ought to be shared with others in some proportion. This is equally the requirement of charity; and charity is as old as man. Is it all that Islam requires? Certainly, it is charity, answers Islam; but it is more. Charity has always been regarded as a high moral value by all mankind. Its proportion, nay its very observance, has been left to the personal discretion of the giver. True, morality has always taught that the greater the portion one shares with his fellows, the greater the merit. Jesus moved charity to higher moral grounds when he taught that the purer the motivation with which the giver gives his wealth, the greater the moral worth of the deed. With all this Islam fully agrees, recognizing this teaching of Jesus as genuine revelation from God. It called the institution *ṣadaqah*, a

derivative from the act of faith itself by which man acknowledges God to be God.

No religion or morality before Islam has made charity itself obligatory in the sense of institutionalizing it and empowering somebody to levy, collect and distribute it. It is nice to have charity as a moral ideal. But what would be its worth if it remained an unobserved ideal? An ideal satisfiable by the millionaire's giving of a few pennies to the poor on the sidewalk? An ideal whose observance is subject only to one's conscience, or to God in the Hereafter, but to no regulation by man's peers in this world?

This is the need to which Islam addressed itself by the institution of *zakah*. You may give of your wealth to your fellow men as much as you please, when you please, in the manner you please. That is your *sadaqah* of which your conscience and God are the only judges. But you may not escape the requirement of giving every year 2.5 per cent of your total wealth to a corporate institution, the Islamic state, for distribution to the less fortunate, to those in need. Thus, Islam sought to preserve the moral value of charity, and to add to it the equally moral value of wealth-sharing or *zakah*. Its purpose was dual: to convince the wealthy that the title to his very wealth is mitigated by the title of his fellow man to life and subsistence, and to assure the needy that his fellow men will not passively see him suffer his misfortune. A bond of humanity, of fellowship, of brotherhood binds both the wealthy and the poor together. The Prophet said: "Men are like the organs of a body. When an organ suffers the whole body responds to repel the cause of suffering." The Qur'an went as far as to quote the consciousness of the need for altruistic self-exertion with religion itself. "Who is the denier of religion itself? It is he who repulses the orphan, who does not enjoin the feeding of the poor. Woe to those who observe the rituals of religion but are insensitive to the moral side of those rituals, and hence to the need of the miserable for assistance." (Qur'an 107:1-7)