

Poverty in Traditional Islamic Thought:

Is it Virtue or Captivity?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the basic sources of Islam evaluate poverty, how it was lived in traditional Islam, and how it affected Muslim people in history. Islam does not see poverty as a virtue, but accepts it as a serious social problem that has negative effects that must be alleviated, and brings some suggestions concerning its solution. In this context, Muslims are encouraged to be wealthy, and wealth, as long as the poor are considered, is accepted as a blessing. The authentic *ahadith* narrated by the Prophet Muhammad also see poverty as a danger and threat from which people in the community should escape. However, some of those from the school of Islamic mysticism fear that prosperity may move people far from the wishes of Allah and believe that those who live a virtuous life based on Islam accept poverty as a blessing from Allah. However, this belief has been misunderstood in some Muslim communities and Muslim countries and has affected them very negatively. This article will try to examine the true aspects of poverty and prosperity in the lives of people based on authentic Islamic sources.

Key Words: Islam, Poverty, Sufism

Poverty has been a constant feature of society throughout history. History shows that poverty has always existed in lives of people. However, it is also a historical fact that although the majority of people have lived in poverty, the remaining minority has lived in luxury. This is also valid in today's societies and nations. Again, while some countries, called first world countries, live in a very luxurious manner, the remaining countries, called third world countries, live in poverty. This also shows that poverty has been a social phenomenon and a serious problem in the past and in the present in history.

This paper examines how the main sources of Islam evaluate poverty, and how

and why some people accept it as a virtue without considering its negative effects on people.

Poverty in Islamic Sources

Poverty, meaning that a person has some material difficulties and cannot do certain things and needs others, as "*fakr, fakir* and (plural form) *fukara'*" is mentioned in the Qur'an twelve times. When these verses are examined, it is seen that two speak of "spiritual poverty."¹ These verses compare the inability of human beings to sustain themselves and their absolute need for Allah (*al-fukara ilallah*) while Allah himself who does not need anybody (*wallahu'l-gani*). The remaining verses are related to "material poverty" and mean helping, protecting, and sheltering poor people.² In these verses, those who are not rich have material needs and require other peoples' help. Thus, it is seen that the majority of verses deal with material poverty.³

The words for poverty (in the *hadiths* of the Prophet Muhammad) are generally used in the same way. There are many *hadiths* related to poverty and the poor in the *Zühd* (the ignorance of the world life) and *Rikak* (giving sensitivity to the heart) chapters of *hadith* sources. In these *hadiths* the poor mainly refer to "material poverty" as it is in the Qur'an. However, it is interesting to note that these *hadiths* speak of poverty in terms of both compliment and loathing.⁴

In the doctrine of *tasavvuf*, which accepts *zühd* as a worldview, *fakr* or poverty has a special meaning and place. The Sufis paying attention to the material meaning of poverty in the earliest years also accepted the act of giving up property and goods as a basic principle.⁵ Since ninth century, it is seen that Sufis' concept of poverty has acquired a *philosophical and spiritual* meaning. *Fakr* means to have no need of

anything or anyone except Allah. With this meaning, the poor is not a person who is far from material things and without daily food, but one who lives keeping constantly aware only needing Allah.⁶

Islamic Understanding of Property

After examining the concepts of poverty and the poor in the sources of Islam, we can pass on to the Islamic view of poverty. However, in order to be able to point out the Islamic view of poverty, first, it should be known how Islam considers worldly property, and to what extent it gives permission to use and benefit from it. We should point out that Islam is not against gaining property and commodities. As long as property does not become of a source of pride, arrogance and oppression or cause people to be enslaved to it (*abdu-dinar*), Islam does discourage but actually encourages people to gain property. On this point, the Qur'an reads as follows: "Say: Who hath forbidden the beautiful (gifts) of Allah, which He hath produced for His servants, and the things, clean and pure, (which He hath provided) for sustenance? Say: They are, in the life of this world, for those who believe, (and) purely for them on the Day of Judgment. Thus, do We explain the signs in detail for those who know."⁷ Again, according to the Qur'an, "women and sons; heaped-up hoards of gold and silver; horses branded (for blood and excellence) and (wealth of) cattle and well-tilled land" are not accused in and of themselves, but because of causing greed and passionate desires in people.⁸ Thus, when prosperity does not cause them to have these negative behaviors, it will be a means of blessing both in this world and the next world.

In order to sustain humanly life in this world, working and having enough property is imperative for everyone in Islam. Moreover, working to obtain property

and maintain a good life is accepted as a valuable effort and worship. It is stated in the Qur'an that while the night is created for the rest, the day is created for the maintenance of life,⁹ and it is accepted as a principle, "That man can have nothing but what he strives for."¹⁰ Furthermore, the Qur'an, in the Surah of Cum'a, commands that when Muslims finish their prayers they should disperse through the land and seek the bounty of Allah.¹¹ Saying "a person does not eat anything better than he earns by himself,"¹² the Prophet Muhammad also indicated the importance and holiness of working. All of these indicate that Islam sees struggling for a living by producing something or by commerce as a meritorious job.

However, it must also be noted that while Islam encourages Muslims to work and to gain their livelihood, it has also brought some regulations and restrictions related to gaining income and ownership. In this context, it has brought two important principles: Gaining income and ownership should be by legal means, and income and wealth should be spent on legal aims and the common good. Islam is against those who accumulate property for the purpose of greed and oppression as well as those who gain thorough unlawful business practices.¹³

Islamic Understanding of Poverty

Islam does not have any negative attitudes towards property; instead it places great value on prosperity as long as it is used properly. Again, Islam basically does not see poverty as a virtue, but as a social anomaly that must be alleviated, and a situation from which a Muslim should pray to Allah to be protected from its consequences. In addition, Islam provides some guidelines to eliminate its negative effects. In fact, other world religions also try to solve this serious problem by establishing some regulations and giving advice to her followers such as "protecting

the oppressed people from the oppressors' cruelty, helping needy persons, and maintaining the lives of aged, orphan and other handicapped persons in the society."¹⁴

There are no verses in the Qur'an nor any *hadith* related to the Prophet that advocates poverty. Although there are some *hadiths* that speak favorably the ascetic life and devoutness and unfavorably toward a passionate desire for property, it is not correct to interpret these *hadiths* as advocating poverty. A normal standard of living is necessary even for an ascetic. Indeed a devout person is a person who has adequate wealth, but never puts it into his/her heart. The Prophet indicates this when he says: "Even if I had had gold as much as the Mount Uhut, I would not have kept it in me."¹⁵ Additionally, the Prophet says: "Worldly wealth is sweet and attractive."¹⁶ However, He meant by this *hadith* that everyone could not behave as he did in terms of property. Indeed, He approved that Muslims should have property and saw richness as a grace of Allah as long as they fulfilled their responsibilities towards other people and society. In this context, He said: "A clean property (goods) that is acquired by legal means is a beautiful grace for a devout Muslim."¹⁷ Although the Prophet Muhammad states that a true richness is the richness of heart,¹⁸ it should not be understood from this that He is saying that He does not reject the property of the world. For he says "Allah loves those who are devout, rich and vow themselves to worship."¹⁹

The issue of poverty is spoken more comprehensively in the *hadiths*. The authentic *hadiths* related to the Prophet indicate that poverty is an important danger and threat for both individuals and societies. The Prophet clearly points out that poverty is an unwanted situation from which every Muslim should protect himself/herself.²⁰ Indeed, while He himself prayed, "O my Allah, I refuge to you from

the evils of poverty,"²¹ he advised his friends with the following prayer: "Refuge to Allah from the evils of poverty, famine, degradation, oppressing and oppressed."²² It is also known that some serious precautions were taken to hinder poverty and to maintain the prosperity of the society during his lifetime. Making the needy people brothers and sisters with those who are rich, freeing of slaves, encouraging the Islamic foundations for the common good, atonement, giving alms for the poor, and voluntary spending etc. are just a few examples.²³

The Situation of Poverty in the Islamic Tradition

Although Islamic sources approve of benefiting from the world and of being rich, and see poverty as a social illness and threat that must be eradicated, it cannot be said that this has been properly understood or applied by Muslim societies in history. The historical events show that while a part of society lived in luxury, forgetting the Islamic teaching of modesty and the middle road, others preferred to live in poverty and withdraw themselves from any of the benefits of the world. Thus, a group of people called "*zuhhad*" affected mostly by foreign cultures such as Iranian and Indian emerged that advocated withdrawal from food and worldly goods. Later, this current of thought found a place for itself in the area of *tasavvuf* and deeply affected the entire Islamic world.²⁴ Although Islam commands its followers to have an active responsibility concerning matters of divine will, those who accept the Sufis' understanding forgot this Islamic command and defended a passive submission and trust in Allah. They viewed working in economic activities as unnecessary effort, concerned only with temporal life without value for the future, and lastly preferred the principle of *fakr*, meaning absolute poverty in matters of the world. Ultimately, this caused all Muslim societies to be backward. In order to defend this way of life, some people wrote some particular chapters in the sources of Sufis that denigrate

worldly wealth and advocated living in poverty, and even fabricated many *hadiths* for this purpose.

In order to encourage people to worship, the Sufis' sources fabricated many *hadiths* that denigrate the benefits of the world and prosperity, but encourage, even compliment poverty. Sufis used these kinds of narratives to defend their mystic understanding that include reducing food eating, sleepless, and rest and become of less concerned for the affairs of the world. Although some of the narratives (*hadiths*) that are used in the works of the Sufis are authentic, most of them are fabricated. One of these fabricated narratives is as follows: "Poverty is my honor and I am proud of it."²⁵ "The present of the believer in the world is poverty."²⁶ In another narrative, poverty is described as a personal honor. "Poverty is more ornamented for the believer than bridle on the face of the horse and whiteness of forehead of the horse."²⁷ According to another narrative which it is not possible to believe, the Prophet said "When the poverty comes to you, meet it saying, 'Welcome Oh, sign of pious people'; however, when the prosperity comes to you, say it that 'you are a sin that causes a future punishment.'"²⁸

Although good standing before Allah depends only on faith, good deeds and pious behavior, some Sufis believe that only the poor may have the most valuable rewards in the life after. "There is a key for everything. The key of the paradise is to love the poor and the destitute. The poor who are patient will be with Allah."²⁹ They even claim that the Prophet himself preferred to die poor. The narrative concerning this claim is as follows: "O my Allah, make me die as a poor man, do not make me rich, and resurrect me in the next world with those who are destitute."³⁰ They emphasized that Muslims should look down on worldly wealth that Allah made legal. "Avoid yourself from the world, for it is more captivating than *Harut* and *Marut*."³¹ In

the works of Sufis, there are many narratives that are opposed to the teaching of the Qur'an.³² The Qur'an says: "But seek, with the (wealth) which Allah has bestowed on thee, the home of the Hereafter, nor forget thy portion in this world..."³³

Those who are against Islam called (*Zindiq*) also played an important role in terms of fabricating these kinds of narratives. Their purpose was to make the poor people enemy to the rich and to create jealousy between them, and thus to create a social crisis. The *zanadiq* (the plural form of *zindiq*) fabricated the following hadiths: "Poverty is my favor"³⁴ To them, the prayer of the Prophet Muhammad will be also with them. In this context, as if the Prophet said: "O my Allah, make me and my Community live as Muslims and resurrect me together with the poor."³⁵ Oppressing the poor was to be a great sin. "Whoever oppresses a poor Muslim without any rights, he will be punished as if he destroyed the Mecca and Baytu'l Makdis, and killed a thousand angels who are close to Allah."³⁶ They assigned the duty of forgiveness to the poor instead of Allah. "The poor are handkerchiefs of the rich. The rich people clean their sins by the handkerchief of the poor."³⁷ According to the assertions of *zanadiq*, even Allah himself will apologize to the poor. "Allah apologizes to the poor in the Hereafter."³⁸ At this point, whatever the poor do, there will be any option for Allah except forgiving the poor. "Allah certainly forgives the poor in Hereafter."³⁹

Since poverty is elevated superior, it follows that the wealth should be blamed. As a result of this understanding, a poor person should not even sit with the rich, even with their children. "Do not sit with the children of the rich, for their sedition is more dangerous than that of a virgin girl."⁴⁰ They (*zanadiq*) stated that the rich are the worst group at all. According to their claims, when somebody asked the Prophet: "Who are the worst scoundrels from your community," the Prophet replied, "they are

the rich."⁴¹ Wealth is even accepted as a sign of polytheism. "Wealth grows hypocrisy in the heart as the water grows."⁴² While the food of poor will be delicious, the food of rich will not be. "Allah certainly gives the deliciousness of the food of the rich to that of the poor."⁴³

The superiority of the poor over the rich will continue in the Hereafter too. The keys of Paradise will be in the hands of the poor. Thus, the poor will enter into Paradise before the rich. Even the entrance of rich people to Paradise will depend on the mercy of the poor. According to a *hadith* related by Anas b. Malik, "We were together with the Prophet Muhammad. The angel, *Cibril* came and said to Him: "O Messenger of Allah, the poor of your community enter the Paradise five hundred years before the rich."⁴⁴ In another narrative, "Poor Muslims enter Paradise forty years before the rich."⁴⁵

While Muslims should live in society as brothers and sisters and show regard and Islam commands love for each other as, the *zindiq* group misunderstood and even abused this understanding of Islam as well. They fabricated some narratives concerning this understanding as follows: "Whoever condescends to the rich just because of their richness, one third of his religion is wasted."⁴⁶ In another narrative, "Allah curses the poor who condescend to the rich just because of their property. Whoever does this, one third of his religion is lost."⁴⁷ They emphasized the value of poverty for Muslims instead of prosperity. "Death is more important than life, poverty is more auspicious than prosperity, and abasement is better than dignity for believers."⁴⁸

Conclusion

The type of thinking regarding the value of poverty is absolutely opposite to the

Islamic teaching, for this kind of understanding makes Muslims withdraw from worldly life and makes them live in very hard conditions, and causes them to live in abasement and degradation. As we stated earlier, this kind of understanding has continued among the masses throughout Islamic history and has affected their total social life. This understanding, which is not approved by Islam, also affected the individual and social lives of the people. Poverty has been a great threat to their beliefs, their moral attitudes, their worldviews, their family lives, and their gaining and maintaining individual and societal needs.

We can say that if, today, the Muslim world is generally economical backward and dependent on developed countries, this misunderstanding has played an important role in this process. This understanding has become an important threat to the political and economic independency of Muslim communities. In addition, this understanding has caused the Muslim community to entertain foreign thoughts, which are opposed to Islamic thinking. When we consider on the effects of this misunderstanding, we can say that such thinking can in no way be accepted in the name of religion. In order to solve this crucial problem that the majority of the Muslim community is faced with, Muslims should turn to the basic teachings of the Qur'an instead of relying on fabricated traditions and foreign thoughts.

Notes

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¹ The Qur'an, Fâtır, 35/15; Muhammad, 47/38; Haşr, 59/8.

² The Qur'an, Bakara, 2/268, 271, 273; Âl-i İmrân, 3/181; Nisâ, 4/6, 135; Tevbe, 9/60; Hacc, 22/28; Nûr, 24/32; Kasas, 28/24; Haşr, 59/8.

³ See for this meaning used in the Qur'an, Kasas, 28/24; Haşr, 59/8.

- ⁴ See for more information, A.J. Wensinck, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane (el-Mu'cemu'l-Müfehres li Elfâzi'l-Hadîsî'n-Nebevî)*, Çağrı Yay., İstanbul, 1986, V/186-189.
- ⁵ See Abdulkarim Kuşayrî, *Kuşayri Risâlesî*, (S.Uludağ), Dergah Yay., İstanbul, 1991, pp. .440-441.
- ⁶ Ebu'l-Alâ Afîfî, *Tasavvuf: İslam'da Manevî Hayat*, (translated by E.Demirli-A.Kartal), İz Yay., İstanbul, 1996, pp. 233-34. See for the definition of *fakr* and more information Kuşeyrî, *Kuşeyri Risâlesî*, s.440-9; Hucvirî, *Keşfu'l-Mahcûb (Hakikat Bilgisi)*, (S. Uludağ), Dergah Yay., İstanbul, 1982, s.99-110; Kelâbâzî, *Ta'arruf (Doğuş Devrinde Tasavvuf)*, (S. Uludağ), Dergah Yay., İstanbul, 1979, p.144-146.
- ⁷ The Qur'an, A'râf, 7/32.
- ⁸ The Qur'an, Âl-i İmrân, 3/14; see also Hadîd, 57/20; Bakara, 2/201.
- ⁹ The Qur'an, 28/73.
- ¹⁰ The Qur'an, 53/39.
- ¹¹ The Qur'an, 62/10.
- ¹² Al- *Buhârî*, Buyû', 15. See also. *Buhârî*, Zekât, 50.
- ¹³ Sabri F.Ülgener, *Zihniyet ve Din, İslam, Tasavvuf ve Çözülme Devri İktisat Ahlâkı*, Der Yayınları, İstanbul, 1981, p. 67.
- ¹⁴ See for exapmls from other religions The Bible, Proverbs, 21/13, 22/9; Deut, 15/7-8; Matt, 5/41-42; 10/42; Luke, 11/41; 14/12-14.
- ¹⁵ *Al-Buhârî*, Zekât, 4; *Muslim*, Zekât, 10.
- ¹⁶ *Al-Buhârî*, Cihâd, 37; *Muslim*, Fiten, 26.
- ¹⁷ Ahmed b. Hanbel, *a'l-Musned*, IV/197, 202.
- ¹⁸ *Al-Buhârî*, Rikâk, 4; *Muslim*, Zekât, 40; *Tirmizî*, Zühd, 40.
- ¹⁹ *Muslim*, Zühd ve Rekâik, 11.
- ²⁰ *İbn Hanbel*, II/231, 250, 410; *Al-Nesaî*, Vesâyâ, 1; Zekât, 60; *İbn Mâce*, Vesâyâ, 4.
- ²¹ *İbn Hanbel*, VI/57, 207; *Ebû Dâvud*, Edeb, 101; *Al-Nesaî*, İsti'âze, 14, 16; *Sehiv*, 90.
- ²² *İbn Hanbel*, II/540.
- ²³ See for more information about this matter, Yusuf Al-Kardavî, *Müşkiletü'l-fakr ve keyfe âlecehe'l-İslâm*, Müessesetü'r-Risâle, Beyrut, 1987, p. 37.
- ²⁴ Süleyman Uludağ, "Dünya", TDVİA., X/23.
- ²⁵ es-Sehavi, *Mekâsidü'l-Hasene*, Bağdat, 1956, p. 480; Aliyyu'l-Kari, *el-Esrâru'l-Merfûa Fi'l-Ahbari'l-Mevdûa*, (thk. M. Lutfi es-Sabbağ), Beyrut, 1986, p. 254. İbn Hacer el-Askalânî and Sübkî said that these kinds of hadiths were fabricated. See *Tabâkâtü's-Şâfiyyeti'l-Kübrâ*, (thk. Mahmud M.et-Tanâhî), Cîze, 1992, III/134.
- ²⁶ Ebû Tâlib el-Mekkî, *Kûtu'l-Kulûb*, Dâru Sâdır, no date., I/243; Ebû Hâmid el-Gazzâlî, *İhyâu Ulûmi'd-Dîn*, Beyrut, 1992, IV/287.

- ²⁷ Ebû Tâlib el-Mekkî, *Ibid*, I/243; Gazzâlî, *Ibid*, IV/287.
- ²⁸ Ebû Tâlib el-Mekkî, *Ibid*, II/194; Gazzâlî, *Ibid*, IV/288. Sübkî said that this was not a hadith, but belonged to the People of the Book. See Es-Sübkî, *Ibid*, VI/366.
- ²⁹ Kuşayrî, *Kuşeyri Risâlesi*, p. 440. İbn Arrâk said that this narrative was not true. See *Tenzihuş-Şeriatî'l-Merfûa ani'l-Mevdûa*, Beyrut, 1981, II/286.
- ³⁰ Ebû Tâlib el-Mekkî, *Ibid*, I/263. İbn Adî and Zehebî said that this narrative was not authentic, thus it was fabricated. See İbn Adî, *el-Kâmil fî Duafâi'r-Ricâl*, Beyrut, 1988, III/10; ez-Zehebî, *Mizânü'l-İ'tidâl fî Nakdî'r-Ricâl*, Dâru'l-Fikr, Beyrut, n.d. I/645; el-Acluni, *Keşfu'l-Hafâ ve Muzilu'l-İlbas*, Beyrut, 1351, I/181.
- ³¹ Ali el-Hindi, *Tezkiretu'l-Mevdûât*, Beyrut, 1399, s.178; Mevlânâ, *Mesnevî*, (trs. V.İzbudak), İstanbul, 1991, I/256.
- ³² The Qur'an, *Kasas*, 28/77.
- ³³ See for the sources of these narratives Ahmet Yıldırım, *Tasavvufun Temel Öğretilerinin Hadislerdeki Dayanakları*, pp. 383-412.
- ³⁴ Ali el-Hindi, *Ibid*, s.179; Ali el-Kari, *Ibid*, s.57.
- ³⁵ Celâleddin es-Suyûtî, *el-Leâli'l-Masnûa Fî'l-Ahâdisi'l-Mevdûa*, Mısır, n.d. II/324; Ebu'l-Ferec İbnu'l-Cevzi, *Kitâbu'l-Mevdûât*, Medine, 1968, III/142.
- ³⁶ İbn Arrak, *Tenzihuş-Şeriatî'l-Merfûa ani'l-Mevdûa*, Mısır 1375, II/316; Suyûtî, *Zeylu'l-Alâi'l-Masnûa*, (thk. Seyyid M.Ma'sukuli), Hindistan, 1303, I/191.
- ³⁷ İbnu'l-Cevzi, *Ibid*, II/154; İbn Arrâk, *Ibid*, II/128; Ali el-Hindi, *Ibid*, s.64.
- ³⁸ Beşir Zafir el-Ezherî, *Tahziru'l-Müslimin mine'l-Ehâdisi'l-Mevdûa*, Mısır, 1903, p. .87.
- ³⁹ İbn Arrâk, *Ibid*, II/317.
- ⁴⁰ İbn Arrâk, *Ibid*, II/214; Ali el-Hindi, *Ibid*, p.189.
- ⁴¹ Ali el-Hindi, *Ibid*, p.178.
- ⁴² Muhammed el-Guzi, *el-İtkân Ma Yuhsinu Mine'l-Ahbân'd-Dâireti Alâ'l-Elsine*, (thk. Halil M.el-Arabi), Kahire, 1415, I/1169.
- ⁴³ Muhammed Kavukci, *el-Lu'luu'l-Marsû' fima Kile la Asla lehu ev bi Aslihi Mevdû*, Mısır, n.d. p. 26; Sehâvî, *Ibid*, s.119.
- ⁴⁴ İbn Arrâk, *Ibid*, II/233.
- ⁴⁵ el-Ceberi, *el-Müştehir Mine'l-Hadisi'l-Mevdûa Ve'd-Daife*, I/31.
- ⁴⁶ Ali el-Hindi, *Ibid*, p.178; Ali el-Kari, *Ibid*, p. 339.
- ⁴⁷ İbn Arrâk, *Ibid*, II/287; Suyuti, *Ibid*, II/323
- ⁴⁸ İbn Arrâk, *Ibid*, II/394.