

Social justice in western cultures : Insights from Islam

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The social responsibility in the western culture had been a major preoccupation during the last decades and many parties tried to promote it using various approaches. Examples from Islam might offer new elements to the organizations involved in the social fields , so far social responsibility had been achieved within a country through the local government actions and the local companies participation

It is possible to consider the major fields of corporate social actions (health, education and training, environment, culture, human rights,...) and the relationship with the recent papal encyclicals.

In studying the islamic model we notice that within Islam social justice is achieved through several elements : The taxation, the wakf, the feasts, the zakat or the poor tax,... and equality is promoted through several religious features (marriage and divorce, islamic banks,...). Despite the implementation of islamic laws in several countries, social differences still exist and the gap between social classes remains wide.

The poverty, social differences between rich and poor, child labor, health and education are major social problems creating strong impacts on businesses and citizens around the world.

The social responsibility in the western culture had been a major preoccupation during the last decades and many parties tried to promote it using various approaches. Examples from Islam might offer new elements to the organizations involved in the social fields and help understand the emergence of the Islamic ideology in former socialist countries.

Social responsibility could be achieved within a country through the local government actions and the local companies participation while a transnational social responsibility is possible through the multinational companies, international agencies and religious institutions actions.

The regression of the socialist model after the collapse of the Soviet Union has discouraged government interventions with the public sector services shrinking and the increase in privatization of assets that used to belong to public sector for strategic reasons (sensitive technology related to defense or resource vital to the economy such as gas and petroleum) or for social reasons (offering the service at a cheaper rate for citizens in need).

The major operators in the social fields will soon become the businesses because many businesses have come to believe that commitments to social responsibility and profitability are not incompatible recognizing that social activities can lead to economic rewards. The concept of corporate social performance evolved as a way to understand how much a business integrates the principles of social responsibility, the process of responsiveness to social issues and the development of policies to address social issues (D. WOOD, 1991) but the interests and goals of stakeholders (customers, employees, suppliers, lenders, unions, lobbies, public institutions,...) should be considered in the social intervention of the company. Most corporate social actions might be found in the recent papal encyclicals mainly in the following paragraphs.

"However, the picture just given would be incomplete if one failed to add to the "economic and social indices" of underdevelopment other indices which are equally negative and indeed even more disturbing, beginning with the cultural level. These are illiteracy, the difficulty or impossibility of obtaining higher education, the inability to share in the building of one's own nation..."

"In brief, modern underdevelopment is not only economic but also cultural, political and simply human, as was indicated twenty years ago by the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. Hence at this point we have to ask ourselves if the sad reality of today might not be, at least in part, the result of a too narrow idea of development, that is, a mainly economic one". (15, *Sollicitudo Re Socialis* 1988).

"Rereading the encyclical in the light of contemporary realities enables us to appreciate the Church's constant concern for and dedication to categories of people who are especially beloved to the Lord Jesus. The contents of the text is an excellent testimony to the continuity within the Church of the so-called "preferential option for the poor", an option which I defined as a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity." [36]. Pope Leo's encyclical on the "condition of the workers" is thus an encyclical on the poor and on the terrible conditions to which the new and often violent process of industrialization had reduced great multitudes of people. Today, in many parts of the world, similar processes of economic, social and political transformation are creating the same evils". (11, *Centesimus annus* 1991).

"But it will be necessary above all to abandon a mentality in which the poor--as individuals and as peoples--are considered a burden, as earksome intruders trying to consume what others have produced. The poor ask for the right to share in enjoying material goods and to make good use of their capacity for work, thus creating a world that is more just and prosperous for all. The advancement of the poor constitutes a great

opportunity for the moral, cultural and even economic growth of all humanity". (28, Centesimus annus 1991).

"Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice. Justice will never be fully attained unless people see in the poor person, who is asking for help in order to survive, not an annoyance or a burden, but an opportunity for showing kindness and a chance for greater enrichment" (58, Centesimus annus 1991).

Major fields of social actions for companies in the West

Several companies are active in the following social fields in accordance with the papal encyclical Centesimus Annus.

1-Health

Financing of programs for children and programs for the elderly, offering subsidies to medical research specially laboratories working on common diseases, promoting safe life styles, enhancing the consumption of healthy food (fresh fruits and vegetables,...), encouraging the practice of several types of sport.

2-Education and training

Faced with a shortage of skilled works, managers realize that they must do something to improve education at all levels and some companies are trying to create corporate universities fulfilling their specific needs and contributing to the spread of education with a better preparation of the work force, companies such as Westinghouse Electric, Exxon and Pepsi are offering financial rewards to teachers showing creativity in their teaching and scholarships to students with a great potential of success belonging to lower social classes (Perry 1988). The hotel group Marriott International has been refining its training program which hones the job skills, life skills and work habits of welfare recipients, Marriott guarantees participants a job offer when they complete the program (Rosabeth Moss Kanter, 1999).

"Authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person. It requires that the necessary conditions be present for the advancement both of the individual through education and formation in true ideals, and of the "subjectivity" of society through the creation of structures of

participation and shared responsibility" (46, Centesimus annus 1991)

3-Environment

The Environment protection, the spread of recycling and the national use of natural resources are becoming a priority and are included in the corporate strategy. Several green products friendly to the environment and green labels had been added to the existing products and brands allowing the consumers to enjoy a nice and healthy environment. The protection of endangered species and the fight against the use of animals for experimental purposes have been adopted by companies involved in cosmetics (Body Shop) and they built their strategy on these topics.

"Equally worrying is the ecological question which accompanies the problem of consumerism and which is closely connected to it. In their desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, people consume the resources of the earth and their own lives in an excessive and disordered way. At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day". (37, Centesimus annus, 1991).

"In addition to the irrational destruction of the natural environment, we must also mention the more serious destruction of the human environment, something which is by no means receiving the attention it deserves. Although people are rightly worried—though much less than they should be—about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction, because they realize that each of these species makes its particular contribution to the balance of nature in general, too little effort is made to safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic "human ecology". (38, Centesimus annus, 1991).

4-Culture

Several companies are trying to improve the cultural level of consumers through subsidies offered to museums or art exhibitions, the sponsoring of musical concerts, the restoration of historical sites even some companies are creating cultural institutes (Paul Getty Institute) and they are participating in the efforts to preserve the human cultural heritage.

"It is not possible to understand the human person on the basis of economics alone, nor to define the person simply on the basis of class situated within the sphere of culture

through language, history, and the position one takes towards the fundamental events of life, such as birth, love, work and death".(24, Centesimus annus, 1991).

5-Human Rights

Some companies have recently adopted a strategy promoting human rights at the international level : Reebok (MILLER 1988) is sponsoring concerts organized by Amnesty International which objectives are the eradication of torture, the freedom for political prisoners, the fight against racial, religious or ethnical discrimination; other companies are offering prizes to personalities or organizations involved in the human rights movement around the world.

"An important, even decisive, contribution was made by the Church's commitment to defend and promote human rights. In situations strongly influenced by ideology, in which polarization obscured the awareness of a human dignity common to all, the Church affirmed clearly and forcefully that every individual—whatever his or her personal convictions—bears the image of God and therefore deserves respect". (22, Centesimus annus 1991).

Most large companies subjected to a social audit identifying their social actions are improving their return on investment and the social expenses through the increase of consumption spending and the improvement of the company's image. The social dimension is becoming a basic element in the corporate strategy allowing the company to develop strong ties with its environment and is compensating the government withdrawal from several social fields.

Social Justice in Islam

Islam appeared in the seventh century in the Arabian desert within a society characterized by deep social differences with a domination of wealthy merchants and a harsh slavery system. Large chapters in the Koran were devoted to social justice and the Prophet Muhammad abolished slavery among Muslims and preached equal rights for all Muslims with safeguards for personal wealth.

Islam has laid down some universal fundamental rights for humanity as a whole, which are to be observed and respected under all circumstances. To achieve these rights islam provides not only legal safeguards but also a very effective moral system. Thus whatever leads to the welfare of the individual or the society is morally good in islam and whatever is injurious is morally bad.

1. **The taxation** :

The Jizye that should be paid by Non-Muslims against the safety offered by the Muslim state allows a better distribution of wealth between Muslims and non Muslims performing oftenly jobs forbidden by the islamic religion such as financial and trade activities generating interests.

2 – **The Wakf** :

It is a form of charity trust involved in social work in favor of the community as a non-profit organization in real estate development, health care, management of orphanage and institutions for handicapped. This pooling of resources allowed the growth of contribution and the leveling of social differences between Muslims.

Most Muslims without direct heirs allocate their wealth to the Wakf increasing the financial and material resources available for social purposes.

3 – **The Feasts** :

The Muslim feasts focus on social justice through the symbolic behaviour required during these periods; the fast during 30 days from dawn to dusk imposed on every Muslim puts the rich and the poor in the same condition of thirst and hunger becoming an incentive to perform the zakate that everyone should do according to his resources.

Every Muslim, regardless the social class to which he belongs, should participate to the solidarity efforts between human beings, even if the person has a limited income he should contribute in assisting a lower class family. The preference goes for needy parents or neighbours otherwise the contribution is channeled through a charity organization.

During the month of Ramadan, at dusk, free dinners are offered in every neighborhood and meals taken by all Muslims are traditionally standardized during Ramadan. The Ramadan month brings Muslims into a period where they shall be happy, friendly to every one, even enemies, give gifts and clothes to children from poor families.

During the Adha feast, the wealthy Muslims should offer a few lambs as sacrifice to commemorate the tradition of Abraham's obedience to God and should offer the lambs' meat to the persons in need. Pilgrimage is achieved in the same conditions regardless the social class; every Muslim should sleep in Mecca next the Qaba and should perform the ritual wearing a standard white sheet (ihram) because it is a reminder that human beings are equal in facing God.

4 – **Zakat or the poor tax:**

The poor-tax is a due imposed by the force of the law, an amount of money at a specified proportion (1/40 of the income). But in addition to this there is the institution of almsgiving which is imposed on the individual conscience without any fixed rate; it is at the discretion of the will and the conscience. It is the outward sign of charity and brotherly feeling, to both of which Islam attaches a supreme importance; it is an attempt to establish the mutual ties of mankind and the responsibilities of society along the line of an individual perception of what is necessary, and along the line of a personal conception of charity. It serves two purposes: first, to establish an inner control of the conscience; and second, to foster a belief in the inherent solidarity of mankind. Islam makes this charity a pure and humane thing, not limited by the bounds of a religious fellowship.

5 – Other features :

Social justice is found in certain features of Islam, in burying the dead persons, an equal treatment is allocated to persons belonging to different social classes because coffins and graves are forbidden, bodies are put on a stretcher and buried underground with a simple stone indicating their name. Marriage is an opportunity to achieve money transfer between families belonging to different social classes because the procedures of marriage and divorce within the Islamic religion are rather simple, men choosing women from lower social classes and providing financial support for their in-laws are very common.

Hungry persons using force to get minimum food in order to survive are justified. The prophet Muhammad blamed wealth for the pride, selfishness and the neglect of spiritual matters found in the behavior of the rich people; he has said "he is not a believer who eats his fill when his neighbor beside him is hungry".

Poverty is widespread but the struggle between rich and poor is nearly absent due to the Islamic religion acceptance of private property and wealth considered as a sign of approval by God however the rich should give away a part of his income for social purposes otherwise he might attract the wrath of God. Fatalism and predestination are a way to avoid social classes struggle and leads to normal relations between rich and poor without hatred and envy.

Islamic banks and funds offer another tool in the fight against poverty because investors do not receive any interest with the banks lending money without charging interest to non profit organizations and dividends devoted to charity; funds and banks are also involved in economical development and social welfare operations in less developed Islamic countries.

Despite efforts to achieve social justice through voluntary contribution we notice that the large differences in wealth still exist inside and between Muslim countries.

Level of development	Saoudi Arabia	Bahrain	Egypt	United Arab Emirates	Jordan	Kuwait	Lebanon	Oman
Demographical growth 1996-2010 (%)	+3,3	+3,1	+1,6	+1,9	+2,6	+2,3	+1,4	+3,8
Urban population (% total population)	83	90	45	84	72	97	88	77
Population in towns>1 million (%)	22	0	25	0	29	70	46	0
Percentage of less than 15 years old	44	37	38	29	41	41	35	47
Life expectancy (years)	70	73	65	75	71	77	70	71
Infant mortality rate (‰)	22	18	53	15	30	11	31	18
Energy consumption per person	4,4	na	0,6	na	1,0	9,4	na	na
Running water availability	100	97	82	98	97	100	92	92
Health care (% population)	98	100	99	90	90	100	95	89
Number of persons/doctor	750	770	1310	1210	550	600	530	1130
Number of telephone lines/1000	106	241	50	302	60	232	149	86
Number of cars/1000 persons	149	300	30	99	68	404	320	134
Computer/1000 persons	37,2	66,8	5,8	65,5	7,2	74,1	24,3	10,9
Illetracy rate (%)	29	15	36	21	7	18	10	27
Years of education (years)	9	na	11	11	11	11	na	8
Secondary education/age class (%)	58	70	74	78	76	64	81	66
University education/age class (%)	15	na	18	9	25	25	27	5

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