

## Human dignity in Islam and its impact on society

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Islamic history has witnessed varying patterns of Muslim-non-Muslim relations, and contemporary Muslim societies are also seeing occasional lapses into negative patterns and advice. The launderette issue, which arose when one or two outlets attempted to offer their services to Muslims only, has, to all intents and purposes, been settled by the Malay Rulers, who rightly sought to put a stop to divisive activities that prejudiced social harmony in the country. Here, we place the issue in the larger context of human dignity as follows.

The most explicit affirmation of human dignity (*karamah*) in Islam is found in the Quranic verse where God Almighty declares: “We have bestowed dignity on the children of Adam... and conferred upon them special favours above the greater part of Our creation.” (17:70).

This verse is self-evident in its recognition of inherent dignity for all human beings without qualification of any kind. The Quran commentator, Shihab al-Din al-Alusi (d.1854) thus wrote that, “everyone and all members of the human race, including the pious and the sinner, are endowed with dignity, nobility and honour, which cannot be made exclusive to any particular group or class of people”.

A question arose as to the criterion of this dignity. There are many references in the Quran that God created the humans “in the best of forms” (64:3), and ranked them in spirituality above that of the angels (7:11). In about a dozen other places, the text is expressive of God’s love for His human servants. Thus, the recurrent phrase “truly God loves- *inna-Allaha yuhibbu*”, those who are just; those who are good to others; those who are conscious of Him and so forth. Then also God’s illustrious affirmation that “I breathed into him (Adam) of My Spirit” (38:72). Could any of these be the criterion of this dignity? The Prophet’s Companion Ibn ‘Abbas, famed for his insight into the Quran, commented that the criterion of this God-given grace was none other than the nobility of reason and the unique human endowment with this faculty.

The scholastic debate that later arose over the universality or otherwise of human dignity was tainted, however, by developments pertaining to war and peace, and views on the alleged division of the world into Abode of Islam and Abode of War. The universalist camp, spearheaded by the Hanafi school of thought maintained that the inviolability of human dignity (*‘ismah*) pertains to the fact of being a human, and that this also creates a legal basis for the protection of all basic human rights. It is further added that fighting the unbelievers in the Quran is contextual, often referring to warlike situations and hostility between the Pagans of Mecca and the nascent Muslim community of the time.

The communalist camp that found many followers among the other leading schools of Islamic law maintained that dignity is attached to Islam. Thus, it is stated that fighting the unbelievers in the Quran is often couched in a general language, which supercedes the grant of *‘ismah* to them. The unqualified language of the Quran on

human dignity was thus subjected to questionable interpretations. Yet, many prominent scholars in all schools, including Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (Shafi'i), Ibn Rushd al-Qurtubi (Maliki), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (Hanbali) have supported the universalist position on human dignity and 'ismah.

Twentieth-century Muslim commentators have also gone on record to say that dignity is not earned by meritorious conduct; it is established as an expression of God's grace as a natural and absolute right of every human person as of the moment of birth. It is God-given, hence, no individual or state may take it away from anyone. As to the question whether dignity also recognised of a criminal — the answer is yes, with the proviso, however, that it is partially compromised to the extent that a court decision on punishment may be enforced, even if punishment involves some erosion of dignity, but beyond that the personal dignity of prisoners must be observed.

As for treating others with dignity, the Quran and Hadith enjoin fraternity and affection with everyone, within and outside the family, especially with one's neighbours, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. The believers are enjoined to speak to everyone with courtesy and tact (2:83); and "when you speak, speak with justice". In numerous places, the Muslims, indeed all people, are enjoined to avoid harbouring ill-feeling, rancour, and suspicion towards one another.

In their dealings with the followers of other faiths, Muslims are ordered to do justice and be good to them so long as they do not resort to acts of hostility and oppression (60:8). The general guideline that applies to everyone is also stated that "there shall be no hostility except against the oppressors" (2:193). The Prophet has endorsed this to say: "People are God's children and those dearest to Him are the ones who treat His children kindly."

He has also said: "Whoever believes in God and the Last Day, let him speak when he has something good to say, or else remain silent."

At this time of heightened Islamophobia and misinformation about Islam, we need to highlight those of Islam's messages that promote social harmony and good relations in our society and with all those that are supportive of amicable relations.

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