

# (Islam and Social Responsibilities: The Way of the Prophet (S

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Men of faith define the present times in precarious terms. Beneath the glamour of technological progress, any deeper assessment of the general human condition presents a far more sombre reality. 'What is to blame for our current perils?' one may ask. In essence, we are living the after-effects of the key intellectual battles of the twentieth century that pitched individual against society.

Although seemingly abstract, the implications of this battle have permeated into virtually every sphere of our lives. The dominant themes and trends of the present era have not escaped these influences. Frictions in society, intolerance, incessant war-mongering and dehumanization are mere manifestations of this slide. They are not arbitrary negatives that can be surgically isolated from a wider context. As individuals and communities, we must continuously strive to develop a clear-sight of the world reality that surrounds us. Indeed, it is critical to engender a collective vision that unifies hearts and minds. But in order for the aforementioned to arise, we must first strengthen the bonds that hold together a community. In truth, the idea of a 'community' can be found at the heart of all faiths. Within the Abrahamic faiths, the history of religion often traces back to and draws inspiration from a resounding illustration of some form of collective ethos. In the Old Testament, the Exodus is arguably one of the most vividly retold stories. Central to its memory is that of a community unified by its suffering, followed thereafter by its march towards a new destiny. In the Islamic tradition, the Hijra or migration similarly represents a defining moment.

Amongst the most striking aspects of early Medinite society are its social hallmarks of fraternity, generosity and compassion. In addition to being a safe haven for the early Muslims, Medinite society is pictured as an emphatic contrast to the avaricious, materialistic and inward-looking society of pre-Islamic Makkah. For outside observers of Islam, one of the most intriguing aspects is the religion's constant emphasis on society. So pronounced this aspect is that some western scholars regard the 'just society' as the primary *raison d'être* or *telos* (ultimate goal) of the Islamic message. In her book *Islam: A Short History* (2002), Karen Armstrong asserts that the creation of a just society is the 'chief duty' for Muslims, adding that 'the experience of building such a society and living in it would give them intimations of the divine, because they would be living in accordance with God's will'. Why then is so much emphasis placed on society? As Muslims we often overlook how embedded social

connotations are in our lives. For example, daily acts of worship like prayer are strongly recommended in congregation, even if there was only but two people. If such is not possible, then Islam prescribes that we ought to congregate at least for the weekly Friday Prayer, which simultaneously conveys a common vision to the community. In his book 'Society and History', Shaheed Murtadha Mutahhari outlines the Islamic view regarding society. He begins by stating that human beings are `inherently` social creatures according to the Holy Quran. In parentheses, there's an intriguing question to be asked: what form of society does Allah (swt) desire for us to live within? Even more importantly perhaps, how do our individual beliefs and actions measure against the convictions of this ideal society? Such questions are inescapable for those who wish to witness the promised rule of the final proof, Imam Al-Mahdi (atf). According to the Qur'anic perspective, the beliefs, conduct and destiny of any given society can be attributable to its members.

Hence, by nurturing a healthy social existence we are in fact improving our individual selves too. Perhaps it is for this reason that the books of narration are replete with sayings that detail numerous social duties whose fulfilment counts as a sign of true faith: rights of kin, rights of parents, rights of teachers, rights of neighbours, rights of the poor and oppressed, and so on. The practical life of the Holy Prophet (s) was an embodiment of these teachings. During the night, he was immersed in worship and prayer; and in the day, he served humanity with everything he had and all he could offer. The Prophetic way that has been laid out for us invariably centres on these two elements. In order to gain Divine proximity and realise our true potentials, we must strengthen our inner faculties through sincere and continuous worship. At the same time, this inner revolution must be in harmony with a conscious, outward fulfilment of social responsibilities. We must not neglect or belittle 'simple' social duties such as regular visitation of our fellow Muslims, because this will inevitably lead us right into the vortex of the countless contradictions and hazards of contemporary society. In the end, we would do well to contemplate deeply about the following tradition by the Holy Prophet (s): `A believer, for another believer, is like a single body. If one of the organs is in pain all other parts of that body` .are also troubled