

The Concept of *Īthār* (Altruism) in Islam: An Exposition in the Light of the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth

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ABSTRACT

Generosity and philanthropy is one of the fundamental pillars upon which the Islamic edifice is established. Islam enjoins its followers to be generous and ready to spend for the welfare of others. It encourages them to compete in the acts of goodness, charity, kindness, and piousness. It emphasizes its followers to render every kind of goodness to the people and make it their permanent policy. One of the highest forms of generosity is 'preferring the needs and necessities of others over one's own', and 'spending on others what you love and desperately need yourself'. This aspect of generosity is termed as *īthār* (altruism). It is this important aspect of generosity which is briefly discussed in this paper. An attempt is made to discuss the meaning, virtues, excellences, and the various levels/aspects of *īthār* in light of the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth, as well as the teachings derived from them.

Keywords: *Īthār*, Altruism, Self-Sacrifice, Generosity, Charity, Goodness.

1. *Īthār* (Altruism / Self-sacrifice)

1.1 Literal Meaning

The word "إيثار" comes from the root word "أثر" which originally means "to transmit, pass along, report, relate something from (or based on the authority of) someone"¹. Its other form "أثر" means "to make or leave or cause to remain, an impression, or a mark, or trace, upon someone or something"², "to influence, to produce an effect or to make an impression"³. Another form of it is "تأثر" which means "to be influenced, to follow the footsteps of another, or do so diligently or perseveringly"⁴.

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Now, the word “إيثار” is the verbal-noun of “أثريؤثر” which means “to prefer someone /something to, to like something more than”⁵. We say “أثره” (he preferred him or it), “أثره عليه” (he preferred him before him), “أثرتُ فلانًا على نفسي” (I preferred such a one before myself). In the Quran, Allah says: فَأَلُوا تَاللّٰهِ لَقَدْ آتَرَكَ اللّٰهُ عَلَيْنَا وَإِنْ كُنَّا لَحَاطِئِينَ (they (the brothers of Joseph) said: “By Allah! Indeed Allah has preferred thee above us, and we certainly have been guilty of sin!”)⁶.

1.2 Meaning and Significance of *Īthār* in Islam

Technically, *īthār* (إيثار) means “altruism, preference, love, affection”⁷. It is preferring the needs of others to your own needs; bearing the hunger and thirst yourself but feeding others; suffering hardships to give comfort to others; withdrawing oneself into the background to allow others to go forward; cutting down one’s own expenses so as to help others; suppressing one’s own personality so that others may shine, or remaining silent to allow others to speak; keeping one’s vehicle to one side so that others may go ahead, such self-sacrifices are called *Īthār*. It means putting others before the self. According to the holy Qur’ān those who possess these qualities will have prosperity in both the worlds. Allah says:

وَيُؤْتِرُونَ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ وَلَوْ كَانَ بِهِمْ خَصَاصَةٌ وَمَنْ يُوقِ شُحَّ نَفْسِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

And they (*Anṣār* of *Madīnah*) give them (emigrants-*Muhājirūn*) preference over themselves, even though they were in need of that. And whosoever is saved from the greed of his soul, such are they who will be the successful.⁸

The quality of *Īthār*, in the truest sense of its meaning, was present in the companions of the holy Prophet (S.A.A.W.S). We know that when the Muslims migrated from *Makkah* to *Madīnah*, they were empty-handed; they had left all their properties and possessions in *Makkah* and migrated to *Madīnah* for the sake of Islam. The people of *Madīnah* were poor themselves possessing things that could hardly suffice their own lives. The things they possessed included household utensils, small houses, lands, orchards, wells and so forth. They did not consider the immigrants as a burden upon themselves and did not grudge them anything. They (*Anṣār*) offered them (*Muhājirūn*) a hearty welcome and shared everything from their possessions

with the newcomers (*Muhājirūn*). In fact there developed a firm brotherhood (مؤاخاة) among them so much so that in case of death the “Brother *Muhājir*” inherited the property of the “Deceased *Anṣār*”.

The Companions of the Prophet in general used to help and support each other as well as any needy person with the utmost sincerity; all for the sake of Allah. Their generosity and charity were free from any sign of ostentation. They used to spend money on others and help them out of genuine pious and unpretentious motives. The holy Quran relates:

وَيُطْعَمُونَ الطَّعَامَ عَلَىٰ حُبِّهِ مِسْكِينًا وَيَتِيمًا وَأَسِيرًا. إِنَّمَا نُطْعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ اللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنْكُمْ جَزَاءً وَلَا شُكْرًا.
إِنَّا نَخَافُ مِنْ رَبِّنَا يَوْمًا عَبُوسًا قَمْطَرِيرًا.

And they feed, for the love of Allah, - the indigent, - the orphan, - and the captive - (Saying), “We feed you for the sake of Allah alone: No reward do we desire from you, nor thanks. We only fear a Day of distressful Wrath from the side of our Lord.”⁹

2. Virtue and Excellence of *Īthār*

A society can prosper only when the bond of relationship among its individuals is strong and based on mutual help and understanding. There should be economic balance in the society and cordiality in it. No individual of the community should be so deprived that he may be facing a life of starvation and no wealthy man of the community should be so greedy that he may be spending his wealth only for his own personal pleasures and luxuries.

Islam prepares its followers to be consistent in the deeds of righteousness and virtuousness, and help and co-operate with each other. It explains to its followers that the benefit of spending in the cause of Allah is not only derived by the poor and needy persons but the givers of charity also achieve the invaluable riches of peace and satisfaction; their hearts are protected from the spiritual diseases like rancor and jealousy, and they are saved from the adverse consequences of selfishness and narrow-mindedness. The holy Qur’ān says:

هَآأَنْتُمْ هَؤُلَاءِ تُدْعُونَ لِتُنْفِقُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَمِنْكُمْ مَنْ يَبْخَلُ وَمَنْ يَبْخَلْ فَإِنَّمَا يَبْخَلُ عَن نَّفْسِهِ وَاللَّهُ الْغَنِيُّ
وَأَنْتُمْ الْفُقَرَاءُ

Behold, ye are those invited to spend (of your substance) in the way of Allah: but among you are some that are niggardly. But any who are niggardly are so at the expense of their own souls. But Allah is free of all wants, and it is ye that are needy.¹⁰

Islam clearly states that only such people can be successful in achieving the rewards in this and the next world who remove the manipulations of narrow-mindedness and niggardliness and nourish the qualities of charity giving and generosity:

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ وَأَسْمِعُوا وَأَطِيعُوا وَأَنْفِقُوا خَيْرًا لِّأَنْفُسِكُمْ وَمَنْ يُوقِ شَحْنَفْسِهِ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ
الْمُفْلِحُونَ

So, fear Allah as much as you can, listen and obey; and spend in charity for the benefit of your own souls.¹¹

Explaining this verse, Abdullah Yusuf Ali writes:

Charity is meant to help and do good to other people who need it. But it has the highest subjective value for the person who gives it. Like mercy “it blesseth him that gives and him that takes”. It purifies the giver’s soul: the affection that he pours out is for his own spiritual benefit and progress.¹²

Satan instils some bad thoughts in the minds of the people that if they give their money in charity that will reduce their wealth and put them near to poverty, as the holy Qur’an relates:

الشَّيْطَانُ يَعِدُكُمُ الْفَقْرَ وَيَأْمُرُكُم بِالْفَحْشَاءِ

Satan threatens you with poverty and bids you to conduct unseemly¹³

Islam, on the other hand, teaches its followers that charity is the means of nourishment and development. It has four-fold worldly and other-worldly benefits for the givers as well.

- i. The wealth will not reduce rather it will get purified and become more valuable and will increase in the future as well because a man who spends the gifts of the Lord generously on His creatures with his both hands will always receive the favours and blessings of God. The Prophet says that there are three types of men about whom he can take an oath. One among them is that person who spends his wealth in the cause of Allah for the goodness of needy, poor and destitute. For such type of men the Prophet swore that their wealth will never decrease on behalf of spending it in charity¹⁴. And also the holy Qur'ān terms it as "قرض حسن" (excellent loan) which will turn back with increased quantity, not two or three times but with many multiplies. The holy Qur'ān says: مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يُقرضُ اللهَ قرضًا حسنًا فيضاعفه له أضعافًا كثيرة (Who is he that will loan to Allah a beautiful loan, which Allah will double unto his credit and multiply many times?)¹⁵.
- ii. They will attain spiritual purity. Many of the spiritual diseases like, greed, love of wealth and riches, hard-heartedness, niggardliness, and covetousness, will not touch them. The Qur'ān says: خذْ مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ صَدَقَةً تُطَهِّرُهُمْ وَتُزَكِّيهِمْ بِهَا (of their goods take alms, that so thou mightest purify and sanctify them)¹⁶.
- iii. That the believers who spend in the path of Allah will get bounds of reward in the hereafter.
- iv. When a person is engaged in the acts of charity and donation in a society and redresses the weak portions of it filling the gaps found in it, naturally the individuals helped and uplifted by his help will become his well-wishers and supporters and give him lots of prayers.

When a man commits a sin and realizes that a distance has arisen between him and his Lord, what restores cleanness, light, and gets him a shelter under the benevolence and pleasure of his Lord is spending his most beloved wealth and property in the cause of Allah, and he should gladden the hearts of the poor and needy with its assistance. There are many *ahādīth* in the books of *Ḥadīth* which

substantiate this rule. These narrations show how a man who got away from the nearness of the Lord due to committing sins can return to the right path and achieve the nearness of the Lord once again by the blessing and greatness of the acts of charity. It is recorded in Al-Ṭabarāni that the Prophet said: “The acts of righteousness and virtue save a man from the adverse consequences of the wicked acts. The charity that is given unobtrusively cools down Allah’s anger and kindness to kinsmen increases a man’s age.”¹⁷

On one hand, Islam exhorts strongly to spend in the cause of Allah through charity, donation, and helping and supporting the needy and the suffering people, while on the other hand it strongly opposes miserliness, greed, and narrow-mindedness. According to a *Ḥadīth* recorded in Al-Tirmidhī:

“A giver of charity is near to Allah, is near to humans, and is near to Paradise and away from hell. And a miser is away from Allah, is away from humans, away from the Paradise and is near to hell. An uneducated giver of charity is liked more by Allah than a miserly worshipper.”¹⁸

3. The Prophet’s Exhortation, Promulgation, and Teachings in Matters of Charity and *Īthār*

It is beyond the common human heart, let alone a heart filled with *īmān* (faith), not to be moved when witnessing people suffering from poverty, hunger, and weakness. Indeed, the faithful are obligated by their faith to fear their Lord with regard to the plight of such helpless, poor, and destitute people.

Once the Prophet of Islam saw such a sad and sorrowful scene, tears rolled out from his eyes, and he was very much perturbed. He gathered all the Muslims and delivered a very effective speech. He reminded them of the rights of men on men and their duties. He warned them of the punishment from Allah and the consequences in the Hereafter. His speech was so effective that the people who were present there, freely donated whatever they could, with the result that so much money was collected that the man whose condition had so moved the Prophet became a wealthy man from this spontaneous help from the companions of the Prophet. Al-Mundhir bin Jarir narrates that his father said:

“We were with the Messenger of Allah during the beginning of the day when some people came who were barefoot and (partially) naked, wearing (torn) cloaks

(*Namirahs* or *Abāyahs*), with their swords hanging from their necks. Most of them, if not all of them, were from the tribe of *Bani Mudar*. The expression of the Messenger of Allah changed because of what he saw in them of poverty. He went into the house and then came out and ordered Bilal to give the *Adhān* and the *Iqāmah*. He prayed the *Ṣalāh*, then he addressed (the people) and said: ‘O mankind! Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person (Adam), created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; reverence Allah, through Whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (that bore you): for Allah ever watches over you.’ (Al-Quran, *Surah al-Nisā’* (4): 1). ‘O you who believe! Fear Allah and keep your duty to Him. And let every person look to what he has sent forth for the morrow.’ (Al-Quran, *Sūrah al-Ḥashr* (59): 18). Then the Prophet said: “Everyone should give in charity *dīnār*, *dirham*, clothing, wheat and dates” - (mentioning examples) until he said: “and even half a date”. Then a man from among the *Anṣār* brought a money bag which his hands could hardly lift, in fact he could not lift it, and the people came one after another until I saw two piles of food and clothing, and I saw the face of the Messenger of Allah glistening like gold (because of happiness). The Messenger of Allah said: “Whoever sets a good precedent in Islam will have the reward for that and the reward of those who do it after him, without that detracting from their reward in the slightest. And whoever sets a bad precedent in Islam will bear the burden of sin for that, and the burden of those who do it after him, without that detracting from their burden in the slightest.”¹⁹

These eloquent words invite us to compete in matters of righteousness and we should try to vie with each other in performing virtuous deeds, e.g., social welfare work during inclement weather, or relief work after natural calamities, etc. On the other hand, these words warn those who introduce bad practices in the society, and by this they increase the problems and complications of the society, and they leave their successors to face the ill consequences of their acts.²⁰

It is recorded in *Sahīh al-Bukharī* on the authority of Abu Hurayrah that once a man came to the Prophet and asked, “O Allah’s Messenger! What kind of *Al-Ṣadaqah* (charity etc.) is the most superior in reward?” He replied, “The charity which you practise while you are healthy, niggardly and afraid of poverty and wish to become wealthy. Do not delay it to the time of approaching death and then say, ‘Give so much to such and such, and so much to such and such.’ And it has already belonged to such and such (his heirs).”²¹

Thus, the Prophet emphasised the importance of giving in charity whatever a person can afford, and that he should never delay or hesitate in giving it, no matter how small it may be when he has no other good things to give. The Prophet also emphasised that the best charity yielding lofty rewards is the one given when one is healthy, energetic, hopeful, and courageous about the future, and when one himself is in need of the things he spends on others.

4. *Īthār* of the Prophet (S.A.A.^{W.S}) and his Companions

In the following lines, some anecdotes from the Prophet's and his Companions' lives about their acts of charity and altruism are given:

(1) It is mentioned in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* that once a woman brought a *Burdah* (sheet of cloth) to the Prophet (S.A.A.^{W.S}) and said, "O Messenger of Allah! I have brought it so that you may wear it." So the Prophet (S.A.A.^{W.S}) accepted it from her because he was in need of it. The holy Prophet wore it. A man among his companions seeing him wearing it, said, "O Messenger of Allah! Please give it to me to wear." The Prophet said, "Yes. (and gave him that sheet of cloth)." When the Prophet left, the man was blamed by his companions who said, "It was not nice on your part to ask the Prophet for it while you knew that he took it because he was in need of it, and you also know that he (the Prophet) never turns down anybody's request." That man said, "I just wanted to have its blessings as the Prophet had put it on, so I hoped that I might be shrouded in it."²²

(2) Abū Hurairah (*Rad.A*) reported that a person came to Allah's Messenger (S.A.A.^{W.S}) and said: I am hard pressed by hunger. He sent a message to one of his wives (to procure food for him), but she said: By Him Who has sent you with Truth, there is nothing with me (to serve him) but only water. He (the Holy Prophet) then sent the (same) message to another, and she gave the same reply, until all of them gave the same reply: By Him Who has sent thee with the Truth, There is nothing with me but only water, whereupon he (the Holy Prophet) said: Allah would show mercy to him who will entertain this guest tonight. A person from the *Ansār* stood up and said: Messenger of Allah, I (am ready to entertain him). He took him to his house and said to the wife: Is there anything with you (to serve the guest)? She said: No, but only subsistence for our children. He said: Distract their attention with something, and when the guest enters extinguish the lamp and give him the

impression that we are eating too. So they sat down, and the guest had his meal. When it was morning he went to Allah's Messenger (S.A.A.^{W.S}) who said: Allah was well pleased with what you both did for your guest this night.²³

In another version of this *Hadīth* it is mentioned that the following Qur'ānic *Āyah* was revealed related to this event:

وَيُؤْتُونَ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ وَلَوْ كَانَ بِهِمْ خَصَاصَةٌ وَمَن يُوقِ شُحَّ نَفْسِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

“But give them preference over themselves even though they were in need of that.”²⁴

(3) Three *Ṣaḥābah* (companions of the Prophet), namely, 'Ikrimah, Ḥārith and Suhail bin 'Amr (*Rad.A*) were fatally wounded in a battle and fell to the ground. They were extremely thirsty and 'Ikrimah asked for water, somebody brought it and wanted to quench his thirst meanwhile Suhail, who was also thirsty, saw the water and wanted it. 'Ikrimah preferred him over himself and asked to satiate Suhail first, when the water was brought near to Suhail the third wounded *Ṣaḥābī* (companion) Ḥārith who was thirstier asked for it. Suhail preferred him over himself and said that he should be satiated first. In this way one preferred the other even when they were dying; none of the three could drink this water as they had breathed their last before the water was brought back to them.

It was narrated that Abu Sa'īd Al-Khudrī (*Rad.A*) said: Whilst we were on a journey with the Prophet (S.A.A.^{W.S}), a man came to him on a mount of his and started looking to his right and left. The Messenger of Allah (S.A.A.^{W.S}) said: “Whoever has a surplus mount, let him give it to one who has no mount, and whoever has surplus provisions, let him give them to one who has no provisions.” He mentioned various kinds of wealth, until we thought that none of us had any right to any kind of surplus.²⁵

The Messenger of Allah (S.A.A.^{W.S}) said: “The food of one is sufficient for two, and the food of two is sufficient for four, and the food of four is sufficient for eight.”²⁶

The holy Prophet (S.A.A.^{W.S}) said: “When the people of *Ash'arī* tribe ran short of food during the holy battles, or the food of their families in Al-Madīnah ran short, they would collect all their remaining food in one sheet and then distribute it among themselves equally by measuring it with a bowl. So, these people are from me, and I am from them.”²⁷

5. Conclusion

It is clear from the preceding discussion that Islam emphasises the importance, significance, and greatness of *īthār* (altruism) in the sight of God for human society. This noble moral virtue was demonstrated by the Prophet of Islam at every moment of his life the details of which are recorded in the books of *Sīrah* and *Aḥādīth* and serve as a beacon light for all the members of the entire Ummah. The Prophet not only instructed his companions verbally in matters of charity and altruism, but he was also completely successful in organising and establishing such a peaceful and civilised society in which every member felt it was his innate duty to help and support others, to the point where they frequently preferred others over themselves in times of need and suffering. The holy Qur'ān praises them thus: and they (*Ansār* of Madīnah) give them (emigrants-*Muhājirūn*) preference over themselves, even though they were in need of that (Al-Qur'ān, *Sūrah al-Ḥashr* (59): 9).

References and Endnotes

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- ²⁴ Al-Qur'ān, Sūrah al-Ḥashr (59): 9.

²⁵ عن أبي سعيد الخدري، قال: بينما نحن في سفر مع النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم إذ جاء رجل على راحلة له، قال: فجعل يصرف بصره يمينا وشمالا، فقال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: من كان معه فضل ظهر، فليعد به على من لا ظهر له، (ومن كان له فضل من زاد، فليعد به على من لا زاد له، قال: فذكر من أصناف المال ما ذكر حتى رأينا أنه لا حق لأحد منا في فضل).

Vol. 4, p. 511. (Ibid. Ḥadīth No. 5368). (يَقُولُ: طَعَامُ الْوَاحِدِ يَكْفِي الْاِثْنَيْنِ، وَطَعَامُ الْاِثْنَيْنِ يَكْفِي الْاَرْبَعَةَ، وَطَعَامُ الْاَرْبَعَةِ يَكْفِي الثَّمَانِيَةَ). Vol. 5, p. 417.

²⁷ قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم: إن الأشعرين إذا أزملوا في العزو، أو قال (Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Ḥadīth No. 2486). (طَعَامُ عِيَالِهِم بِالْمَدِينَةِ جَمَعُوا مَا كَانَ عِنْدَهُمْ فِي تَوْبٍ وَاحِدٍ، ثُمَّ اقْتَسَمُوهُ بَيْنَهُمْ فِي إِثْنِ وَاحِدٍ بِالسُّوْيَةِ، فَهُمْ مِنِّي وَأَنَا مِنْهُمْ).