

Social Work Philosophy and Islamic Ideals: A Common Foundation

Dr. Shazia Manzoor*
Amira Wali†

Abstract

Social Work has a philosophy based on the ideals of inherent human worth and dignity. The professional relationships developed in Social Work practice are based on the premise of problem solving and are not devoid of warmth, compassion, empathy and kindness. Similar ideals are also advocated and propagated by almost all religious philosophies. In particular, this paper is an attempt to draw convergences between the value base of social work and the Islamic ideals associated with these values, as substantiated by the verses of the holy book and the prophetic traditions (Sunnah). Whereas Social Work as a profession has developed into an organized discipline as early as in the sixteenth century, the written Islamic prescriptions regarding an individual and his social way of living date back some fourteen hundred years ago. In the effort towards explicating the Social Work values in the light of Islamic references, it was observed that there are notable similarities between the two directing us to the fact that the Social Work philosophy has roots in religious ideals.

Key Words: Social Work, Islam, Charity, Convergence

Introduction

Social Work comes under the umbrella of helping professions where the focus is on resolving issues faced by an individual, group or a community. The problems are addressed by way of intervention and it could consequently lead to solving an individual problem (Case Work), group problems (Group Work) or issues faced by communities (Community Organization).

This profession took time to evolve as a full-fledged organized discipline over centuries. The precursors to this evolution were charity and philanthropic contributions leading to the need of organized and concerted efforts towards distributive justice. In the west, the informal charities given by the rich to poor assumed organized character after the introduction of Elizabethan Poor laws in 1601 to evolution of charity based societies and alms houses (1662-1889¹) followed by pioneering efforts of Jane Addams, Dorothea L. Dix and Mary

* Senior Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Kashmir

† Ph. D. Scholar, Department of Social Work, University of Kashmir

Richmond, the post war and post economic depression rehabilitation efforts, establishment of the American Association of Social Workers in 1921, and the National Association of Social Workers in the 1950s. All these centuries of campaigning and forming public opinion in favor of philanthropy and extending help shaped Social Work to become a professional discipline with its distinct philosophy and body of knowledge. Since inception, charity and alms giving formed the basis of this developmental work, with mostly the sources of this charity based work being religious obligations.

Chanakya's *Arthashastra*, which is an ancient Hindu documented guideline for running public administration and political life, attributes it as the King's responsibility to meet people personally and make every effort to trying to solve their issues. The state appointed *Gopas* would keep record of households and the managers of charitable institutions would send information to the *Gopas* so that proper care would be taken of those in need². The concept of *Daana* (generosity, alms giving, donations) have been encouraged commonly in Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains. The Rigveda relates *daana* to *satya* (truth) and refers to it as an act of giving to those in distress³. *Dana*, is one of the three prescribed duties for Sikhs by Guru Nanak and entails sharing part of earnings by charity (*Vand ke Chakna*- sharing within the community). Examples can be seen in Guru Dwaras in the form of selfless service (*langar*).

The Christian Missionaries have an extensive network of organized charity throughout the world and the setup is a follow out of multiple references to the same in the Gospels. *Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you* (Matthew 5: 42). *He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor, his righteousness endures forever, his horn is exalted in honor* (Psalm 112:9)⁴. Similarly, in Islam charity is a religious obligation.

Islam and the concept of Charity

The concept of giving alms is one of the obligatory five pillars of Islam. The Islamic charity, called *Zakat* is based on the idea of avoiding accumulation of wealth and is calculated on the savings rather than earnings of a person.

*Whatever God may restore to His Messenger...is due to God and to His Messenger...the orphans and the needy... so that it may not be confined to the (few) rich amongst you. (49:7)*⁵

The notion is to give it as a form of obligatory charity and non as an act of self-righteousness. The word Zakat translates to purification and growth⁶ and is a means of cleansing accumulated wealth.

*Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet (p.b.u.h) said, "Seven people will be shaded by Allah under His shade on the day when there will be no shade except His....(6) a person who practices charity so secretly that his left hand does not know what his right hand has given (i.e.nobody knows how much he has given in charity)..."*⁷

This conveys about the value attributed to charity with the promise of reward in the after-life and the immense importance of value in discreetness of the charity extended. It also means that a muslim is not allowed to be arrogant or ostentatious about the charity he gives.

Presently, *zakat* has reached an extensive organized network and is a vital system of social harmony and social security, discouraging beggary, protection against hoarding and giving guaranteed returns by keeping wealth in circulation.

*That which you give in Zakat, seeking Allah's countenance, has increase manifold (30:39)*⁸

Thus, Islam strongly endorses the concept of alms giving and extending help to the needy and destitute.

The Value base of Social Work

In order to understand the value underpinnings of Social Work philosophy, it is important to first identify the actual meaning of Social Work practice. *Social Work is the professional activity of helping individuals, groups or communities; enhance or restore their capacity of social functioning and creating societal conditions favorable to that goal*⁹. *Utilising theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of Human Rights and Social Justice are fundamental to Social Work*¹⁰. This implies that this is a helping profession aimed at bringing about favorable changes in in people as well as their environment so that social harmony is restored. Thus Social Work profession is based on a holistic concept of *person in environment* and deal with people in totality. The interventions carried out are purposeful with societal sanctions in the form of values. These interventions can be brought about only in the light of the basic principles and values on which this profession is founded. *Value is a type of belief, centrally located in one's total belief system, about how ought or ought not to behave, or about some end state of existence worth or not worth attaining*

(Rokeach)¹¹. Values have been defined as beliefs, while ethical practice has been viewed as the application of these beliefs’’¹². Thus Social Work is essentially a value laden practice.

One might wonder about the need to adhere to a value system or act morally. The answers can range from acting from a sense of fairness, following your consciousness, wanting to be a good person, acting in such a way as to make this world a better place, acting in a way that acknowledges that people have rights and also because of religious instructions. For instance, good muslims should behave in a way that glorifies their Lord and included in this command is to show charity and compassion to the poor¹³.

The Social Work values have roots embedded in religious, democratic and puritan ideals. Judaism, Islam and Christianity advocate the doctrine of integral worth and dignity of humans, emphasize on community partnerships and responsibilities towards neighbors¹⁴.

“He who sleeps satiated while his neighbor is hungry is not dear to Allah”, the Prophet PBUH pronounced¹⁵.

The three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all celebrate the dignity and uniqueness of each human being....For those who belong to these faith communities, therefore, each human being is a “divine” dignity. They are unique and special in their own right and also as creatures of the Divine Being¹⁶.

Additionally, the democratic ideals on equality, liberty, justice and fraternity underline basic humane values.

“Rule with justice among men...” (38: 26)¹⁷

The puritan ethic emphasizes the strength of character and morality. These religious ideals are very akin to the social work values of human worth and dignity, respect for uniqueness and diversity and lending help to the needy. The commitment to social service is central to Social Work philosophy. Islam has also conceptualized a system corresponding to that concept of public assistance provided to the socially handicapped and under privileged, through a public exchequer called the *Bait ul Mal*¹⁸. This common treasury is in place in many Islamic communities and is a source of some sort of comfort to the needy and destitute. Hence, the ideals of help, service and charity are embedded in the nature of Islamic life by divine prescriptions. The muslim is nurtured by way of these prescriptions to become a considerate, sharing, helping and compassionate individual. And the beauty is that while he is groomed in such a manner, he is

promised rewards and huge dividends after his death and after-life. So the benefits are accrued in this life time as well as for future comfort.

Islamic Perspective and Social Work Values: The Convergences

Islam is the religion professed by Muslims all over the world and is derived from the word “*Aslama*”, which means submission (to God). The submission to Almighty permeates all levels of practical and spiritual life and one thing is connected to the other. The concept of Islam is holistic and it is supposed to be entered in its totality (2:208)¹⁹. There are more than 1.8 billion muslims in the world that roughly constituted 24 % of the global population in 2015 and Islam is the fastest growing major religion²⁰. The Holy Book of the Muslims is considered to be the word of Allah and is a written code of conduct for life. There are multiple instances in the Holy Verses that explicate the expected values from a Muslim society and there are clear prescriptions about the conduct of social, economic and moral life. Islam emphasis on the quality of relationships in society governed by love, care, tenderness, affection and consideration- be it towards a relative, neighbor, or a friend. The principle of law, being summed up by the last Prophet (P.B.U.H), “*Do not inflict injury, nor repay one injury with another*²¹ ... *Honouring ties of relationship does not mean honoring your ties with those who honour their ties with you; it means honouring your ties with those who sever ties with you.*²²” These ideals recognize man as social beings with inherent human worth and dignity.

Islam, thus is a way of life having divine directions. And these directions point towards a society rich in its values leading to mutual feelings of love, brotherhood, justice and peaceful co-existence.

The code of living prescribed in the Holy Book ensures awards and bounties for people following it in letter and spirit and punishments for those who deviate. The prescriptions recorded in the Holy Book yield to the ideals of equality and justice in the sense that the awards and punishments are common to all who are righteous and err irrespective of class, color and caste. There are no special sanctions for the rich and no concessions for the poor.

Men and Women have Equal Reward for their Deeds: (Surah al Imran 3:195)

Hence, Equality is an important tenet of Islamic jurisprudence.

Treat everyone equally, with the understanding that everyone is equal before Allah, and therefore everyone- regardless of race, gender, age or status- should be treated equal before law; and there are no exceptions to this rule...No race of

people is better than another race, instead, superiority is achieved only through merit- one's level of piety and righteousness²³.

.... of righteousness after I am gone. All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety (taqwa) and good action²⁴.

Islam strongly endorses the concept of social justice by judging people not on the basis of their nobility and lineage but on the merit of their deeds.

In this section, the Social Work values have been dealt with elaborately and a parallel correspondence to Islamic teachings by way of the Holy Quran and Prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*) have been drawn. Some of the important values which form the basis of social work practice are outlined in the table below.

BIESTEK (1974)	TIMMS (1983)	BUTRYM (1976)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance • Non Judgmental Attitude • Individualization • Control emotional involvement • Confidentiality • Self-Determination • Purposeful expression of feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect • Acceptance • Non condemnation • Self Determination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for people • Uniqueness of persons • Persons as Social Beings • Belief in Personal change

Source: Lester Parrot, Values and Ethics in Social Work practice, pp 21.

One may again ask why the need to follow a basic value system arose in the first place. There are multiple factors for this. A value laden society creates a sense of fairness in its individuals. There is a feel good factor about one's own self. This value base recognizes and acknowledges the rights of others as humans, thus giving a man the sense that he is following his conscience and doing the right thing, also increasing communal harmony and reducing inequalities²⁵. Another very important factor for this are the religious prescriptions that make it incumbent on man to act conscientiously and not ignoring value considerations.

Islam advocates keeping good relations with kith and kin (having a good social life), helping neighbors, being generous and well-mannered, merciful, kind, polite, respectful, non-judgmental and non-condemning. These ideals are important aspects of *Sunnah* (the Prophetic tradition).

*Whoever is not merciful to others will not be treated mercifully*²⁶.

Islam advocates showing mercy, compassion and generosity to others.

*Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "Anybody who believes in Allah and the Last Day should not harm his neighbor, and anybody who believes in Allah and the Last Day should entertain his guest generously and anybody who believes in Allah and the Last Day should talk what is good or keep quiet. (i.e. abstain from all kinds of evil and dirty talk)"*²⁷.

Islam discourages from talking evil about or harboring hatred against others, it stresses on maintenance of character and integrity even in adverse situations.

*Narrated Masruq: `Abdullah bin `Amr added, Allah's Apostle said, "The best among you are those who have the best manners and character"*²⁸

*"Be Generous, kind and noble to your children and make their habits and manners good and beautiful. Among the virtues they should inculcate are the habits of truthfulness, honesty, gentleness, politeness, helpfulness and consideration for others," said the Prophet PBUH*²⁹.

*Narrated Anas bin Malik: Allah's Apostle said, "Do not hate one another, and do not be jealous of one another, and do not desert each other"*³⁰.

Talking down upon a fellow human, denigrating his worth and dignity, disrespect and desertion in need, are highly condemned in Islam. This corresponds to the Social Work values of respect for people, acceptance and non-condemnation.

*Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "Beware of suspicion, for suspicion is the worst of false tales and do not look for the others' faults, and do not do spying on one another, and do not be jealous of one another and do not hate one another, and do not desert (stop talking to) one another. And O, Allah's worshipers! Be brothers!"*³¹

Narrated 'Ubada bin As-Samit: We were with the Prophet in a gathering and he said, '...whoever among you fulfills his pledge, his reward is with Allah; and whoever commits something of such sins and receives the legal punishment for it, that will be considered as the expiation for that sin, and whoever commits

something of such sins and Allah screens him, it is up to Allah whether to excuse or punish him."³²

Islam does not encourage judging people. It prescribes the Muslims to ask forgiveness for their deeds and leave it to the Almighty to punish him or forgive him. The human agency of admonishing and telling down upon other people is not recognized at all. Hence, Islamic ideals strongly correspond to the Social Work values of acceptability and non-judgmental attitude towards others.

*Narrated Abu Huraira: I heard Allah's Apostle saying. "All the sins of my followers will be forgiven except those of the Mujahirin (those who commit a sin openly or disclose their sins to the people). An example of such disclosure is that a person commits a sin at night and though Allah screens it from the public, then he comes in the morning, and says, 'O so-and-so, I did such-and-such (evil) deed yesterday,' though he spent his night screened by his Lord (none knowing about his sin) and in the morning he removes Allah's screen from himself."*³³

Another beautiful tenet of Islam is the shielding of one's faults and misgivings. It is an inherent tendency of humans that they err knowingly or unknowingly at various things in life. But since Islam recognizes the ability of humans to change for better (Social Work value of belief in personal change), it also discourages people from disclosing others' faults so that the person does not feel demoralized and is motivated to strive towards becoming better. Hence, confidentiality is utmost important. Anonymity and confidentiality are also recognized values in Social Work practice. The common aim is not to write off people for their wrong doings but believing in the effort to better one's own and the other people's situations. Confidentiality is an integral part of trust building in Social Work Practice as well as in Islamic life. So breach of trust is like breaking the covenant of confidentiality. Islam advises to keep one's covenant of trust and not discuss it with others³⁴.

Conclusion

In the above discussion, there are evident links and striking commonalities between the value base of Social Work and Islamic values of life. Additionally, these core values have led to the establishment of Social Work Principles. Various authors like Konopka and Clarke have summed up these values into principles and have come up with a common understanding of the tenets guiding Social Work Practice. The ethical principles in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) code of ethics are built upon the values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, importance of human relationships,

integrity and competence³⁵. In Islam, even competence in social service is emphasized.

Just as man is responsible for himself, so is he responsible for his family and for his relations, for his neighbours and then for his community.(51:19) If anyone undertakes any work, God loves to see him do it nicely and efficiently for he us beautiful and He loves to see things done in a beautiful and nice way³⁶.

The generic principles of Social Work are establishing Meaning Relationships, the principle of Self Determination, Acceptance, Communication, Social Functioning, Tuning Behaviour, Social Learning and the principle of Confidentiality. These principles are essentially derived from the value base of Social Work discussed above in detail. Akin to that, the Islamic way of life has been guided by the values of this religion. Every individual has been endowed with dispositions and capabilities, accompanied by a sort of inner direction and innate guidance (91:7-8). While a person can chose from his volition to face a particular situation, he may not be, in hour of exigency, left to fend for themselves³⁷. This emphasizes the values of self-determination along side non desertion and non-condemnation. There is strong emphasis on soliciting help regarding problem solving, called *mashwara* in Islam. A person might chose to pray for divine guidance, or soliciting help from a friend or relative; or both. Likewise, in Social Work practice, these values are upheld and respected at the same time. It can thus be concluded that the Islamic ideals have potent similarities with the values Social Work attaches to the individual.

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