

Wealth and Poverty in the Qur^ʿān, Ḥadīth and the *Rasāʿil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʿ*

This paper examines the abstract concepts of wealth and poverty,¹ in the foundational texts of Islam and the famous encyclopedia entitled *Rasāʿil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʿ wa-khullān al-wafāʿ* (Epistles of Sincere Brethren and Faithful Friends)² that circulated widely at the end of the third/ninth and the beginning of the fourth/tenth century.³ The notions of poverty and charity in Islam have been analyzed before, albeit discursively by scholars from different perspectives. The notion of wealth in the Qur^ʿān, on the other hand, has not been dealt with comprehensively. With regard to the *Epistles of Sincere Brethren*, as far as it can be ascertained, the above themes have not been previously explored.

The paper is, therefore, divided into three sections. The first, introductory part, surveys the relationship between religion and wealth, on the one hand, and religion and poverty, on the other. It is followed by a review of widely accepted thesis concerning the rise of Islam and socio-economic environment that prevailed in pre-Islamic Arabia, especially in Mecca. The second

¹ Wealth is defined as large possessions, abundance of things that are objects of human desire, while poverty is defined as lack or relative lack of money or material possessions. For various other definitions see *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1993), pp. 1778, 2589.

² It is also translated as “Brethren of Purity and Loyal Friends.”

³ For recent information see Ismail K. Poonawala, “Why We Need an Arabic Critical Edition with an Annotated English Translation of the *Rasāʿil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʿ*,” in Nader El-Bizri (ed.), *The Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʿ and their Rasāʿil: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 33-57.

section, investigates the notions of wealth and poverty as depicted in the Qur^ʿān and the traditions of the Prophet (*aḥādīth*, pl. of *ḥadīth*). The last section scrutinizes how the *Sincere Brethren* perceived the notions of wealth and poverty and how they are portrayed in their *Rasāʿil* (Epistles).

I

Let me begin that relationship between religion and wealth is a complex issue and has been passionately debated by scholars. Most of the economists have stressed the negative impact of religion on wealth. Adam Smith, for example, believed that clergymen are members of an unproductive frivolous profession. Others have argued that religion is a major cause of economic underdevelopment. Similarly it has been contended that the Islamic *sharīʿa* is an impediment to modernization in Muslim countries. Max Weber, the most influential twentieth-century social scientist, emphasized the negative role of the religions of the East. Those who criticized Weber assert that the rise of capitalism was accompanied by a decline in credence given to magic and religious belief. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, on the other hand, upheld that Protestantism was “the most fitting form of religion” for capitalism and that in the religions of the masses one could hear the “sigh of the oppressed creature.” Both, Weberians and Marxists, further maintain that an increase in wealth discourages a truly religious spirit.⁴

Thus, there is no simple way to characterize the relationship between religion and wealth in light of the determinate role played by the specific historical and social circumstances that prevailed at the origin of a particular religion. Furthermore, religion’s influence on the wealth or

⁴ Winston Davis, ‘Wealth,’ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edn., ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit, Mich.: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), vol. 14, pp. 9707-9710.

poverty of a country is governed in conjunction with another set of complicated social variables, secular institutions and values in general. The most significant contributions made by Protestantism to the development of capitalism, according to Winston Davis, were its general indifference to the social problem of poverty, its hostility to the labor movement, and its assumption that individualism is as “natural” in economics as it is in religion.⁵

The relationship between religion and wealth, therefore, varies from one society to another. Since religion and wealth were closely intertwined in prehistoric societies, ownership and wealth were woven into a rich tapestry of myth, ritual, moral values and other ideals. However, with the advent of historic religions, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Abrahamic religions, the relation between religion and wealth changed significantly. One should bear in mind that in the ancient Near East, and later in the Far East, and Catholic Europe, religious institutions themselves became powerful landlords, controlling trade and the use of large tracts of land for their own interests.⁶

On the other hand, poverty, a principle of voluntary this worldly asceticism, or limitation of material possession as a virtue, is incorporated into the world’s major religions. What each religious tradition deems necessary for the attainment of human aspirations determines the way in which poverty is viewed. This paper is not concerned with definitions of poverty as it is dealt with by Michael Bonner in his article entitled, “Definitions of Poverty and the Rise of the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Muslim Urban Poor.”⁷ Bonner reached an important conclusion that will be discussed at the end of this paper.

Almsgiving in many religions is regarded as a religious obligation; sharing of one’s excessive possessions and even the necessities of life with the deprived is often seen as the moral responsibility of the wealthy. Poverty also denotes a sense of detachment from worldly pleasures in the quest of a higher spiritual good. Historically, some religious and philosophical figures have regarded voluntary poverty as a spiritual good in the sense that it fosters the principle of self-sufficiency. The notion that one could easily become obsessed with possessions was, for such groups as the Stoics, Pythagoreans, the Sincere Brethren and the mystics of Islam, a reason for incorporating some degree of poverty into their codes of personal discipline.⁸ The early Muslim jurists (*fuqahāʾ*), in passing, considered the questions related to the poor and poverty in their discussions of alms (*zakāt* and *ṣadaqa*). The subject was also debated in Ṣūfī circles. The designation of poverty as a spiritual state did not go uncontested. While some Ṣūfīs designated

⁷ Michael Bonner, “Definitions of Poverty and the Rise of the Muslim Urban Poor,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 6 (1996), pp. 335-44; idem, “Poverty and Charity in the Rise of Islam,” in M. Bonner et al (eds.), *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 13-30. It should be noted that one cannot apply the modern tools developed to measure poverty indicators, such as the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), that poverty manifests itself in different kinds of deprivation — lack of food, shelter, sanitation, schooling, health care, and so on.

⁸ Rosemary Rader, ‘Poverty,’ in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1st edn. Mircea Eliade, ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Comp., 1987), vol. 11, pp. 466-67.

poverty a major part of their spirituality, others were more cautious in their evaluations of the holy poor.⁹

It is worth noting here that Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfi^{ʿi}, an Egyptian author composed his book entitled *Kitāb al-Masākīn* (The Destitute) around the early twentieth century. Al-Rāfi^{ʿi} chose the format of classical genre of *al-maqāmāt* for his work of reflection on poverty.¹⁰ It has become a masterpiece of modern Arabic literature and is admirably rendered into English by Yusuf Talat DeLorenzo.¹¹ The gist of the book can be summed up in the words of the author himself who states:

A rich man who withholds his wealth from the poor may increase it, even virtually, by the amount that he withholds ... a few dirhams and a few dinars. But, in doing so, he increases the estrangement of his conscience by his ruthlessness and by his disregard of moral excellence. In this way he will continue until a day comes on which his conscience will lose all of its fine sensibilities and, with them,

⁹ Adam Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egypt, 1250-1517* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 3-4. He states that on the one hand, the poor were despised and even feared by the upper classes [rich], on the other hand, they were thought to hold a spiritual status, and one who gave them alms could expect to be rewarded for his actions.

¹⁰ A. F. L. Beeston, "Al-Hamadhānī, al-Ḥarīrī and the *maqāmāt* genre," in Julia Ashtian et al (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: ʿAbbasid Belles-Lettres* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 125-35; C. Brockelmann & Ch. Pellat, 'Maḳāma,' *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn., vol. 6, pp. 107-15.

¹¹ *The Destitute*, Original Arabic by Mustafa Sadiq al-Rafi^{ʿi}, English tr. by Yusuf Talat DeLorenzo (London: Huma Press, 2013).

its self-contentment which is the most approximate of all meanings to true happiness!¹²

II

Returning to the subject, prevailing socio-economic conditions in pre-Islamic Arabia as a whole, especially in Mecca where the Prophet was born and raised, nurtured relations between Islam and wealth, on the one hand, and Islam and poverty on the other hand. Muslim historians depicted pre-Islamic Mecca as a thriving capitalist hub, a central point on the north-south trade route that ran the length of western Arabia from the ports of Yemen up to the Mediterranean, and to Damascus and beyond. It was ruled by an oligarchy with power in the hands of the wealthy few. Every aspect of the pilgrimage to Mecca had been carefully calculated by them down to the last gram of silver or gold or its equivalent in trade. Fees were required for setting up a tent, entry into the Ka'ba precinct, water, food, and clothes. All for the benefit of the Quraysh tribe. Their business was faith, and their faith was in business. The wealthy took wealth as a virtue in and of itself, a sign that they had been favored by God. This image was contrary to the Bedouins who believed all property was held in common.

Before proceeding further let me digress a little from the main subject to indicate major difficulties in the aforementioned thesis that Mecca was a thriving capitalist hub. Wealth and poverty have received a lot of attention, especially in the works of W. Montgomery Watt in the Fifties and Sixties of the last century. He argued that Muhammad's activity as a prophet in Mecca took place within a larger context of weakening social solidarity and the growth of

¹² Ibid, p. 94-95.

individualism. Meccan merchants, consisting of the dominant Quraysh tribe, accumulated riches without regard for the poor and deprived members of that society.¹³ In short, the story of Meccan trade, which has been told with increasing refinement to the present, has received the lion's share of attention in his diagnosis of the malaise.

Patricia Crone's book *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, published in 1987, was a devastating critique of Watt's proposition.¹⁴ Crone argued that Mecca was never the hub for trade that modern scholars have depicted. Her critique of Islamic sources is quite damaging. She showed little interest in Watt's themes of wealth and poverty. Thus, Watt's premise of large-scale Meccan trade and his thesis was that the Qurayshi transition to a mercantile economy undermined the traditional order. Consequently, it generated a social and moral malaise to which Muhammad's preaching was the response. Watt's entire edifice built around that hypothesis in his numerous works, such as *Muhammad at Mecca*, *Muhammad at Medina*, and *Islam and the Integration of Society*, therefore, collapses.¹⁵ A number of books and articles written since Crone's *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* sought to overcome the issue of trade and the rise of Islam and the conflict between the older view of the Islamic sources and what has been

¹³ For the W. Montgomery Watt's works, see n. ? below.

¹⁴ Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

¹⁵ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1953; idem, *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1956; idem, *Islam and the Integration of Society*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961. For more details on Crone's critique see M. Bonner, "Poverty and Charity in the Rise of Islam," pp. 16-18.

labeled as the “revisionist school.”¹⁶ However, none of those sources have satisfactorily answered the objections raised by Crone. Therefore, historiographical issues still confront us when fully understanding the role of wealth and poverty during the rise of Islam.

II

I have to put those questions aside because they do not contribute to my presentation whatsoever. The central message of the Qur^ʿān besides the concept of One God (*tawhīd*), during the Meccan phase, is socio-economic justice. Both concepts are intertwined and one cannot be separated from the other. The doctrine of charity, in terms of alleviating suffering and helping the needy, constitutes an integral part of Islamic teachings. In the earliest passages of the Qur^ʿān one finds expressions of severe hostility towards wealth, recommending the rich to make worthy use of their possessions, and the threat of harsh chastisement by God. The remedy applied to the evils caused by the inequality of wealth is the taxation (*zakāt*, i.e., obligatory alms) of the rich. It sets forth the precept of the good circulation of wealth among the poor and needy, not from the rich to the rich. The Qur^ʿān makes constant admonitions and demands for *zakāt/Ṣadaqa*.¹⁷

¹⁶ These include Mahmood Ibrahim, *Merchant Capital and Islam* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). He traces the roots of capitalism from the emergence of merchants as the main force in Mecca through the eruption of the first civil war (656-61) in Islam. He argues that the rise of merchant capital in Mecca conditioned the development of Meccan social, economic, religious, and political structures. He further contends that Islam contributed certain institutional beliefs and practices that unclogged obstacles and helped merchants gain political and economic hegemony. More sources are cited by M. Bonner, “Poverty and Charity,” pp. 27-28.

¹⁷ Both the words *zakāt* and *ṣadaqa* are used in the Qur^ʿān. *Zakāt* is frequently paired with *ṣalāt* (prayers), and, contrary to *ṣadaqa*, it is used only in the singular and has no denominative verb corresponding to its sense of giving alms. *Ṣadaqa* has broader connotations than *zakāt* and is used in the Qur^ʿān for both voluntary and obligatory alms.

Several verses are in the context of prodding reluctant affluent Muslims into making such donations. Referring to those who feared that charity might reduce their wealth, it states:

And should you fear poverty, then [know that] in time God will enrich you out of His bounty.” (Q 9:28)¹⁸

It is worth noting that the Qur^ʿān asserts a right/claim (*ḥaqq*) which inheres in possessions. It states:

And [would assign] in all that they possessed a due share unto such as might ask [for help] and such as might suffer privation (*fī amwālihim ḥaqq^{um} li^l-sā^ʿil^ī wa^l-maḥrūm^ī*).” (Q 51:19)

At another place it states:

The Qur^ʿān does not make distinction between the two terms. *Ṣadaqa*, as voluntary alms giving, was practiced in Mecca, while *zakāt* was instituted in Medina. See *The Pillars of Islam*, vol. I, *ʿIbādāt: Acts of Devotion and Religious Observances, Da^ʿāʾim al-Islām* of al-Qāḍī al-Nu^ʿmān, tr. by Asaf Fyzee, completely revised and annotated by Ismail K. Poonawala (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 199, n. 1. M. Asad renders *ṣadaqāt* (pl. of *ṣadaqa*) as “offerings given for the sake of God.” This comprises of everything that a believer freely gives to another person, out of love or compassion, as well as what he is morally or legally obliged to give, without expecting any worldly return ...(which is the primary meaning of *ṣadaqāt* – e.g., in Q 2:263-64), as well as the obligatory tax called *zakāh* (“the purifying dues,” because its payment purifies, as it were, the person’s property from the taint of selfishness). Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur^ʿān: Translated and Explained*, The full account of the revealed Arabic text accompanied by parallel transliteration (Bristol: The Book Foundation, 2003), p. 303, n. 81.

¹⁸ All translations of the Qur^ʿān, otherwise stated, are by M. Asad, *The Message of the Qur^ʿān*.

And in whose possessions there is a due share, acknowledged [by them], for such as ask [for help] and such as are deprived [of what is good in life] (*fī amwālihim ḥaqq^{um} ma^clūm^{um} li^l-sā^ʿilⁱ wa^l-maḥrūmⁱ*). (Q 70:24-25)

The Prophet dispatched his agents to collect the *zakāt*. He instructed them to take *zakāt* out from the possessions (*amwāl*) of the rich and return them to the poor. The Qur^ʿān states:

[Hence, O prophet,] accept that [part] of their possessions which is offered for the sake of God, so that thou mayest cleanse them thereby and cause them to grow in purity, and pray for them: behold thy prayer will be [a source of] comfort to them (Q 9:103)

A type of profit that was particularly excessive, *ribā*, was totally forbidden.¹⁹ Any speculation in foodstuffs, especially hoarding them, is forbidden. Similarly, any selling wherein there is an element of speculation or uncertainty is prohibited.²⁰ Praying to God and other devotional acts are deemed to be a pure façade in the absence of active welfare service to the needy. In *Sūrat al-Mā^cūn* (Assistance), it states:

Hast thou ever considered [the kind of man] who gives the lie to all moral law?
Behold, it is this [kind of man] that thrusts the orphan away, and feels no urge to feed the needy. Woe, then, unto those praying ones whose hearts from their prayer

¹⁹ It is referred to in Q 2:275-78; 3:130; 4:161; J. Schacht, 'Ribā,' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn., vol. 8, pp. 491-93.

²⁰ For example see See *The Pillars of Islam: vol. II, Laws Pertaining to Human Intercourse, Da^cā^ʿim al-Islām of al-Qāḍī al-Nu^cmān*, tr. by Asaf Fyzee, completely revised and annotated by Ismail K. Poonawala (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), chap. 1; Book of Business Transactions and Rules Concerning them, pp.1-74.

are remote—those who want only to be seen and praised, and, withal, deny all assistance [to their fellow men]. (Q 107)²¹

Man is by nature timid: when evil befalls him, he panics, but when good things come to him he prevents them from reaching others. Human nature is, thus, aptly depicted in the following verse.

Verily, man is born with restless disposition. [As a rule,] whenever misfortune touches him, he is filled with self-pity, and whenever good fortune comes to him, he selfishly withholds it [from others]. (Q 70:19-21)

In another passage the Qur^ānic criticism of human nature becomes very sharp. It states:

But as for man, whenever his Sustainer tries him by His generosity and by letting him enjoy a life of ease, he says, “My Sustainer has been [justly] generous towards me;” whereas, whenever He tries him by straitening his means of livelihood, he says, “My Sustainer has disgraced me.” But nay, nay, [O men, consider all that you do and fail to do:] you are not generous towards the orphan, and you do not urge one another to feed the needy, and you devour the inheritance [of others] with devouring greed, and you love wealth with boundless love! (Q 89:15-20)

The Qur^ān vehemently criticizes the accumulation of wealth for wealth’s sake in chapters 102 and 104. In *Sūrat al-Takāthur* (Greed for more and more), it states:

²¹ The Qur^ān translations, otherwise indicated, are by Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur^ān* (England: The Book Foundation, 2003), p. 1118. The term *mā‘ūn* comprises the many small items needed for one’s daily use, as well as the occasional acts of kindness consisting in helping out one’s fellow-men with such items.

You are obsessed by greed for more and more until you go down to your graves!
Nay, in time you will come to understand! And once again: Nay, in time you will
come to understand! Nay, if you could but understand [it] with an understanding
[born] of certainty, you would indeed, most surely, behold the blazing fire [of
hell]! In the end you will indeed, most surely, behold it with the eye of certainty:
and on that Day you will most surely be called to account for [what you did with]
the boon of life! (Q 102)

In *Sūrat al-Humaza* (the Slanderer), it states:

Woe unto every slanderer, fault-finder! [Woe unto him] who amasses wealth and
counts it a safeguard, thinking that his wealth will make him live forever! Nay,
but [in the life to come such as] he shall indeed be abandoned to crushing
torment! And what could make thee conceive what the crushing torment will be?
A fire kindled by God, which will rise over the [guilty] hearts: verily it will close
in upon them in endless columns! (Q 104:2-9)

The Qur^ʿān stipulates that the rich should participate in charity more or less in proportion
to their incomes. In *Sūrat al-Layl* (the Night), it states:

Thus, as for him who gives [to others] and is conscious of God, and believes in
the truth of the ultimate good – for him shall We make easy the path towards
[ultimate] ease. But as for him who is niggardly, and thinks that he is self-
sufficient, and calls the ultimate good a lie – for him shall We make easy the path
towards hardship; and what will his wealth avail him when he goes down [to his

grave]? ... he that spends his possessions [on others] so that he might grow in purity – not as payment for favours received, but only out of a longing for the countenance of his Sustainer, the All-Highest: and as such, indeed shall in time be well-pleased. (Q 92:5-10, 18-21)

Feeding the hungry, an orphan near of kin, or a needy [stranger] lying in the dust, and freeing a human being from bondage are praised and encouraged by the Qurʾān. In *Sūrat al-Balad* (the Land), it states:

[It is] the freeing of a human being from bondage,²² or the feeding, upon a day of [one’s own] hunger, of an orphan near of kin, or of a needy [stranger] lying in the dust – and being withal, of those who have attained to faith and who enjoin upon one another patience in adversity, and enjoin upon one another compassion. Such as they that have attained to righteousness; whereas those who are bent on denying the truth of Our messages – they are such as have lost themselves in evil, the [with] fire closing in upon them. (Q 90:13-20; see also 76:8-9 where people feed the needy, the orphan and the captive for the sake of God.)

In his *Islam and Capitalism*, Maxime Rodinson states that the Qurʾān is not opposed to private property, since it lays down rules for inheritance. The Qurʾān looks with favor upon commercial activity, confining itself to condemning fraudulent practices.²³ It also advises that

²² I have preferred this translation of the phrase *fakk raqaba*, indicated by Asad in n.7, p. 1088.

²³ For example it states in *Sūrat al-Muṭaffifīn* (Those who give short measure): “Woe unto those who give short measure; those who, when they are to receive their due from [other] people, demand that it be given in full-- but when they have to measure or weigh whatever they owe to others, give less than what is due!” Q 83:1-3.

inequalities are not to be challenged,²⁴ contenting itself with denouncing the habitual impiety of rich people, stressing the uselessness of wealth in face of God's judgment and the temptation to neglect religion and charity that wealth brings.²⁵

With regard to the second Islamic source, namely the traditions of the Prophet, once again, we encounter the question of authenticity.²⁶ Leaving aside the question of genuineness we find an echo of the Qur'ān in countless traditions. Devouring usury (*ribā*) and consuming the property of an orphan are enumerated among the major sins and signs of hypocrisy.²⁷ In the chapter on *zakāt* most of the traditions reiterate that the *zakāt* is to be taken from the rich and distributed among the poor and needy. Those who withhold this tax are warned of severe punishment by God.²⁸

²⁴ For example in *Sūrat al-Nisā'* it states: "Hence, do not covet the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on some of you than on others." Q 4:32. In *Sūrat al-Nahl*, it states: "And on some of you God has bestowed more abundant means of sustenance than on others: and yet, they who are more abundantly favoured are [often] unwilling to share their sustenance with those whom their right hands possess" Q 16:71. In *Sūrat al-Isrā'*, it states: "Behold how We bestow [on earth] more bounty on some of them than on others: but [remember that] the life to come will be far higher in degree and far greater in merit and bounty." Q 17:21.

²⁵ Maxime Rodinson, *Islam and Capitalism*, tr. by Brian Pearce (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 14.

²⁶ For the discussion of this issue see James Robson, 'Ḥadīth,' *EI*, 2nd edn. vol. 3, pp. 23-28; Jonathan Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: One World, 2009).

²⁷ It is transmitted by Bukhārī and Muslim, see James Robson, tr., *Mishkat al-Masabih* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1975), vol. I, p. 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 371-73, 376; most of the traditions are transmitted by Bukhārī and Muslim. Those who are entitled to receive *zakāt* fall into eight classes, enumerated in the Q 9:60. For further discussion and especially in modern period, see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn., s.v. *Zakāt*, by A. Zysow, vol. 11, pp. 406-22.; Timur Kuran,

It is interesting to note that in the chapter on *zakāt* there is a section entitled “Those who are not allowed to beg and those who are.”²⁹ Accordingly, begging is acceptable for three classes of people. First, for a man who has become a guarantor for a payment (as an undertaking to pay someone else’s debt or blood money). Begging is permitted for him until he acquires it, after which he must stop. Second, begging is sanctioned for a man whose property has been destroyed by a calamity and has smitten him. He is allowed to beg until he gets what will support life or provide a reasonable subsistence for him and his family. Third, a man who has been struck by poverty, its authenticity is confirmed by three learned members of his people until he obtains enough support.³⁰ In short, begging is not permitted unless under dire circumstances. Yet another tradition states that begging is not permitted for those who have [physical] strength and are sound in limbs, but only to those who are in grinding poverty or are in serious debt.³¹

The above section is followed by a subdivision entitled “Spending, and disapproval of avarice,” wherein miserliness is condemned, and generous people who help the poor and needy are commended.³² It is followed by yet another segment enumerating the excellence of *ṣadaqa*. The most excellent *ṣadaqa*, in the general sense, consists of charitable acts. One tradition states that if anyone gives as *ṣadaqa* the equivalent of an edible fruit of the date-palm from something

“Islamic redistribution through Zakat: Historical record and modern realities,” in M. Bonner et al (eds.), *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts*, pp. 275-93.

²⁹ Ibid., vol. I, pp. 389-93.

³⁰ Ibid., vol. I, p. 389; transmitted by Muslim.

³¹ Ibid., vol. I, p. 391; transmitted by Tirmidhī.

³² Ibid., vol. I, pp. 394-61.

lawfully earned, for God accepts only what is permissible ... till that fruit becomes like a mountain.³³ Another tradition says that every act of kindness is *ṣadaqa*.³⁴

The section on the excellence of the poor and the Prophet's livelihood is preceded by a section on "Words which soften the heart." It is here that the famous tradition is cited, which states: "The world is the believer's prison and the infidel's paradise."³⁵ Several traditions state that the majority of those who entered paradise were the poor and that the rich were held back. Another tradition put in the mouth of the Prophet says: "I looked into paradise and saw that most of its inhabitants were the poor."³⁶ A different tradition says: "It is by the blessing of the presence of the poor in the community that the people get support against their enemies and receive their provision." This section is closely interwoven with the livelihood of the Prophet and his family stating that Muḥammad's family did not have enough barley bread to satisfy them on two consecutive days up to the time when God's Messenger was taken by death.³⁷

According to a tradition trade is considered a superior way of earning one's livelihood. In a number of traditions hoarding of wealth without recognizing the rights of the poor is threatened with the most severe punishment in the hereafter and is declared to be a main cause of the decay

³³ Ibid., vol. I, pp. 402-13.

³⁴ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 403; transmitted both by Bukhārī and Muslim.

³⁵ Ibid, vol. II, p. 1071. For variant versions of this traditions see A. J. Wensinck, et al, *Concordances de la Tradition Musulmane* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), s.v. f-q-r.

³⁶ Ibid., vol., II, p. 1085; transmitted by Bukhārī and Muslim.

³⁷ Ibid., vol., II, p. 1086; transmitted both by Bukhārī and Muslim.

of societies. Several traditions stress that the beggar (*sā'il*) should not be allowed to return without giving him even a cloven hoof.³⁸

III

Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' is a pseudonym assumed by the authors of a well-known encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences who described themselves as a group of fellow-seekers after truth. Members of a religio-political movement, they deliberately concealed their identity so that their treatises, entitled *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' wa-khullān al-wafā'* (Epistles of Sincere Brethren and Faithful Friends), would gain wider circulation and appeal to a broad cross-section of society. I have discussed their authorship, dating, and contents elsewhere.³⁹ The Ikhwān employ fables, parables, and allegories to illustrate and prove their doctrine while not revealing their identities; as a result, much of their system of belief remains hidden from the careless reader. The reason they give for hiding secrets from the people is not their fear of earthly rulers, but a desire to protect their God-given gifts. To support their contention they invoke Christ's dictum not to squander their wisdom by giving it to those unworthy of it.⁴⁰

There is no separate treatment of wealth and poverty because the encyclopedia was designed for various disciplines, such as Mathematical, Physical and Natural Sciences in addition to Spiritual-Intellectual and Juridical-Theological Sciences. The prophetic tradition that this

³⁸ See Wensinck, *Concordance*, s.v. *s-'ll/sā'il*.

³⁹ Ismail K. Poonawala, "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, 2nd edn., vol. 7, pp. 4375-77; idem, "Why We Need an Arabic Critical Edition." For more details see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn., s.v. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' by Y. Marquet, vol. 3, pp. 1071-76.

⁴⁰ *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' wa-Khullān al-Wafā'*, Beirut: Dār Bayrūt wa-dār Ṣādir, 1957, vol. 4, p. 166.

world is a prison for the faithful and a paradise for the infidel is reiterated.⁴¹ Hence, their remarks about wealth and poverty are scattered throughout the four volumes of the text and another volume entitled *al-Risāla al-jāmiʿa* (Compendium).

The story about the dispute between humans and animals (one of the longest Epistles in the encyclopedia) is one example of their views. It is an allegorical story in which the animals complain to the just king of the jinn about the cruel treatment meted out to them by human beings. In the course of the debate, the animals refute humanity's claim of superiority over them by denouncing the rampant injustice and immorality of human society. This fable is a good example of the Ikhwān's sociopolitical criticism of Muslim society without offending anyone's sensibilities. The most severe criticism in this allegorical story is leveled against the wealthy who go on amassing fortunes without caring for the needy, against the privileged, and the ruling classes. Even the religious figures and their establishments are not spared from their scathing criticism for not looking after the worldly and heavenly welfare of their communities.⁴²

The point is rendered more explicitly in the *Compendium* wherein it is stated that the animals in the story symbolize “the masses who blindly follow their rulers and religious leaders.” The humans represent “the advocates of reasoning by analogy (*al-qiyyās*),” who deduce legal prescriptions from the Qurʾān and the *sunna* by reasoning and analogy. This category of people

⁴¹ Ibid., vol. 3, p. 304.

⁴² *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn*, An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 22, ed. & tr. Lenn Goodman and Richard McGregor (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2009).

are the disciples of Satan, the adversaries of the prophets, and enemies of the Imams.⁴³ The role of a religious critic is assigned in the fable to *Ṣāhib al-ʿazīma* (lit. a person with determination), a high court dignitary and advisor of the King of the Jinn. Like a chief/public prosecutor, he always points out the shortcomings of the various human spokespersons and reprimands them.⁴⁴

The story enjoyed wide popularity among the masses and was translated into Hebrew during the fourteenth century and was rendered into Urdu-Hindustani by Mawlavī Ikrām ʿAlī in 1811.⁴⁵

There is a section entitled *Fī bayān al-fuqarāʾ waʿl-masākīn wa-ahl al-balwā* (On the description of the poor, miserable and misfortunate) in the first Epistle entitled *Fīʿl-ārāʾ waʿl-diyānāt* (On opinions and creeds) of the fourth section named *fīʿl-ʿulūm al-nāmūsiyya al-ilāhiyya waʿl-sharʿiyya* (The divine religious sciences).⁴⁶ It is a short section of two and a half pages and here I would like to present its summary.

The above group of people (i.e., the poor, miserable and misfortunate) is a blessing and an admonition to the wealthy and affluent. Those who enjoy this worldly affluence should know that God has not done any favor to them or rewarded them with riches [for any reason]. Nor did He recompense the poor for their deeds [as punishment]. Rather, reflect on the condition of the

⁴³ *Al-Risāla al-jāmiʿa liʿl-Ḥakīm al-Majrīṭī*, ed. Jamīl Ṣalība (Damascus: Maṭbūʿāt al-Majmaʿ al-ʿilmī al-ʿArabī, 1949), vol. 1, pp. 437-47.

⁴⁴ The term *ulū al-ʿazm min al-rusul* occurs in Q 46:35. Also see Ismail K. Poonawala, “Humanism in Ismāʿīlī Thought: The Case of the Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ,” in M. Morony (ed.), *Rationalism in Islam*, (forth coming).

⁴⁵ Poonawala, “Why We Need an Arabic Critical Edition,” p. 36.

⁴⁶ *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, vol. 3, pp. 429-32.

poor and misfortunate and help them. God says: “If you are grateful [to Me], I shall most certainly give you more and more; but if you are ungrateful, verily, My chastisement will be severe indeed!” (Q 14:7)

When those who are faithful and believe in the hereafter look at those poor and miserable and ponder over their situation in this world should re-affirm their belief in the world to come and know that they [the poor] will be rewarded for their sufferings and patience as God, the Most High, states: “Verily, they who are patient in adversity will be given their reward in full, beyond all reckoning!” (Q 39:10)

Know well that this group (that is the poor, miserable and misfortunate) possess many virtues (*faḍā'il*) and there is a Divine wisdom behind them hidden from the wise and the affluent. They are the ones who immediately responded to the call of the prophets, rather than the rich, because they are content with whatever little they possess. Again they are the ones who remember their Lord the most, the most honest in their invocations to God, and more tender at heart.

I hope this will give the reader a glimpse of their views. There is another important brief segment in the fourth Epistle of the fourth section entitled *Fī kayfiyyat mu'āsharat ikhwān al-Ṣafā' wa-ta'āwun ba'ḍihim ma' ba'ḍ wa-ṣidq al-shafaqa wa'l-mawadda fi'l-dīn wa'l-dunyā jamī'an* (On the manner of living together with the Sincere Brethren, and cooperation with each other and earnestness for compassion and love in faith and worldly matters), wherein the issue of wealth and poverty is explicitly treated.⁴⁷ Mankind is divided into three general categories: i) those who are wealthy; ii) those who are learned; and iii) those who are neither wealthy nor

⁴⁷ Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 41-60; however, the summary is from pp. 54 to 56.

learned but have excellent character. The following summary of about three pages in the original Arabic is quite an eye-opener and a balancing act by the Ikhwān.

As for those of our brethren who are provided with wealth but not with knowledge ought to seek a brother who is bestowed with knowledge, embrace him and share with him his worldly possessions. The latter must give the former the benefit of his knowledge. Both should assist one another to improve their lots in this world and the hereafter. The one with worldly goods ought not to be obliging the other and not to despise him on account of his own poverty, since wealth is nothing but a physical acquisition that lasts its [determined] physical life circle on this earth. The knowledge, on the other hand is a spiritual asset that will count in the afterlife. The essence of the soul is better than the essence of the body. In the same way spiritual life is superior to the physical life because the latter is temporary, limited for a period after which it is cut off and vanishes, while the former survives forever as God states: “And neither shall they taste death there after having passed through their erstwhile death.” (Q 44:56)

The brother who is bestowed with knowledge also ought not to envy the brother with wealth and ought not to despise him for his ignorance and should not brag about his learning and seek not any recompense [for imparting his knowledge]. Both of them, in their cooperation with each other, are like the hand and foot attached to a body, hence they should assist one another for their own benefit. If the hands assist in removing a thorn from the feet, they should not expect any reward from the feet and vice versa.

The Sincere Brethren should assist each other for the betterment of this world and the next. The mutual support of the wealthy and the learned is similar to the fate of two fellow travelers in a vast desert. One of them is endowed with acute eyesight, information about the

tracks and winding paths and carries heavy provisions, but due to his weak body is unable to carry it. The other is blind, has a strong body but without any provision for the long winding road. Hence, the one with eyesight takes the hand of the blind and leads him, while the latter lightens the burden of the former and takes it on his shoulders. Both help each other with that task. Thus, they would be able to cross the desert and save themselves [from destruction]. None should boast about assisting the other or rescuing him from ruin.

As for the one bestowed with learning but not with fortune and does not find anyone to help him out, ought to be patient and wait for relief that God has promised his friends (*awliyāʾ*) when He says: “And unto everyone who is conscious of God,⁴⁸ He [always] grants a way out [of unhappiness], and provides for him in a manner beyond all expectations.” (Q 65:2-3) He also says: “And for everyone who is conscious of God, He grants ease out of his situation.” (65:4) He should, therefore, be content to know that it is better to be endowed with learning rather than affluence.

As for our Brethren who possess neither the worldly goods nor the learning but are endowed with chaste soul, sound intellect without corrupt notions, praiseworthy character, love for good and virtuous people, ought to be content with what God has apportioned them with their lot. They should not regret the denial of either the affluence or learning because most of the time those two categories of people [the wealthy and the learned] lack the qualities our Brethren possess. Because we often find learned thinkers compose books about refinement of character while they themselves lack rectitude. On the other hand, one finds people who are not very learned are righteous. Thus, it is obvious that being virtuous is a divine gift. The Prophet was

⁴⁸ The Arabic reads: *man yattaqi Allāh*, lit. means: Whoever fears God.

extolled in the Qurʾān for his praise worthy character.⁴⁹ Rectitude is the innate quality of the angels and the inhabitants of paradise. The Qurʾān states: “God save us! This is no mortal man! This is nought but a noble angel!” (Q 12:31) It is only the people with deviated nature, devilish character and inhabitants of inferno that envy each other as the Qurʾān states: “[And] every time a host enters [the fire], it will curse its fellow-hosts – so much so that, when they all shall have passed into it, one after another, the last of them will speak [thus] of the first of them: ‘O our Sustainer! It is they who have led us astray: give them, therefore, double suffering through fire!’ He will reply: ‘Every one of you deserves double suffering – but you know it not.’” (Q 7:38)

Conclusion: In his admirable study entitled “Definitions of Poverty,” M. Bonner explored various definitions of the urban poor in legal and literary sources. In his search for the early Muslim poor he scrutinized the event known as “The Siege of Baghdad,” i.e., the civil war between the two brothers: al-Amīn and al-Maʾmūn which occurred in 196-98/812-13. By analyzing the terms, such as wretches, beggars, vagabonds, riffraff, thieves, rogues, scoundrel, common folk, jailbirds, people of the market, often called *al-ʿurāt* (the naked) by the historian al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956),⁵⁰ he arrived at the conclusion that there were two competing views of poverty during the first centuries of Islam: the radical and the conservative. The former reflects the structure of the early conquest polity: a society of warriors, kept apart and insulated from the conquered population which feeds them. The “naked warriors” (*al-ʿurāt*) described by the historian al-Masʿūdī, were the urban poor of Baghdad who supported al-Amīn, and lost their

⁴⁹ Q 68:4 (Asad renders *khuluq* “a sublime way of life.”)

⁵⁰ Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawhar*, ed. B. de Meynard, et al. and corrected by Charles Pellat (Beirut: Publications de l’Université Libanaise, 1973), vol. 4, pp. 279, 281 ff.

cause with the latter's defeat. The conservative view, on the other hand, suggests a different concept of poverty: maintaining social peace in a world characterized by inequality.⁵¹

The views of the Ikhwān examined above can be classified as conservative for various reasons. First, the Epistles were composed by a group of urban scholars closely associated with the Ismā'īlī movement.⁵² Second, their doctrines, i.e., the philosophical structure and the cosmology of their system are derived from Neoplatonism and Neo-Pythagoreanism. Eclectic in nature, the system draws on various faiths and philosophies, with a strong undercurrent of rationalism. Hence, they are heavily inclined in maintaining a balance between wealth and poverty. Their emphasis is directed toward unworldliness, what is described as asceticism (*al-zuhd fi'l-dunyā* and not *al-zuhd 'an al-dunyā*), attaining happiness in the hereafter. Third, the Ikhwān describe themselves as “People of Justice and Scions of Those Who Extol God and the People Who Possess the Truth and Real Meaning [of Things] Concerning the Cleansing of the Soul and Refinement of Character in order to Attain the Ultimate Happiness, the Highest Loftiness, Everlasting Life and the Final Perfection” (*wa-ahl al-‘adl wa-abnā’ al-ḥamd wa- arbāb al-ḥaqā’iq wa-aṣḥāb al-ma‘ānī fī tahdhīb al-naḥs wa-iṣlāḥ al-akhlāq li’l-bulūgh ilā al-sa‘āda al-kubrā wa’l-jalāla al-‘uẓmā wa’l-baqā’ al-dā’im wa’l-kamāl al-akhīr*).⁵³ Finally, the

⁵¹ M. Bonner, “Definitions of Poverty and the Rise of the Muslim Urban Poor.”

⁵² Ismail K. Poonawala, “Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’,” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edn., pp. 4375-4377.

⁵³ Ismail K. Poonawala, “Why We Need an Arabic Edition Critical Edition with an Annotated English Translation of the Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’,” in Nader El-Bizri (ed.), *The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ and their Rasā’il: An Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 46.

sub-title/phrase the “Cleansing of the Soul and Refinement of Character” is repeated in the title of each and every Epistle. In conclusion it should be stated that the Epistles presented the Qurʾānic teachings of socio-economic justice and communitarian values with renewed dynamism, but at the same time equally stressing spiritual inwardness.

Ismail K. Poonawala, “Why We Need an Arabic Edition Critical Edition with an Annotated English Translation of the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*,” in *The Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ and their Rasāʾil: An Introduction*, ed. Nader El-Bizri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 34-36.