Poverty
The Curse and the Blessing

A Muslim Response by Professor Hussein Rashid, Ph.D.
Hofstra University

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim
As-salaam alaykum wa rehmatullahi wa barakatahu
In the name of God, The Compassionate, The Merciful
May the peace, mercy, and blessings of God be with you.

I am grateful to the Father Patrick Ryan both for his erudite remarks and for the invitation to offer a Muslim perspective. I am also indebted to Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse, who manages so much of the process to make this event happen.

I.
INTRODUCTION

Father Ryan points out the ways in which voluntary poverty is used by Muslims with a mystical inclination to draw themselves closer to God.
This strand of thought is so strong in Muslim traditions that it seems like a logical place to start a discussion of poverty. It highlights the idea that the world serves as a distraction from God, so that one must withdraw from it. In a saying attributed to Imam Ali (AS)\(^*\), the successor to Prophet Muhammad’s (SAWS)\(^*\) spiritual authority, he says of Jesus (AS):

If you desire I will tell you about ‘Isa son of Maryam. He used a stone for his pillow, put on coarse clothes and ate rough food. His condiment was hunger. His lamp at night was the moon. His shade during the winter was just the expanse of earth eastward and westward. . . . His two feet were his conveyance and his two hands his servant.\(^1\)

Jesus becomes the exemplar of asceticism leading to higher spiritual knowledge and truths for Muslims.

At the same time, this spiritual growth is not meant to be simply for the benefit of the individual. If it were, the act would be selfish and not the goal of such practice. There is a distinction between asceticism and monasticism, and to take the path of a Muslim is to be engaged in the world. Spiritual growth is to follow a prophetic example and to make the comfortable uncomfortable, as the twentieth century Iranian thinker Ali Shariati says.\(^2\)

Therefore, we begin with looking at the mystical ascetics but do so in a context of choice and agency that affects the world for the better. Poverty may direct one to God more fully, but we should not aim to hold up a “Noble Poverty” that will see a reward in the future. Instead, we need to see poverty as a complex that involves poverty of the hand, poverty of the mind, poverty of the heart, and poverty of the spirit. When one suffers poverty in any of these arenas, one suffers them in all arenas. To be conditioned to act as a fāqir, one in want, means that no matter what

\(^*\) The abbreviation aS is an expression that follows the name of any prophet or archangel. It means “peace be upon him.”

\(^*\) The abbreviation SAWS follows the Prophet Muhammad’s name and means “may God’s blessing and peace be with him.”
wants are filled, one will always act in a way that not only denies one’s basic humanity but the basic humanity of others. That is why Moses had to wander in the desert for 40 years.

I argue this not in the abstract but in the context of higher education today, which exhibits characteristics of poverty and transmits it to its students, undermining the very mission it seeks promote. I choose this example because of our setting here today, but one can easily make parallel arguments for any corporate institution, whether on Wall Street or Silicon Valley.

There is a reason that when President Franklin Roosevelt made his 1941 State of the Union address, he spoke of four basic human freedoms, including the freedom from want. It was not a war on poverty but a realization of human needs that had to be met, otherwise one was enslaved to those needs.

II.

POVERTY OF CHOICE

Poverty by choice, for Muslim mystics, is about servitude but servitude to God. The zahid is the ascetic, who chooses to live on little, so as to be more conscious of God in the world. It is a rejection of distraction. She seeks nothing from the world and asks nothing of anyone. Yet she exhibits a type of self-sufficiency that troubles us.

The miskin is the poor one who is conscious of how far she is from God. To have the state of a miskin is to pine constantly for God. By being distant from God, one is much more aware of God. We find the miskin disconcerting because she expresses a consciousness that we do not, and we do not know how to relate to this, as she asks nothing from us.

And the faqir is our mendicant who asks us to fill a want. And here, a want is not a frivolous desire but an unfulfilled need. We understand the faqir through lens of transactional experience. We provide “charity,” fulfilling our mu’ammadat, our obligations to other human beings, and we hope
that God will reward us for the good deed (2:261). But what the \textit{faqir} is doing is asking us why there is want in the world, and why we are not paying attention.

Each of these individuals, and the numerous others of the mystic “poor,” are a challenge to the systems that generate poverty and want. We translate \textit{zakat} as “alms” or “charity,” and as a specific type of \textit{sadaqa} or giving. However, \textit{sadaqa} writ large is a much larger transformative act, of which \textit{zakat} is the bare minimum. The idea of giving, from a Muslim perspective, is about a larger message about putting limits on acquisition and greed. The Qur’an says that if you are unsure how much you should give, you should give anything more than you need (2:219). It is the same logic against usury. The goal is to not only allow the individual to avoid distractions from God but to craft a society where others can be free of the want that keeps them from God.

The idea of \textit{sadaqa} was so revolutionary because it focused on anonymous giving (2:264; 2:271), breaking a cycle of abusive “charity,” where individuals became indebted to those who gave such charity. This action created an unhealthy dependency on other humans; a type of indentured servitude to other humans.\footnote{The earliest Qur’anic revelations focus on giving so much so that it is likely the most commanded act in the Meccan revelations and possibly the entire Qur’an. This act redirects individuals to have a primary bond with God as The Giver, not other people, and that servitude should only be to God. The Qur’an will later go to great lengths to end slavery, and that fits in not only with a reorientation to the Divine but also a recognition of human dignity.}

The Qur’an also says that money should go to those in need so that it does not only circulate amongst the wealthy (59:7). This radical reimagining of the purpose in money resulted in the first post-Prophetic civil war, the \textit{Ridda} Wars, which were about keeping one’s wealth for one’s self rather than contributing to a common good. It was an attempt to revert to the old order, which kept money for individuals and humans as lords of the universe.
III.

NOBLE POVERTY (THE PRIMITIVE AND THE SAVAGE)

This criticism of wealth staying with the wealthy should not be read as an endorsement of poverty. It is about distributing wealth to create a more just and equitable society that frees a human being to develop her own humanity and to focus on God.

One can look at the poor, the miskin, and say that they believe in God because they have nothing else. Such an approach denies what we know of human beings as self-aware, creative, idealistic, moral, with the ability to act on those characteristics. We can look beyond ourselves to something greater, and we can also be distracted from that vision. It is not that poverty breeds belief but that belief can be masked by wealth.

At the same time, it would be easy to idealize those in poverty as being more true to human nature, the hunter-gather who is focused on existence and God. Such a romantic view of a “noble poverty” continues to mask the true state of exploitation and want that poverty generates.

A recent article on the Kenya Financial Diaries project of the Gates Foundation highlights five learnings from records kept by 300 low-income families—72% of whom lived on less than $2 a day. Among the observations are that people are more connected as they share funds more openly and help each other “bridge” expense gaps; informal savings accounts, a type of hybrid between micro-credit institutions and credit unions, further these ties; and they wanted their money “working” for other people, rather than in accounts that keep these human dependencies from developing by shifting the focus to capital growth. These statements indicate that poverty can strengthen human relationships. Yet there is something dehumanizing about this system as well. Children cannot attend school for the lack of $0.59, and medicines remain unpurchased because of a shortfall of $0.82.
It is a valorization of extreme need because it brings out the best of humanity, and that is what concerns me. It avoids the conversation of recognizing the deprivation and challenges to dignity that the individual faces. Nor does it seek to understand the systems of capital we have constructed and participate in that ignore human dignity, including our own.

Rabia al-Basri is a great ninth century Muslim mystic who is considered an archetype for ecstatic and ascetic love. Her story begins with her being taught reliance on God by her father, who was visited by Prophet Muhammad in his dreams. Then we have one of the most famous stories of any Muslim, which is Rabia running through Basra with a pail of water in one hand and torch of fire in the other. When asked what she was doing, she replied that she wanted to burn down the gates of Heaven and put out the fires of Hell. She did not want to worship God out of fear of Hell or the promise of Heaven but the love of God.

This attitude mirrors a saying attributed to Imam Ali:

> There is a group who worship God out of desire [for something not yet attained], and this is the worship of the merchants. And there is a group who worship God out of fear, and this is the worship of the slaves. And there is a group who worship God out of gratitude, and this is the worship of the free.7

What the comment suggests is that a relationship with God based on trade or fear are equally deplorable; the merchant and the slave are in the same condition of not turning to God. Yet, the middle of Rabia’s story is often glossed over, when she was a literal slave. Captured during a conflict, she never wavered in her faith. This attitude of hers is spiritually admirable but avoids the questions of how slavery was permitted and how the poverty she knew as a child was allowed to exist.

These are not simply historical questions. We have but to leave this campus and go less than a block to see the everyday poverty that surrounds on the streets. We know of child soldiers throughout the world.
and modern-day slavery. All of these are the results of structures we choose to erect, and actions we choose not to take. They too are a type of poverty.

IV.
POVERTY AS A SYSTEM

Poverty of the hand, the material want, is only one aspect of the system of poverty that affects us. To be in physical need retards our mental, emotional and spiritual potential. We know the mental tax capital poverty exerts on lives, creating poverty of the mind, poverty of the heart and poverty of the spirit. And this relationship is not unidirectional. A gap in any one area has repercussions in another area. One simply has to look at Saudi Arabia, which has no poverty of the hand for the ruling family, but where we see brutal treatment of religious minorities, casual murders of foreign workers and the total dehumanization of non-Wahhabis. Charitable giving favors purchases of weapons.

We see less graphic but no less disturbing patterns of wealth seeking to recreate itself in the United States. It goes from Kansas, where in order to make sure the rich do not pay taxes, money is being spent to make sure those receiving government assistance do not spend money on recreation, like swimming, and to limit ATM withdrawals to $25. This law, of course, says explicitly that people who are poor are different than other citizens. In New York, a small group of billionaires are remaking the public education system in order to destabilize long-term professional educators as a sin qua non of public schooling and to avoid paying taxes for an equitable school fund.

We see these multiple types of poverty being taught every day. If we look at the budget of the United States as a policy document, and we believe that education serves the purpose of helping individuals explore their own humanity, then we have to look at school budgets as moral documents. So when we have a professoriate that is more than 70% adjunct, it telegraphs that the humanity of the professoriate is irrelevant.
With poor wages and lack of benefits, faculty will often work multiple positions and still receive better teaching reviews than full-time faculty. Oftentimes, adjuncts do not have office space, so when they meet with students in public spaces, it telegraphs that students’ private, individual needs are irrelevant. Cutting back humanities programs, so that students learn-to-earn signals that the there is no need to be human, if one can be a good worker. Nor is this sort of thinking implicit or an unfortunate by-product of a neutral decision.

Margaret Mary Vojkto taught at Duquesne University, a Catholic institution in Pennsylvania, for 25 years as an adjunct. She did not make enough money to heat her home in the winter, was denied further courses at the age of 83, for which she was filling an age-based discrimination lawsuit, and suffered a fatal heart attack in front of her house. She had no health insurance to help her pay for the chemotherapy she was undergoing. The university is fighting the unionization of adjuncts, claiming that it is against Catholic belief and violates their religious beliefs.

Starting with the decision that the school should not pay living wages, should undercut long-term education investing by switching to adjuncts and by making it clear that a demand for human dignity through wage increases and healthcare is against Catholic teaching, Duquesne makes it explicit that the focus on capital, from a poverty of the heart and the spirit, increases poverty of the hand. And this poverty in all areas will be taught to a new generation, as they are shown the humanity of their seniors is meaningless, and their own humanity is not valued in either education or religion. As an adjunct at Fordham, and several other schools, I can attest that Dusquesne is simply the most tragic result of a system many schools have adopted. If poverty is something to be challenged, then one has to ask how Fordham is demonstrating that commitment in-house.
V. CONCLUSION

The great fourteenth-century thinker Ibn Khaldun, considered the father of modern sociology and contributor to the development of modern historiography and economics, argued that societies collapse because of greed and corruption, as they result in a social breakdown. For him, the rending of human connections ultimately has to lead to the shredding of the social contract, and the shears are the misuse of capital. Dante, in Canto VII of his *Inferno*, places misers and spendthrifts in the fourth circle. They share the sin of not understanding what capital is for; both groups are overly attached to money.

The focus on capital not only generates material want but perpetuates it. By assuming money can fix the problems that money created, we cannot generate new structures and relationships that deemphasize money. Yes, capital will remain important in the process, but we have to understand the differences amongst charity (voluntarily giving money to those in need, usually addressing a manifestation of need), philanthropy (voluntary giving out of a love of humanity, usually focused on causes of need), and altruism (a moral calling that may function similarly to philanthropy but without a voluntary component). It is not a desire to end poverty but a need to end it.

When we address poverty, it is not just the poverty of the hand, which can easily be romanticized and remain unchallenged. It includes poverty of the mind, the heart and the spirit. These ideas are dependent on one another, and we can generate poverty in any area and see the results in the loss of individual humanity and thus the dehumanization of other people. What is more troubling is that we can also propagate that poverty by choosing to teach that human dignity has no worth, and the meaning of life is to be found in being labor for someone else.
What the question of poverty shows us is that we need to create new thinking of the role of capital in our lives: who is the master, and who is the servant. When the *faqir* comes, we must ask why the *faqir* is there. The Qur’an tells us that we must give but that giving is not sufficient. We must change our own condition (13:11), and remember that it is possible that there shall be no needy because God will provide (Deut. 15:4).
NOTES


3 The Arabic word *sadaqa* is cognate to the Hebrew *tzedakah*, and carries similar connotative ranges of justice.

4 Michael Bonner, “Poverty and Economics in the Qur’an,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35 (2005), 403.

5 See Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*.


HUSSEIN RASHID, PH.D.

Hussein Rashid, Ph.D., is founder of islamicate, L3C, a consultancy focusing on religious literacy and cultural competency. He is a contract faculty member most often associated with Hofstra University. This semester, he is also an adjunct professor at Fordham University.

Professor Rashid has a B.A. from Columbia, and an M.T.S. and Ph.D. from Harvard. His research focuses on Muslims and American popular culture. He writes and speaks about music, comics, movies and the blogistan. He also has a background in South and Central Asian studies, with a deep interest in Shi’i justice theology.

His scholarly publications include work on Muslims in film, Hindu-Muslim relations in diaspora communities, Malcolm X and South Asians, Sufism, history of violence in the Arab Middle East, free speech and Charlie Hebdo, intra-Muslim racism and #BlackLivesMatter, Muslim worship spaces in America, and a survey of Muslim contributions to American culture.

Professor Rashid is a term member on the Council of Foreign Relations, a fellow at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, the Ariane de Rothschild Fellowship in Social Entrepreneurship, the American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute, and the Truman National Security Project.

He is on the advisory boards of Deily, Everplans, Anikaya Dance Theater and Al-Rawiya. He served on the advisory board of Project Interfaith and the British Council’s Our Shared Future Program. He is currently working with the Children’s Museum of Manhattan as a content expert.

He was on the editorial boards of Religion Dispatches, The Islamic Monthly and Cyber Orient, in addition to being a contributing scholar to State of Formation. Hussein appears on mainstream media, including CNN, Channel 4 (UK), Iqra TV (Saudi Arabia), Al-Jazeera America, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, and has published at On Faith (Washington Post), Belief Blog (CNN), On Being (NPR) and The Revealer. He is a contributor to Religion News Service.