

Rights of God, Rights of People

One defining feature of Islam's ethics is the distinction drawn between rights owed to God and rights owed to fellow humans. Even those otherwise unfamiliar with the Arabic language recognize the phrases *huquq Allah* and *huquq al-`ibad* when they hear them; this might be because human rights are but a handful of themes Muslims still find relevant in the weekly sermons. Generally, we use these terms to emphasize our obligations to others—individuals mainly in the case of our fellow humans—and of course, to God. We also use it to express Islam's own contributions to the global culture of human rights, or to demand our rights from others—from those wielding authority over us, or those in control of our institutions—and less frequently, to demand that others be treated justly. This habit of not demanding for others what we ourselves seek is roundly condemned by almost all faiths as humanity's collective shame. Among Muslims there are two more 'shames' that have yet to be recognized: the first is our ignorance of how intertwined divine rights and human rights really are, and the second, is our unfortunate willingness to sacrifice other people's human rights to comply with our duties to the Divine.

Lest we get the impression that this is but one more effort to reduce all things sacred to the utterly human and profane, I should emphasize that human rights within the context of religion is different in one important way. Whereas secular human rights are homocentric to the extent that the human condition is its point of departure, and the human will the only measure of all things good and bad, divinely based human rights, at least among western religions, make God central to all things human and His will the measure of all things good and bad. Secular human rights have much to be proud of, I admit, but they have failed us in some significant ways, of which perhaps the genocides of the twentieth century are the best examples. Divinely based human rights have for the most part stood the test of time, but they too stand humbled if not humiliated by the countless pogroms and internecine purges perpetrated in the name of God.

With regard to Islam, there's both the good and the bad. The sacred texts uphold the rights of all human beings to life and liberty, to equality before the law, to social and economic rights, and to the right to religious freedom. They cover everything from the rights and the obligations of parents and children, to the duties owed to the disabled, to the ethics of warfare, and the humane treatment of enemy combatants. This was not quite the Magna Carta, or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I admit, but for the era, these standards were without equal. Muslim history, however, had an enormous influence on the interpretation and application of these texts; they often softened or hardened in tandem with the level of hostility that prevailed between Islam and its neighbors.

As for those rights owed to God, these, on closer examination, actually hinge on the fulfillment of human rights as well. The five pillars of Islam, for instance are all acts of worship, which, as we know are rights owed solely to God. But the striking feature of Muslim worship is that to comply, one must fulfill certain human rights. This applies to all acts of worship in Islam, and is perhaps best exemplified in the *zakat*, or the religious tithe. But the human element in worship inheres even in the most abstract tenet of Islam,

tauhid, or the proclamation of the unity of the Divine. In testifying explicitly to God's oneness, to His exclusive role in our creation, nurture, and evolution—this being the very rationale of monotheistic worship—we at the same time testify to all His creatures, Muslim and non Muslim, animal and human, as being essentially equal. As equals before God, theirs is the task, not of living in subservience to each other, but of interacting symbiotically with each other to the benefit of life on earth.

The stark contrast often drawn between the *huquq Allah* and the *huquq al-`ibad*, therefore, is not just facile, but downright misleading. It all too often obscures the fact that Islam's ethical divisions are in reality two sides of the same coin. More disturbing is the false notion that the rights of God trump the rights of human beings, that the individual seeking salvation must curtail the rights of others in order to fulfill the rights of God. This distorted understanding of our ethical system, more than anything else, gives license to those who engage in honor killings, for instance, or those who unilaterally apply the public aspects of Islamic law without political mandate.