THE LAW OF MOVASAT AND THE MORAL CHALLENGE OF STAYING AT HOME DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract
The challenge of the COVID-19 Pandemic is usually reduced to a mere medical and health problem, while one can observe its sizeable influence on economic, cultural, political and moral domains, too. In Muslim countries, moral conflict becomes one of the significant challenges of COVID-19 affecting people's lives. Staying at home and its relationship with livelihood is one of the most complicated of these conflicts. In this essay, the authors assess and expose this moral conflict using the ethical doctrines of the Islamic religion rooted in the moral law of Movasat Altruism. There are four strategies in the principle of Movasat for overcoming the crisis: (1) uprooting poverty and reducing social-economic inequality; (2) job creation and supporting the production cycle; (3) eliminating unnecessary brokers; and (4) strengthening sympathy, empathy, and love within society.
A. Introduction

Finding a moral answer to life impasses is considered to be one of the most important issues of applied ethics. Needless to say, the settlement and resolution of moral conflicts take form by the reference to the schools of thought. Now, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the emergence of many moral dichotomies and conflicts. Among these moral conflicts is the relation between taking care of one’s health and livelihood. One of the most important pieces of advice highlighted by the medical and healthcare centres worldwide regarding the measures against the contraction of the Coronavirus is “staying at home”. Nevertheless, this advice, despite its basic intention of avoidance from the contraction of the pandemic, is in conflict with the normal process of livelihood provision. To put it simply, curfews and prescription of staying at home can be an ideal solution if the clearest of all primary necessary human needs, i.e. food, has already been provided. Said differently, although the contraction of Coronavirus will be followed by numerous individual and social problems, setting curfews and advising people to stay at home as well as closing the market regardless of people experiencing poverty in the society who hardly succeed in making their living in normal and non-critical conditions still imply the failure of the provision of people’s primary needs. If people’s presence in society is associated with the possibility of contraction of the pandemic and the death of citizens, staying at home, mainly for low-income families, will lead to gradual death as a result of hunger. This problem becomes even more complicated when we notice that WHO has not announced any determinate date for the end of the pandemic, and the presentation of a decisive cure for this virus would take months or even years.

In the current research, we intend to resolve this moral conflict based on the mutual sense of responsibility of the individuals in society towards each other, referring to the moral thought of Islam, the Movasat “Altruism”. The term Movasat comes from an Arabic word, muwāsāt, that lexically implies “medical treatment of the wounds on the body of...
Linguists suggest that the root of Movasat means “treating, medicating and improving pains, sorrows and griefs”. It also implies the “expression of one’s sense of sympathy with other people’s pains and grief”. Then, Movasat has two meanings: (1) improvement and treatment of pains and (2) grieving on the pains.

B. The Conceptual of Movasat

The concept of Movasat in religious sources is also in harmony with its lexical meaning. The word Movasat has not been used in the Quran, though its variations have been mentioned in a number of places. However, we can use other keywords, such as “giving alms and charity”, particularly as used in the context of Surah Al Ma’un, which discusses people’s needs. This word has been widely used in the prophetic traditions, the analysis of which suggests that Movasat has two meanings: (1) showing one’s sympathy with others as to their needs and hardship and letting them have a share of one’s life provisions; and (2) observation of the rights of others in an equal way and the exercise of justice in dealing with others, “which is itself of different types such as social and educational justice and family.”

The most important point regarding this term is that the chief extension of Movasat, as mentioned in the prophetic traditions, is financial support. This extension is much more in harmony with its lexical meaning and the function of Movasat, i.e., eradicating poverty in Islamic society. Nevertheless, other extensions should not be neglected. According to the definitions of Movasat, this word has countless extensions. For example, in the Quran, one of the cases in which the use of Movasat has been recommended is the use of one’s reputation for solving people’s problems. The Quran rebukes the believers’ failure to persuade each other to feed the orphans.

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Conceptually, Movasat is very similar to the concept of infāq (helping the poor solely expecting favour from the Lord). For infāq implies something that fills a vacuum or satisfies a need, then it means helping the needy people from what is more than one needs. However, Movasat implies sharing one’s own required items with people experiencing poverty. In addition, Movasat also has many other similarities with the concept of sacrifice from different perspectives. Nevertheless, the difference between sacrifice and Movasat lies in the fact that sacrifice implies giving the whole of what one needs to others and giving priority to others over oneself, while Movasat refers to “sharing others with one’s needed items”\(^5\). To put it otherwise, in Movasat, one struggles to secure other people’s interests just as if they are his own interests, and likewise denies the harms targeting others just the way one resists any harm targeting oneself. While, in sacrifice, one prioritises others over himself.

One of the basic questions regarding the law of Movasat is whether this law is particularly for a specific social class or group, e.g. the rich people or government officials, and the poor and lower classes are exceptions to this rule. In the Quran, read: “Let the rich spend according to his wealth and for he whose provision is little, let him spend from what Allah has given him. Allah does not charge a soul except with that He has given him. Surely, Allah will bring ease after difficulty”\(^6\).

Although this verse concerns the payment of alimony by someone who has divorced his wife and is obligated to pay the subsistence of his wife and children in a determinate period, it is not unlikely that this would convey a universal rule regarding all cases of infāq. Then, in this case, every Muslim should spend as much as he can in the path of Allah. Infāq is not an obligation just for the rich; instead, all Muslims are the addressee of this rule. This obligation is even the case with those who are poor, as they must help the people they find even poorer than themselves. Thus, everyone is required to help as much as they can. Imam Sadiq states: “If someone cannot offer any help to the people of his society, he must at least pray for them”.

The philosophy of the Quran’s categorical imperative of infāq addressing all Muslims would lie in the fact that just as the performance of such devotional actions as daily prayers, fasting, and Hajj leads to divine rewards and numerous benefits for the Muslims. Zakat

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\(^5\) Ibid., p. 253.
\(^6\) QS Al-Ṭalāq, 65: 7.
The Law of Movasat

(almsgiving) is also of the worldly and the otherworldly reward. The Lord does not like anyone, even the poorest in society, to be deprived of such great goodness. Imam Reza is quoted to have said, “I haste to provide the needs of the person who asks me to help because I am afraid of the moment when I have lost the time and the person has reached his needed item from other source and is needless now”. Therefore, all Muslims are ordered to engage in infāq as much as they can. Another reason the Quran has emphasised infāq is that the Lord wants all Muslims to be brothers and sympathetic, help each other in difficulties and troubles, and think of Movasat and unlimited mutual help. The Prophet (pbuh) states: “The man who sleeps night without thinking of helping Muslims of their needs is not a Muslim”.9

According to the above prophetic tradition, thinking of other people’s needs, helping people solve their problems and serving others are all among the essential obligations of every Muslim. Then, the Prophet (pbuh) has excommunicated those from Islam who fail to observe the law of Movasat, where he is quoted to have said: “The man who sleeps stuffed while his neighbour is hungry, he is not a believer”.10

It is noteworthy that the Prophet (pbuh) would have spoken such words at a time when most Muslims had difficult lives and could hardly make their own living, and they even underwent numerous hardships to have one meal a day. Thus, these traditions imply that Muslims must care for each other even under such difficult conditions. Then, there is no selfishness and egotism in Islam, and these qualities have nothing to do with Muslimhood.

C. Persuasive Rules of the Quran for the Creation of the Spirit of Altruism

Now we have to answer the question of what are those rules to which the Quran resorts to persuade the people to observe the law of Movasat and the creation of the spirit of altruism and keeping oneself away from the spirit of selfishness and egotism.

10 Muhammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, Wasā’il al-Shi‘ab (Qom: Al al-Bayt Institute, 1989), vol. 12, p. 130.
1. The Rule of Bountiful Livelihood

Imam Sadiq is quoted to have said: “When the verse ‘whosoever does a good deed shall have better than it’\(^{11}\) was revealed, the Holy Prophet stated: ‘My Lord, give me more;’ and then came the verse ‘He who brings a good deed shall have tenfold of its like,’\(^{12}\) once again the Prophet said, ‘My Lord, give me more,’ and then revealed the verse ‘Who is he that will lend Allah a good loan! He will multiply it by many multiples.’\(^{13}\) Perhaps at first glance, helping others appears to be losing one’s property, but according to Quranic verses, this leads to reduced poverty and increased divine bounties. Then, God warns people in his divine verses against the spirit of egotism and orders the believers to take the path of altruism.

2. The Rule of Divine Kingdom

The Quran reads: “To Him belongs the Kingdom.”\(^{14}\) The Lord notes this point to remind the people that all the bounties belong to God; we are just entrusted by them, and the Lord is the Divine. Furthermore, if the property is not returned to the Lord, it will be spoiled. This is why Imam Sadiq has stated: “The Kingdom belongs to the Lord. God has entrusted us humans with all the properties we own and let us take advantage of these properties to satisfy our physical needs, clothes and food in a moderate manner, of course.\(^{15}\) If someone makes use of the property entrusted by the Lord to provide his own needs without having a luxurious life, such a person will have the opportunity of infāq. The prophetic tradition reads: “A believer has a modest living while his help is huge”. However, some people are not interested in the financial support of others because they seek honour in wealth and think that these properties belong to them. The Quran reads that when Korah was told to give alms, he replied: “What was given me is only because of the knowledge I possess.”\(^{16}\) Then, if somebody believes that the Kingdom belongs to the Lord and one’s honour does not lie in collecting wealth instead in the way he spends it, he will have observed the rule of altruism.

\(^{11}\) QS Al-Qasas, 28: 84.
\(^{12}\) QS Al-An’ām, 6: 160.
\(^{13}\) QS Al-Baqarah, 2: 245.
\(^{14}\) QS Fāṭir, 35: 13.
\(^{16}\) QS Al-Qasas, 28: 78.
3. The Rule of Trial of People by Donation

The Quran notes that “We have appointed all that is on the earth an adornment for it, in order that We try which of them is finest in works”.17 One of the trials that God sets up for the people is insufficient livelihood. The Quran states: “It is He who has made you caliphs in the earth and raised some of you in rank above others, so that He might try you in what He has given you. Swift is your Lord in retribution; yet He is Forgiving, Merciful”.18 Then, one needs to know that he/she is continuously exposed to divine trial and all the properties have been given to him/her for the sake of trial, and he/she will lose each one of these properties in a form. Therefore, it should be taken into account that we are not supposed to keep anything by ourselves. Moreover, if we have the power to leave the properties entrusted to us by God, we will succeed in passing the Divine Trial or otherwise we will lose everything based on a rule stipulated in a prophetic tradition as follows: “One of the worst forms of losing one’s properties upon Divine Will is that if man does not move on the path of the Lord’s Saint and refuses to pay alms, he will spend his wealth on the path of the enemies of God. To put it otherwise, he is forced to cover the expenses of the enemy of God”.19

Now, one may ask why this bliss is extended just to a few people and does not cover the poor. The answer is that the Lord tries some people in this form. God says, “I will apologise to the poor on the Day of Judgement and tell them that I was not humiliating you, rather I put you into a trial in that way.” The Prophet is quoted to have said: “The first group of people who enter the paradise is the poor.”20 Among the prophets, Solomon will enter paradise later than any other, even if His Highness Solomon did not have any attachment to wealth. The Prophet Solomon always reminded his followers of the extraordinary powers which were at his service, “All these are out of the beneficence of my Lord”. Then, he said that these were all means for my trial. Some are tried by wealth, too. The poor will pass the final interrogation very easily, while the rich have many things to explain and will be delayed.

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17 QS Al-Kahf, 16: 7.
18 QS Al-An‘ām, 6: 165.
Therefore, the Lord orders the poor to engage in *infāq* as much as possible. Even those living a miserable life should care for the wretched ones. This formulation is all for letting every poor individual in the society enjoy such a good set by the Lord for His servants.

**D. The Priority in Movasat**

In his letter to Malek Ashtar, Ali ibn Abi Talib recommends that the new governor of Egypt not let anyone be deprived of his love and affection because the people are two groups, “either your religious brothers or your fellow human beings”. The law of *Movasat*, then, is not about a particular group of people in a society unless a man is a foe to Muslims. Thus, financial support and charity can be extended to all citizens in a society regardless of their religion. However, here, one would ask if this law of altruism and humanitarian aid should be implemented as regards the individuals in a society based on a specific priority. In a prophetic tradition, it is noted that the help offered to someone is to be proportionate to his knowledge, and if someone whose faith is of a higher degree is found, we have to revere him more. If somebody is a man of Jihad, we would love him more. If we support someone while we know that this man is himself supporting others, we have to prioritise helping him. The Quran states: “(Charity is) for the poor who have sacrificed whatever they have in protecting the path of Allah and are unable to journey in the land.”

Despite these emphases in the Quran and prophetic traditions, the question is whether *Movasat* serves as a strategic pillar for solving the problems of society in critical universal moments, particularly in that of COVID-19 pandemic. Basically, the fundamental Islamic concepts must be seen from the point of view of civilisation-building. The concept of *Movasat*, or primordial altruism, just like many other concepts, is a civilisation-building concept. *Movasat* has a basic role in building Islamic society as one of the significant stages of the new Islamic civilisation. The Prophet (pbuh) states: “Believers love each other and care about

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their destiny just like the members of a living body that if one of its members aches, the other members express their sympathy with it fast.” Therefore, citizens’ failure to sympathise with each other can make the body of a society ill, and an ill society fails to emerge as a civilisation-building society. In its first step towards the revival of a healthy society, the Prophet encourages his followers to love each other and be sympathetic. The Quran explains the early Muslims in the following words: “But those who before them, had homes (in Medina) and had adopted the faith, show their affection to such as came to them for refuge, and entertain no desire in their hearts for things given to the (latter), but give them preference over themselves, even though poverty was their (own lot). And those saved from the covetousness of their own souls, they are the ones that achieve prosperity.”

The Prophet (pbuh) started Islamic religion with Movasat. He set the conditions in a way that the believers of Medina should have accepted the Muslims from Mecca and shared their lives, properties, and farms. This practice was not out of a law or force. If there had been no spirit of altruism and a primordial sense of support at the dawn of Islam, the religion of Mohammad would have never survived to this day. Of course, later, Movasat started to fade, and others failed to keep pace with the Prophet in this city. Despite Movasat’s high stature at the dawn of Islam, we rarely read this part of the history of Islam. Even in the time of the Caliph of Ali, he would state: “I can eat the best food, wear the best clothes and have the best life ever, but can I call myself the Emir of Believers and not share their griefs? Can I eat well, sleep well, wear whatever I want and live in a magnificent palace while others suffer?” Ali was also a rich person even before entering the office of Emir of Believers. He would make twenty-six farms, which is a huge wealth, but he would have donated all these farms to people experiencing poverty.

Koleini has related another prophetic tradition of the people who fall short of acting according to the law of Movasat that reads as follows: in the Doomsday, he will be brought to the Court of Divine Judgement with sunken eyes and chained hands, and the following words inscribed on his forehead: “Such a person is disappointed in the Divine Beneficence, and God will disgrace him…. Then, he is described

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22 Majlisi, Biḥār al-Anwār, vol. 58, p. 150.
as a person who was able to solve people’s problems and did not do so. He was able to help others, but he did not do it. This person is ordered to be sent to Hell.

Therefore, Movasat should be gradually changed into our culture and lifestyle because the rule of primordial altruism and mutual support is an efficient prescription for the empowerment of Islamic society. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some people lost their jobs who were not even part of the poor social class. Suppose today, the people act in the spirit of altruism and mutual support in the way that the Prophet’s disciples did at the dawn of Islam in sharing their properties with the immigrants. In that case, we will witness the Islamic revival’s progress in all domains. Thus, we can serve as a model for other nations. However, how can the rule of Movasat serve as a chief and strategic pillar for resolving the problems of society, particularly in times of crisis?

1. Uprooting Poverty and Reducing Social-Economic Inequality

Movasat is one of the significant solutions for uprooting poverty and establishing social justice. This solution should be analysed within the context of the intellectual system of resistance economy and religious civilisation building. Particularly, one of the pillars of a resistance economy is its people-basedness. Then, any action in the country should be taken to uproot poverty deprivation and bring prosperity to public life without limiting this prosperity only to part of people and specific classes. In such an atmosphere, people can reach the higher goals of the Islamic Society, i.e., spirituality, spiritual evolution, and moral transcendence. This is indeed an atmosphere in which the good in society is distributed accurately. Everyone has the opportunity to realise his own existential potentialities and enjoy their benefits. The state should protect the citizens against any form of oppression and not let anyone be deprived of anything. Uprooting poverty requires all citizens to note that the poor, the orphans, and the wretched people in society are a trial setting and an opportunity for spiritual refinement for the men of honour, the rich and the distinguished figures because, according to Islamic doctrines, whatever man has in command of properties are indeed the bounties endowed upon the mankind by the Lord.25 Man has been given these bounties as the vicegerent of Allah. This vicegerency is of the community in the first place, and it is only in

25 QS Ibrāhīm, 14: 32.
the next stage that this is conferred upon the individuals.\textsuperscript{26} Accordingly, private ownership of individuals is provided through their membership in the community where they live.\textsuperscript{27}

2. Job Creation and Supporting Production Cycle

At the dawn of Islam, one of the Prophet’s close disciples told an immigrant that: “I will share my house with you, I am ready to help you marry, and I will give half of my wealth to you. All these are my obligations as a Muslim.” In fact, he wanted to put the rule of primordial altruism into action. The immigrant thanked the disciple and told him, “The only favour I expect you to do for me is to show me how to have my own business in Medina to make my living.” In the Prophet’s words, the best form of infāq is empowerment. By empowering families with low income through certain purposeful economic activities, these families will have extra income and make new investments or donate. On the other hand, the income resulting from the reinvestment promotes the cycle of consumption, investment, and social solidarity. Thus, economic growth increased, and the national income rose. The best form of Movasat in society is a collective action for work and production that naturally creates wealth.\textsuperscript{28}

3. Elimination of Unnecessary Brokers

In the process of implementation of financial mutual support by people, the unnecessary mediators and brokers are eliminated, and the people play their role directly in the distribution of wealth and income. This, in turn, can reduce the expenses and problems created as a result of the brokers’ activity, on the one hand, and establish a love-based relationship among the citizens, from the poor to the rich, on the other. The direct presence of the people in the distribution field and the creation of an immediate role for them in the course of wealth distribution strengthens the sense of solidarity and love in society. Primordial altruism not only accelerates the emergence of the effects of wealth distribution. For example, the tax system of states is in one sense very similar to Movasat mechanism, though in the former, the government

\textsuperscript{26} Mohammad Baqir Sadr, \textit{Al-Islam Ya’qud al-Ḥayat} (Qom: Centre for Research and Studies of Shahid Sadr, 2000), p. 36.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 607.

\textsuperscript{28} Rajaei, Mohammad Kazem, “Balance and Imbalance of Wealth in the Hands of the Rich”, \textit{Knowledge of Islamic Economics}, no. 7 (2012).
forces the people to pay their taxes, which are gathered in the state treasury, and the taxpayers cannot immediately see the effects of their taxes in the society. However, in Islamic society, people make use of the rule of Movasat and directly take action towards resolving the existing problems and providing public welfare. Thus, people can immediately witness the effects of the just distribution of wealth in society.\(^{29}\)

**4. Strengthening Sympathy, Empathy, and Love in Society**

One of the key constituents of a healthy society is the spirit of love, sympathy, and empathy in the citizens, which in turn brings about trust and mental, vocational, social, and economic security because people are themselves the core of the society. One of Movasat’s most important achievements is the strengthening of this spirit. Ali stated that “nothing can sustain brotherhood like Movasat.”\(^{30}\) The Lord blesses such a society, as Sadeq said: “As long as our followers take care of their relations with their Lord, trust their Leaders and imams, treat their brothers in the spirit of goodness, be compassionate toward the powerless and help the poor, they will always be under the protection of the Divine. We never allow oppression; rather, we recommend that you be pious and mutually support your brothers.”\(^{31}\)

**E. Concluding Remarks**

The present essay addresses the pains of Muslim societies in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. This essay sees the law of Movasat as a suitable solution in Islamic societies for overcoming the paradox between staying at home and livelihood. Of course, the authors believe that other human societies can use this maxim as a model. In the current world situation in which the ties between countries are expanding in a complicated way, the engagement of nations in common crises is unavoidable. Then, in critical conditions, a good plan for supporting the lower social classes is needed in the face of the consequences of the existing crises. It must be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic can serve as an opportunity to move towards a suitable model of life and change our dominant lifestyle. Thus, the best style for reducing


the consequences of the universal crisis, particularly COVID-19, is the rule of mutual support and primordial altruism that has to change into the permanent culture and lifestyle for humanity. The realisation of this lifestyle can solve many economic, social and moral problems in society, such as production, lack of jobs, welfare, and so on. This can even be a great contribution to the realisation of the high goals of human societies, specifically those of Islamic society because this law can uproot poverty and establish social justice. \textit{Movasat}, or taking care of other people’s affairs and solving their problems, is among those cases highlighted in revealed religions, particularly Islam. Of course, one needs to know that this primordial altruism cannot be conducted and oriented well unless in the light of the religious teachings because the spirit of mutual support can only prevail if the people worship God and the love of the Lord exists in the hearts of the citizens. This divine love becomes manifested in society in the form of friendly relations that ground the very foundation of sacrifice and altruism.
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