

Thank God for Justice: Renewing the Spirit in Uncertain Times

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Bi ismi Allahi al rahman al rahim.

In the name of God, Who is both the essence of mercy and the most merciful

Every Muslim, at the beginning of whatever one does or intends to do, asks for the blessing of God by invoking His name in this way.

One might call this the Islamic invocation of the trinity. God, the Father is the essence of power, God the Son is the essence of mercy, and God the Holy Spirit is the essence of wisdom. Like Meister Eckhart, who succeeded St. Thomas Aquinas in the chair of theology at the University of Paris, we understand this as honoring the attributes of God Who is beyond number, beyond existence, and even Beyond Being.

My Thanksgiving Day talk today is entitled "Thank God for Justice" because justice is the combination of power, compassion, and wisdom, the Abrahamic trinity.

On the back of my card for the Abraham Federation are three quotes. The first is from Deuteronomy 16:20, "Justice. Justice, Thou Shalt Pursue." The second is from Pope Paul VI, Si vic pacem, laborate justitiam, "If you want peace, work for justice." And the third is from the Qur'an, Surah al An'am 6:115, Wa tama'at kalimatu Rabika sidqan wa 'adlan, "And the Word of your Lord is fulfilled and perfected in truth and in justice."

The central task of the great scholars in all three of the Abraham religions has been to develop holistic methodologies to explore what transcendent justice may mean in the design of God for the universe and how we creatures may best pursue it.

Justice may be defined as right order in a coherent universe. Transcendent justice assumes that the universe has purpose beyond its mere existence. Justice assumes that sentient human beings are part of this order and therefore that every human being by nature seeks justice as a higher purpose than mere life and liberty, because life and liberty are primarily products of justice. We should be thankful that we as sentient beings have both the capacity and the instinctual inclination to understand the concept of justice and that we have the life and freedom to pursue it.

Now down to the practice of justice and then we will go back again to the theory. I almost always avoid discussion of justice in the Holy Land, because emotions can distract from a higher understanding that we must shift from policies of power to a new paradigm of justice in all domestic and foreign policies. On the other hand, the Holy Land is a good case study, because the dilemmas in the Holy Land today are a microcosm of the world. If the Jews are not free to fulfill their divine destiny there, as the twentieth century's greatest spiritual leader, Rebbe Abraham Izaac Kook, prophetically said that they can, must, and will do, then there is no future for human civilization.

Almost twenty-five years ago, a close colleague of mine in congressional lobbying, Rabbi Herzl Kranz, whom many of you no doubt know as the long-time rabbi of a nearby synagogue, discussed his concern for the security of Jews in Israel. I said, "What we need is justice!" His eyes lit up and he exclaimed, "Yes, justice! The Arabs must go!" And then he gave me Rabbi Meir Kahane's book, published in 1981, *They Must Go: How Long Can Israel Survive its Malignant and Growing Arab Population?*.

Here we get to the issue of premises. As the philosopher Cicero said two thousand years ago, "Before you discuss anything whatsoever you should first agree on premises

and terminology.” Rabbi Kahane’s basic premise was his goal of an exclusivist religious state, at least for Jews, though I doubt that he would have recognized the justice of a Christian state and certainly not a so-called Islamic one.

In fact, we are dealing here with a paradigm that comprises a spectrum of three premises. In his recent book, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal*, the dean of historians of religion in America, William R. Hutchison, proposes a framework of three premises for interfaith relations. The first one is “tolerance.” This means, quite simply, “I won’t kill you yet.” The second is diversity, which is somewhat more expansive and means, “You’re here damn it, and I can’t do much about it.” The third and highest premise is “pluralism,” which means “We welcome you because we each have so much to offer and learn from each other.”

Hutchison’s thesis is that in the history of America we consistently think we are one level higher than we actually are, while most of us seem insistently to act as if we were one level lower.

If we want to aspire to, much less live in, a world of pluralism, we must find common purpose. “Pluralism by participation,” Hutchison writes, “implies a mandate for individuals and groups ... to share responsibility for the forming and implementation of the society’s agenda.” This is the difference between suicide by assimilation and both survival and prosperity by integration so that everyone can share the best of the other. Perhaps the highest wisdom of interfaith understanding and cooperation calls us to recognize the truth and wisdom of the prophets, each of whom left the same message expressed in the words of Jesus, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” John 14:16.

Last summer at the International Institute of Islamic Thought in Herndon, Virginia, twenty scholars from around the world spent a month discussing what this means as a framework for faith-based justice and faith-based reconciliation, which now is the framework for all of the IIIT’s work.

Aside for a couple of Wahhabis who were invited to provide a wide spectrum of thought,

we reached consensus on two things. First, we agreed that we should further develop methodologies and even lead the way to derive truth and justice heuristically from three sources. These are, first, haqq al yaqin, which is divine revelation, second, 'ain al yaqin, which is natural law or the Sunnat Allah observable in the physical universe, including our own human nature, and, finally, 'ilm al yaqin, which is the intellectual processing of the first two.

Second, we reached agreement on the purposes of what we might call transcendent justice or even metalaw but what Muslim scholars refer to by the traditional term maqasid al shari'ah. This is the classical Islamic normative law known variously as the maqasid or purposes, the kulliyat or universal principles, and the dururiyat or essentials of universal jurisprudence. This whole subject is clarified in my article in the current issue of *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, entitled "Human Rights in Traditionalist Islam: Legal, Political, Economic, and Spiritual Perspectives." The state of the art in the development of holistic methodologies for the study of justice is best shown by Jasser Auda's tome, *Maqasid al Shari'ah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach*, which was published this year by The International Institute of Islamic Thought as part of a whole library of books now appearing on the subject.

Among the seven irreducibly highest principles developed more than half a millennium ago by Al Shatibi, who was the greatest of the classical Islamic scholars on the subject, the first maqsud is haqq al din. During the past six hundred years, this has been ossified to mean "protection of true belief," meaning protection of Islam as an organized and politically approved religion. Beginning in 1946 with the publication of the book entitled *Treatise on Maqasid al Shari'ah* by the Grand Mufti of Tunisia, Ibn Ashur, and reaching broad acceptability today half a century later, this first principle of classical Islamic thought about justice is understood to mean "freedom of religion" in the true sense of pluralism. This is blindingly clear throughout the Qur'an but much less so in the hadith, many or most of which are either spurious or related by witnesses who had their own biases in understanding what they had heard.

Next come three sets of pairs. The first pair consists of haqq al haya and haqq al nasl,

which mean the duties, respectively, to respect the human person and life itself and to respect the nuclear family and communities at every level that derive from the sacredness of the human person. The first one includes the elaborate set of principles that define the limitations of “just war” theory. The second one includes the principle of subsidiarity, which recognizes that legitimacy expands upward from the community or nation to the state.

The second set consists of two responsibilities related to institutionalizing economic and political justice: haqq al mal and haqq al hurriyah. Throughout much of Islamdom this second pair of responsibilities has been observed, more often than not, in the breach. Even when the principles have been acknowledged, the derivative lower level, known as hajjiyat, of institutionalized implementation has been ignored.

The third pair of maqasid consists of haqq al karamah, the duty to respect human dignity especially in regard to gender equity, and haqq al ‘ilm, the duty to respect knowledge, including the secondary level of implementation known as freedom of thought, publication, and assembly. The historical trend of these last two maqasid is now strongly upward because educated Muslim women are gaining recognition as equal to men in the ijtiḥad of scriptural analysis known as the intellectual or “third” jihad: Wa jihidhum bihi jihatdan kabiran, “And struggle to understand it [divine revelation] in a great jihad” (Surah al Furqan 25:52).

Beyond the intellectual development of these universal principles, which increasingly in the West are now known expansively as natural law, and beyond the philosophical debate over whether positivist or man-made law is the only kind of law accessible to human knowledge, is what Yves R. Simon in his book, *The Tradition of Natural Law: A Philosopher’s Perspective*, on page xxi calls “a connatural grasp of the idea via inclination.”

Here we come to the essence of my talk and the real reason why we should be thankful for our awareness of a transcendent justice and of the responsibilities that this enjoins upon us. The grand master in this aspect of justice is the Rebbe Abraham Izaac Kook,

whose wisdom has so grievously been distorted and perverted by his self-styled followers, the Gush Emunim in the modern Settlers' Movement. He was Chief Rabbi of Palestine from 1919 until the beginning of the first great Palestinian national-liberation movement in 1935. He taught that every religion contains the seed of its own perversion, because humans are free to divert their worship from God to themselves. The greatest evil is always the perversion of the good, and the surest salvation from evil is always the return to prophetic origins. Rebbe Kook's wisdom has been collected in Abraham Isaac Kook, *The Lights of Penitence, The Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems*, translation and introduction by Ben Zion Bokser (Paulist Press: N.Y., Ramsey, Toronto, 1978), published in *The Classics of Western Spirituality: A Library of the Great Spiritual Masters* under the supervision of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Fazlur Rahman, Huston Smith, and others.

The fundamentalist Gush Emunim make the sacrilegious error of turning his spiritual teaching into a call for secular nationalism of the most extreme kind. Abraham Isaac Kook's entire life spoke his message that only in the Holy Land of Israel can the genius of Hebraic prophecy be revived and the Jewish people bring the creative power of God's love in the form of justice and unity to every person and to all mankind. "For the disposition of the Israelite nation," he asserted, "is the aspiration that the highest measure of justice, the justice of God, shall prevail in the world." Universally recognized as the leading spokesman of spiritual Zionism, Rebbe Kook went to Jaffa from Poland in 1904 to perfect the people and land of Israel by bringing out the "holy sparks" in every person, group, and ideology in order to make way for the advent of the Messiah.

This was the exact opposite of "secular Zionism," which resulted from the assimilationist movement of 19th century Europe, compounded by the devastating blow of the holocaust to traditionalist Jewish faith. Thus alienated from their own culture, and vulnerable to modern nationalist demagoguery, a growing portion of the Jewish nation came to elevate control over physical land to an ultimate value and goal, and therefore to transform the land of Israel into a golden calf.

As a Lurianic Cabbalist, committed to the social renewal that both confirms and

transcends halakha, Rebbe Kook emphasized, first of all, that religious experience is certain knowledge of God, from which all other knowledge can be at best merely a reflection, and that this common experience of “total being” or “unity” of all religious people is the only adequate medium for God’s message through the Jewish people, who are the “microcosm of humanity.”

“If individuals cannot summon the world to God,” proclaimed Rebbe Kook, “then a people must issue the call. The people must call out of its inner being, as an individual of great spiritual stature issues the call from his inner being. This is found only among the Jewish people, whose commitment to the Oneness of God is a commitment to the vision of universality in all its far-reaching implications and whose vocation is to help make the world more receptive to the divine light by bearing witness to the Torah in the world.” This, he taught, is the whole purpose of Israel, which stands for shir el, the “song of God.” It is schlomo, which means peace or wholeness, Solomon’s Song of Songs.

But he warned, again “prophetically,” that, “when an idea needs to acquire a physical base, it tends to descend from its height. In such an instance it is thrust toward the earthly, and brazen ones come and desecrate its holiness. Together with this, however, its followers increase, and the physical vitality becomes strikingly visible. Each person then suffers: The stubbornness of seeking spiritual satisfaction in the outer aspect of things enfeebles one’s powers, fragments the human spirit, and leads the stormy quest in a direction where it will find emptiness and disappointment. In disillusionment, the quest will continue in another direction. When degeneration leads one to embrace an outlook on life that negates one’s higher vision, then one becomes prey to the dark side within. The spiritual dimension becomes enslaved and darkened in the darkness of life.”

Rebbe Kook warned that “the irruption of spiritual light from its divine source on uncultivated ground yields the perverse aspect of idolatry. It is for this reason that we note to our astonishment the decline of religious Judaism in a period of national renaissance.” “Love of the nation,” he taught, “or more broadly, for humanity, is adorned at its source with the purest ideals, which reflect humanity and nationhood in their

noblest light, but if a person should wish to embrace the nation in its decadent condition, its coarser aspects, without inner illumination from its ancient, higher light, he will soon take into himself filth and lowliness and elements of evil that will turn to bitterness in a short span of history of but a few generations. This is the narrow state to which the community of Israel will descend prior to an awakening to the true revival.”

“By transgressing the limits,” Rebbe Kook prophesied, the leaders of Israel may bring on a holocaust. But this will merely precede a revival. “As smoke fades away, so will fade away all the destructive winds that have filled the land, the language, the history, and the literature.” Always following his warning was the reminder of God’s covenant. “In all of this is hiding the presence of the living God. It is a fundamental error for us to retreat from our distinctive excellence, to cease recognizing ourselves as chosen for a divine vocation. We are a great people and we have blundered greatly, and, therefore, we suffered great tribulation; but great also is our consolation. Our people will be rebuilt and established through the divine dimension of its life. Then they will call out with a mighty voice to themselves and to their people: ‘Let us go and return to the Lord!’ And this return will be a true return”.

We cannot know whether the catastrophe that Rebbe Kook foresaw was merely a warning, or whether the true return is already taking place, but he was confident of the end result. The Rebbe always sharply defended the validity of both Christianity and Islam as religions in the plan of God, and proclaimed that, “the brotherly love of Esau and Jacob [Christians and Jews], and Isaac and Ishmael [Jews and Muslims], will assert itself above all the confusion [and turn] the darkness to light.”

For this we should be thankful. Al hamdu li Allah, wa astaghfiru Allah inna Allahu ghafur wa rahim.

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