

Analysis of Social Elements 1

We have said that to explain the fact that religion is one of the norms of history, it is necessary to analyse the elements forming society so that we may know what these elements are and in what forms and norms they are combined. To answer these questions we have chosen the following Qur'anic verse

When your Lord said to the angels: 'I am placing in the earth a vicegerent,' they said: 'Will You put there one who will make there mischief and will shed blood, while we proclaim Your praise and glorify You?' (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:30)

When we study this verse, we observe that Allah informs the angels that He has laid the foundation of a society on the earth. We naturally want to know what elements form this society. From the expressions used in this verse by the Qur'an the following three main elements can be derived

- (i) Man
- (ii) Earth or nature as a whole as indicated by the words:

"I am placing a vicegerent in the earth "

Here the second element is the earth or nature as a whole, the first element being man whom Allah has appointed His vicegerent in the earth.

(iii) The third element is a mental bond which binds man to the earth or nature on the one hand and to other fellow human beings on the other. This bond has been called by the Qur'an vicegerency. These are the three elements which form society on the earth: (i) man, (ii) nature,

(iii) Vicegerency – the bond which binds man to the earth and to his fellow human beings.

When we look at human societies, we find that the first two elements are common to all of them. You cannot find a single society in which man may not be living with his fellow beings, or not living on the earth or not having a contact with nature in order to play his role.

As far as these two elements are concerned, all societies are alike. But as for the third element, each

society has its own variety of bond. Societies, in other words, differ in the nature and the form of the bond which they have.

Thus the third element, that is the element of a mental bond is changeable and it differs from society to society. Every society operates it differently. This bond can be expressed in two ways. According to one way of expression it has four sides and according to the other three only.

The four-sided relationship is that which binds man and nature with other men. Here also we have three clear sides, namely nature, man and the bond existing between man and nature on the one hand and between man and his fellow human beings on the other. If we presume that there is a fourth side also, even then prima facie there will be three sides only, the fourth side being outside the social frame and not a part of society.

Anyhow, the expression that this relationship has four sides makes it necessary that the fourth side also should be regarded as one of the fundamental factors of social relations. That is what is meant by the Qur'an when it gives the name of vicegerency to the four social dimensions.

From the viewpoint of the Qur'an vicegerency is a social relationship. If we study and analyse it, we can say that it has four elements, for vicegerency necessitates the existence of:

- (i) One who appoints the vicegerent,
- (ii) The things in respect of which the vicegerent is appointed,
- (iii) The vicegerent himself.

In this case the vicegerent is man. The things in respect of which he has been appointed vicegerent, are the earth and all that exists on the face of it, including the human beings. Thus besides man and his relation with his fellow men and nature, the fourth side necessary for the materialization of vicegerency is Allah, Who appoints the vicegerent. As such the social relationship of vicegerency consists of the following four sides:

- (i) The one who appointed the vicegerent, that is Allah; (ii) The vicegerent, that is man.
- (iii) and (iv) That which has been put under the charge of the vicegerent, that is nature and human beings.

As a result of his monotheistic conception of the world, man acquires a special outlook on the life and the universe. It is with this outlook that he says: There is no deity and no lord of the world and life but Allah, and that man has to play no role in his life except that of the vicegerent, for Allah has appointed him His deputy on the earth and has assigned to him the position of leadership.

Man's relation with nature is not that of the owner and the owned. In fact the relation between them is

that of the trustee and the trust. Irrespective of their social position one man's relation with his fellow man is that of the two colleagues performing the same duty of the vicegerent of Allah, and not that of the master and the slave, nor that of master and the servant. This description of the four sides of the social relationship of vicegerency to which the Qur'an has referred, is closely related to the conception of cosmos in Islam.

In contrast to this Qur'anic conception, there is another idea of a three-sided relationship which links up man with his fellow beings and nature but rejects the fourth side (Allah) and makes this social relationship devoid of its fourth dimension. As a result of ignoring the fourth dimension the whole relationship is upset and the entire social structure changes.

Man's lordship over his fellow beings resulting from overlooking the fourth dimension and regarding man alone as the source of all values, has appeared in various forms over history. Different forms of ownership and varying degrees of man's domination over other men have manifested themselves on the scene and stage of life.

If we minutely compare these two relationships with each other and make a comparative study of the four-sided relationship (man + nature + relation between man and nature + Allah) and the three-sided relationship (man + nature + relation between man and nature), we will observe that the addition of the fourth side is not merely a numerical question, but this addition brings about a fundamental change in the basis of social relations and the structure of the other three sides.

Therefore the addition of the fourth side should not be regarded as merely a numerical addition. In fact this addition gives the other three sides a new spirit and a fresh significance, and brings about a basic change in the mutual relationship of the four sides.

In fact the addition of the fourth side changes the whole structure of the social relations. Therefore in regard to social relations we can act either according to the system of the four-sided relationship or according to the system of the three-sided relationship.

The Qur'an believes in the four-sided relationship only, as can be inferred from the above quoted verse, for man's appointment as the vicegerent of Allah amounts to the confirmation of the four-sided social relationship.

The Qur'an not only believes in it, but also regards it as one of the norms of history. As we have seen in a previously quoted verse, the Qur'an regards religion as a norm of history. The four-sided social relationship being nothing but an application of religion to life, it is one of the historical norms. Now let us see how it can be so.

The Qur'an presents this relationship in two ways: Sometimes it describes it as a Divine act because vicegerency is Allah's favour bestowed on His creation. The Qur'an expresses it thus:

"I am about to place a vicegerent in the earth."

In this verse the four-sided relationship has been described as Allah's favour to man and Allah's positive role in it, has been stressed. Sometimes the same four-sided relationship is advanced from another angle. In the following verse it has been declared that this relationship has been accepted by man himself:

We offered the trust (vicegerency of Allah) to the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it. Surely he has proved a tyrant and a fool. (Surah al-Ahzab, **33:72**)

The trust referred to in this verse is the same as the vicegerency. This high position was granted by Allah to man who accepted it. The acceptance of the trust means that man was chosen by Allah to be His vicegerent and deputy, and he accepted that heavy responsibility. This responsibility is the same as the four-sided relationship. It is sometimes observed from the angle of the bestower of this favour. In this case it is said:

"I am about to place a vicegerent in the earth";

sometimes it is observed from the angle of the acceptor of this responsibility. Then it is said:

"We offered the trust to the heavens, the earth and the hills . . . "

This trust which was offered to man and which he accepted was not, according to our interpretation, some kind of duty to be discharged or some order to be obeyed, for the same trust was offered to the hills, to the heavens and to the earth also. Evidently a duty and obedience have no meaning in respect of them. That shows that the offer does not mean the enunciation of any law to be observed. What is meant is that this favour of Allah looked everywhere for an object which may be its nature and historical structure be suitable for its application. The hills were not suitable to receive this favour.

The heavens and the earth were not compatible with the four-sided relationship and could not shoulder the responsibility of this Divine trust, that is the vicegerency of Allah. Hence an offer was made to man, who accepted it in the sense that the four-sided relationship was made a part of his creational structure and his natural and historical development.

Hence this verse refers to a historical norm a norm of the third form which can be resisted and contravened. It is not one of those norms which cannot be resisted even for a short time. It is a part of human nature and one can rise against one's nature at least temporarily. The Qur'an has hinted at this reality, and so after mentioning this historical norm it adds:

"And man assumed it. Surely he has proved a tyrant and a fool."

By using the expression, '***a tyrant and a fool***' the Qur'an has thrown light on the fact that any arrogant

and foolish man can withstand this norm and can content with it negatively. We find a similar expression at the end of that verse which describes the true human nature. In that verse also the Qur'an first says:

"So set your face to religion as a man by nature upright . . ."

and then adds:

"But most men do not know".

Just as we deduced from the verse of true human nature that religion was a norm of life and a norm of history, from this verse also we can deduce that the relation between religion and life consists of a four-sided social relationship described by the Qur'an as the trust and the vicegerency. This social relationship also in its Qur'anic sense is a norm of history. In fact both the verses amount to the same thing. In the first verse the Qur'an says:

So set your face to religion as a man by nature upright - the nature framed by Allah in which He has created man. There is no altering of the laws of Allah's creation. That is the self-sustaining way. (Surah al-Rum, 30:30)

The expression of self-sustaining way has been used to lay stress on the true concept of religion. The Qur'an wants to say that it is religion that forms man's basic nature and the cornerstone of his history. Religion regulates man's life.

The religion has been described as the self-sustaining way because it is religion which acquaints us with the conception of self-sustenance in life. Here self-sustenance is a concise term representing four-sided social relationship at which the two verses, one mentioning vicegerency and the other mentioning trust hint.

Religion is a norm of life and history. It introduces the fourth dimension in life with a view to bring about a basic change in the social set-up, not merely to increase the number of dimensions.

This concept that religion is a norm of history is deducible from the above-quoted two verses of the Qur'an. Now how can we form a more clear and comprehensive picture of this norm and how can we know the role of vicegerency and the establishment of religion as a norm of history in life? How can the role of the fourth side of the social relationship as a norm of history be accepted? How can religion have had a basic role in man's life over history?

In order to be able to understand these points we must have the knowledge of the two stable elements of the social relationship. One of these two elements is man and his fellow beings and the other is nature or the universe. We call these two elements stable because they are the part of the three-sided as well as the four-sided relationship. In order to know the role of the fourth side, that is Allah in the structure of man's social relationship, we first must know the role of these two stable elements. What is man's role in the process of history?

The Qur'an has its own views about man, history and the ways of life. What according to it is man's role in social relations? What is the role of nature in them? How does nature influence the social relationship and how can the role of man and nature be determined? If we study these questions, we can find out the role of the fourth side which is the distinguishing feature of the four-sided relationship as opposed to the three-sided relationship.

This study will show to what extent the role of the fourth side is essential, and to what extent the law of history and man's own structure make the existence of this element necessary for the formation of man's four-sided social relationship. To understand this law of history it is necessary to look at the role of man and nature in the formation of history from the viewpoint of the Qur'an. We propose to deal with this question later.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/trends-history-quran-muhammad-baqir-al-sadr/analysis-social-elements-1>