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The meaning of work in the Islamic tradition*

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^{*} This note addresses the issue of work in the Islamic tradition. By Islamic tradition the author means the Islamic normative framework rather than the description of the reality of today's Muslim societies. In many countries Muslims are still fighting for a decent life and the prerequisites to decent work.

1— Some basic Islamic concepts

Seven Islamic concepts are briefly presented here because they will guide the discussions on the meaning of work in the Islamic tradition, and also, later on, on the issues of Islamic work ethics (IWE) and social justice. These basic concepts are: rahma, karāma, islām, īmān, ihsān, jihād and dīn.

1.1— Rahma (رجمة): the true love

Rahma is a concept that occupies a central position in Islam. God tells Prophet Muhammad in the Qur'ān: "And We have not sent you but as a rahma to the entire universe"¹. God is the source of rahma. Muslims are requested to start all their sayings and doings by the sentence: "Bismillah Ar-Rahmān, Ar-Rahīm". Rahma comes from the same root as the word "rahim", which means the protective womb of a mother. It has been translated by classical and modern scholars into the words mercy, beneficence, benevolence, compassion, grace, or care. It has also been translated into a word that encompasses all these qualities and that is simply love². Muslims are enjoined to begin all their activities with the statement "In the name of God, the Loving, the Love-Giving" which also opens every chapter of the Qur'ān. Muslims are therefore supposed to constantly remember that all what they say or do must be governed by rahma; they are exhorted to exhibit rahma in their lives towards all creatures of God.

1.2— Karāma (ڪرامة): human dignity

Karāma is the Arabic word for dignity. The human being is granted karāma by the Lord who says in the Qur'ān: "And surely We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam"³.

1.3— Islām (إسلام): the road to peace

Islām is usually translated into the word submission. A Muslim is the one who submits him- or herself solely to God, to His Will and to His Law revealed by His numerous messengers and prophets. In that sense, for Muslims all envoys of God and their followers are Muslims. Islām is a liberating submission since, in the same time, it is resistance to all forms of false deity, be it the authority of a despot, the power of money, the passion of self, or anything else.

The word Islām comes from the same root as "silm – سلام" and "salām – سلام", meaning peace. Therefore Islām may be translated as "Seeking peace near God".

There is also a formal, legal meaning of the word Islām specified by a hadith (saying) of the Prophet, known as "Hadith Gibrīl" because it was said in the presence of Archangel Gabriel: "Islām is (1) to testify that there is no other divinity than God and Muhammed is the Messenger of God, (2) to perform the prayer, (3) to pay the Zakāt (almsgiving), (4) to fast in the month of Ramadhān, and (5) to make the pilgrimage to the House of God (the Kāba in Mecca) if one is able to do so."⁴

1.4— Īmān (إيمان): a matter of belief

Īmān is about the belief. The prophet defines it in "Hadith Gibrīl" as: "to believe in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, the Last Day, and in divine destiny, be it good or bad"⁵.

1.5— Ihsān (إحسان): the sum of virtues

Ihsān is the highest rank of the Islamic faith. It was also defined by the Prophet in the same "Hadith Gibrīl" as "to worship God as if you are seeing him, because if you do not see Him, He sees you" ⁶.

Ihsān, a quite difficult concept to translate, is considered as the sum of virtues since it covers five of them: (1) the good, (2) the fair, (5) the true, (4) the right and (5) the beautiful.

1.6— Jihād (جهاد): an effort in/out

Jihād originates from the root verb jahada, meaning to make an effort. The derivative verbs are jāhada, meaning to engage in a mutual effort, and ijtahada, meaning to make an effort for a specific goal such as solving a problem, answering a question, passing an exam and so on. From this comes the word ijtihād which refers to the reasoning, interpretation and projection of Islamic foundational texts in a specific context.

Jihād may be defined as an effort, of any kind (heart/tongue/hand) that is permissible, made in the way of God (intention), in order to fight against (goal): (1) all forms of evil inside oneself (greater jihād), (2) all forms of injustice outside oneself (smaller jihād).

1.7— Dīn (دين): a way of life

Dīn is the Arabic equivalent of religion. In the Islamic tradition dīn is understood as the divine way that is suitable for all humanity, anytime and anywhere. It covers the realms of: (1) Doctrine (aqida – عقيدة) which defines the faith and sets the system of beliefs; (2) Law (shari'a – عقيدة), which regulates worships (ibādāt – عبادات –), common practices (ādāt – عادات –), dealings (mu'amalāt – عادات –) and legal provisions (jināyāt – جنايات –); and (3) Ethics (akhlāq – معاملات) which deals with matters of morality.

2— An operational definition for work

The Arabic equivalent of work is 'amal (عمل). This word or one of its derivatives appears hundreds of times in the Qur'ān.

Work may be defined as "an *effort*, deserving *reward*, made within a *time* interval, with prior *knowledge*, in order to achieve a specific *task*, for a predefined *purpose*".

The effort can be either physical or mental. Thus defined, it encompasses: acting, doing, making, producing, saying, thinking, reflecting, etc.

Work originates from the jawārih (الجوارح), which could be translated by the "effective organs" such as the hand and the foot, but also the tongue, the brain and the heart.

Work includes not only words and acts of commission (af'āl – أفعال) but also words and acts of omission (turūk – تروك), since an effort is necessary to refrain purposely from saying or doing something.

2.1— Work has a purpose

Any activity is considered as being work if it is purposeful, i.e. guided by an orientation and intent. The Prophet said: "Works are by intention and everyone shall have what he/she intended"⁷.

For the Muslim the purpose of work is related to the purpose of his whole life, which is to assume the responsibility of khilāfa on Earth. At the creation of Adam, God said to the Angels: "I am going to appoint a khalīfa on the Earth"⁸, khalīfa meaning here vicegerent, deputy, successive authority, or trustee. Assuming the responsibility of khilāfa requires the willingness and capacity to please God by obeying Him and implementing His order, and to spread rahma over the creatures of God by serving them and caring for them.

God also says in the Qur'ān: "It is He who made you from the Earth and let you make of it a convenient place to spend your life-time"⁹. The Arabic word used in this verse is ista'marakum (استعمركم) which, according to Muslim scholars, conveys the meanings of life-time ('umr – عمر) and development ('imāra – عمارة) in the sense of farming, manufacturing, building, producing goods,

trading, etc. The work of development must therefore be congruent with the basic requirements of life for humanity (present and future generations), hence sustainable.

2.2— Work is task-oriented

Work can be compulsory (necessity) or optional (volunteering). It can be a paid or an unpaid activity. It is necessarily about achieving a task, be it economic, social, political, religious, moral, or whatever. This task must comply with the purpose already mentioned.

2.3- Work is knowledge-based

Work must be knowledge-based. In the Qur'ān, the order of God is: "Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge"¹⁰. On the other hand, knowledge must also be work-oriented, in other words useful. In the daily invocations of the Muslim, he or she always asks God for both "a useful knowledge and a righteous work".

2.4— Work is time consuming

Time is considered as a limited resource and a valuable commodity to be consumed efficiently. Time must be used in a meaningful and productive way.

Just as it is mandatory in Islam to perform zakāt (almsgiving) on any valuable commodity in order to purify it and to contribute to social solidarity, it is also required to perform zakāt on time by doing useful voluntary unpaid work.

Any human activity is considered as work if it involves a consciousness of time. Even recreation, entertainment, and leisure may be considered as work provided the purpose of these activities is not to waste or "kill" time, but to use the spare-time in order to recover energy.

Islam imparts a sharp consciousness of time on its followers, since whatever activity the Muslim is performing, his daily life is punctuated by acts of worship such as the five daily prayers. In fact, prayer is described in the Qur'ān as a "timed prescription"¹¹ (کتابا موقوتا).

In the Islamic tradition there is no "work-free" day, devoted for instance to the Lord, actually all days of the week are devoted to Him. It is true that Friday is a blessed day in Islam, it is the day of congregation (jumu'a – جعة), it may be considered as a "holiday"; but it could be a working-day. In

fact, God says in the Qur'ān: "O you who believe, when the call to prayer is made on Friday, come to the remembrance of God and leave off business; that is better for you, if you know. And when the prayer is finished, then disperse in the land and seek the favour of God. And remember God frequently so that you may prosper."¹² In Muslim countries, Friday or another day of the week, is declared a "job-free" day, this is not for religious reasons but rather for considerations of public health and for the wellbeing of the society.

2.5— Work is effort making

Work is an effort. But in the Islamic tradition it is felt as a positive load rather than a negative burden. Work is not considered as a penance or a punishment of Adam and Eve after leaving Paradise for Earth. The first parents of humanity were pardoned and granted free choice to do good or bad deeds. Work is viewed as a way to erase one's daily sins. The Prophet said: "The one who, at the end of the day, is exhausted by the work of his hands, is forgiven by God"¹³.

2.6—Work is reward-motivated

In the Islamic tradition work is necessarily rewarded in this worldly life or/and in the hereafter.

God says in the Qur'ān: "Whoever does the weight of an atom of good work will see it, and whoever does the weight of an atom of bad work will see it."¹⁴ He says: "We do not waste the wage of whoever does a good work."¹⁵ He also says: "Whoever works for good, man or woman, and is a believer, we will surely grant him or her a good life and reward them a wage in accordance with the best of what they worked."¹⁶

God orders the Prophet to say to his companions: "Work and God will surely see your work, and His Messenger, and the believers; and you will be returned to Him who knows the unseen and the visible, and then He will inform you of what you have worked."¹⁷

The believer's expectations are more focused at the reward in the hereafter, but he is asked not to forget the reward in this worldly life.

The order of God in the Qur'ān is: "And seek the abode of the hereafter through what God has given you, and do not forget your part in this world. Do good to others as God has done good to you, and do not try to spread corruption on Earth. Surely God does not like corrupters."¹⁸

A wise person said: "Work for your worldly life as if you were going to live forever, and work for your hereafter as if you were going to die tomorrow".

The Prophet said: "Anything you sow or plant that will benefit a bird, a human being or an animal is an act of charity."¹⁹ He also said: "If the Hour of Resurrection comes whilst you have a shoot in your hand, and if you still can plant it, then do it."²⁰

3-Work is a human activity

3.1— Activity of other creatures

In the Islamic tradition only human activity with a freely predefined purpose is called work. The activity of other creatures has a purpose that is predetermined by the Creator. God says in the Qur'ān: "Have you not seen that to God prostrate all who are in the heavens and in the earth, the sun and the moon, the stars and the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and many people?"²¹ All creatures of God are therefore bound to worship Him, except human beings who were given the choice to do it or not, and many of them do it.

3.2— Acts of God

There are significant differences in the Islamic tradition between the acts of God and those of human beings. The acts of God are acts of creation ex nihilo, direct or indirect. Evoking the creation of Adam, God says in the Qur'ān: "He created him from dust, then said to him: "Be". And he is."²² The present is used here "and he is" because the act of creation is continuous, not finished.

Unlike the acts of God, those of human beings are never acts of creation from ex nihilo. They are always acts of transformation, sometimes in a creative way: matter to matter, matter to energy, energy to matter or energy to energy.

An act of God is not called work in the Islamic tradition, for at least two reasons:

1- Work is reward-motivated. God does not expect reward from anyone for His acts, as stated in a Qur'ānic verse: "O mankind, it is you who stand in need of God. As for God, He is above all need, worthy of praise."²³

2- Work is an effort which necessarily leads to tiredness then to drowsiness and sleep. God says in the Qur'ān: "Neither drowsiness overtakes Him nor sleep"²⁴.

The Qur'ān describes the creation of the Universe as follows: "Your Lord is God, Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and then firmly established Himself on the throne."²⁵ Two comments are necessary here:

a) The notions of "days" and "throne" are not perceived by Muslims as corresponding to human space and time. For them God proceeds and transcends space and time. He created the space-time framework;

b) Muslims believe that God "established Himself on the throne" not to rest and recover from fatigue. God says in another verse of the Qur'ān: "We created the heavens and the earth and all what is between them in six days, and no weariness touched Us."²⁶

4— The value of work

4.1— Work, an evidence of faith

Work is often associated with the faith of the believer in tens of Qur'ānic verses and in many sayings of the Prophet. Faith is viewed as both doctrine and work (الإمان عقيدة وعمل).

The statement "those who believe and perform righteous work" appears in the Qur'ān over fifty times. For example, at the end of Surat Maryam (Chapter Mary), God says: "On those who believe and work deeds of righteousness, will God Most Gracious bestow love."²⁷

The Prophet said: "Īmān has seventy odd branches. The uppermost of all these is to testify that there is no true divinity except God, while the least of them is the removal of a harmful object from the road."²⁸

Muslim scholar Al-Hasan Al-Basri (642-728) said: "Īmān is not by wishful thinking or outward trappings; it is rather a conviction in the heart confirmed by work."²⁹

4.2— Work, an act of devotion

Work may be considered as an act of worship (ibāda – عبادة) if it is performed to please God and to serve His creatures, as will be seen in the following sections. Muslims are advised in the Qur'ān not to spend the whole night performing supererogatory prayer, even if it is stated that the hours of the night are more suitable for prayer, the reason being to save one's energy for the hard work and the prolonged occupation of day time.

4.3— Work, a form of jihād

If work is an effort to please God and serve His creatures, in other words with the intention to be in the way of God, then it can be equated to jihād as defined earlier. In fact many texts confirm this interpretation.

A man who passed near the companions of the Prophet was showing a great deal of activity and dynamism; they were impressed and said: "If only this was in the way of God! The Prophet replied: If this man is striving for his young children, then it is in the way of God, and if he is striving for his old parents, then it is in the way of God, and if he is striving for himself to remain chaste, then it is in the way of God, but if he is striving to seek splurge and show off, then it is in the way of Satan."³⁰

In another circumstance, the Prophet said: "The one who strives for the widow and the poor is like the one who performs jihād in the way of God and like the one who spends his night praying and his day fasting."³¹

The second Caliph Omar said: "The place where I would prefer dying is while struggling for the sustenance of my children."³²

5— Work as a necessary paid job

5.1— Earning a decent living is an obligation

One form of work is aimed at maintaining and supporting oneself and family and providing basic subsistence need. In this form, work is performed against an amount of money called ajr (أجر) in Arabic; that is remuneration, wage, pay, salary. But another ajr for that work is also expected in the hereafter.

Work aimed at guaranteeing decent living conditions is an obligation in Islam. The Prophet said: "The best food man eats is what he earns working with his own hands and the Prophet of God David ate from what he earned with the work of his hands."³³

Laziness is disliked in Islam and anyone who has the capacity and the possibility to work is not allowed to beg his livelihood or rely on private or public assistance. The Muslim in his/her daily prayer invokes God to protect him/her from laziness.

The Prophet said: "It is better for one of you to take his rope, to go and fetch a bunch of firewood on his back and sell it than to beg from people whether they give him or not."³⁴

The Muslim is not entitled to give up working to earn a living even for worshiping God. Once the Caliph Omar entered the mosque and found people retreating and devoting their time only to prayer, relying on the community for their living. He ordered them: "Do not refrain from seeking a livelihood and say God grant me sustenance. You know that the sky does not rain gold and silver."³⁵ The Caliph Omar also said: "Seek the bounty of God and do not be a burden on one another."³⁶

5.2— All lawful jobs are valuable

In the Islamic tradition there is no hierarchy of values associated with the various types of lawful jobs. There is no preference for intellectual over manual work, for skilled over menial work, for outover in-house work, or for trading over farming or manufacturing. There is no degrading profession. When lawful, work is honourable whatever it is about. The diversity of/in work is related to diversity in predisposition and aptitude of human beings. Everybody is predestined to what he/she is best suited for (كلُّ لِما يُسَرَّ لِه).

Learning crafts and exerting them is considered by Muslim scholars³⁷ as a communal obligation (fardh kifaya – فرض كفاية) because they are necessary for the common good.

All prophets while assuming their divine mission exerted a profession. They were craftsmen and ate from their hands. You find the farmer like Adam, Job and Jethro, the hunter like Ishmael, the fisherman like Jonas, the shepherd like Saleh, Isaac, Jacob and Moses, the baker like Ezekiel, the carpenter like Noah, Zechariah and Jesus, the weaver like Elijah, the tailor like Enoch, the trader like Hūd, the smith and armourer like David, the administrator like Joseph and Aaron. Prophet Mohamed worked as shepherd in his early life. Later on he worked as trader and run the business of his wife to be Khadidja, and when he was at home he always engaged in housework.

5.3— Four basic requirements for a good job

Karāma: dignity in work, work in dignity

If work contributes in protecting the dignity of the human being and in saving him from the humiliation of being a burden on others, work has to be undertaken in an environment and under conditions that safeguard the dignity of the human being. Any work that fails to do so is forbidden in Islam. Worth mentioning are the professions that objectify man or woman and alienating conditions that dehumanize the worker for the sake of productivity and the logic of unlimited profit.

One fundamental aspect of dignity is usefulness. This is an attribute of the human being that covers his/her whole life and accompanies him/her from birth to death. The believer is requested to develop this quality as much as possible. It is stated in a hadith of the Prophet that "the most loved by God are those who are useful to people"³⁸.

Losing the sense of usefulness is losing the meaning of life and the attachment to it. This can lead to self-immolation as in the case of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid (Tunisia) who was the trigger of the "2011 Arab spring", and the employee of France Telecom – Orange, who wrote in his letter preceding the suicide: "I am useless (Je suis en trop)".

The usefulness of the human being must not be job-related as it is the case in today's culture, where the labour jargon strengthens this relation. When you cease your professional occupation your are retired, a word close in meaning to tired, used, and useless. In French you are retreated (retraité), losing your active role in society. In Arabic you are among the seated (mutaqā'id – متقاعد) losing your capacity to stand up and act.

Itqān: a technical aspect of Ihsān

Itqān is the attitude and behaviour of professionalism, which is to perform a work as well as technically achievable. Muslims are ordered to learn a profession and to be trained for a craft. The Prophet said: "God likes when one of you does a work he/she achieves it in a professional way"³⁹. He also said: "God likes the believer who is professional (has a profession)"⁴⁰. Caliph Omar said:

"Sometimes I see a man and I like him. Then I ask if he has a profession. When they say no, he falls in my eyes."⁴¹

Amāna: a sense of responsibility

Capacity is not enough. Responsibility that involves trust, honesty, sincerity and integrity matters too in order to achieve a good work. When Prophet Moses met with the daughter of Prophet Shu'ayb and she came to know him, she discovered in him two qualities: capacity and responsibility. As related by the Qur'ān, she asked her father to recruit him for a job and said: "O my father! Hire him! The best one you can employ is the strong and trusty"⁴².

The Prophet said: "Everyone of you is a shepherd, and everyone one of you is responsible for his flock." $^{\!\!\!\!\!\!^{43}}$

Any act of cheating, bribery or another form of corruption is condemned in Islam. The Prophet said: "The one who cheats us is not one of us"⁴⁴. He said: "Fulfil the trust to the one who trusted you, and do not betray the one who betrayed you."⁴⁵ He also said: "The best earning is the one made by the hands of an honest worker"⁴⁶; and "The honest trader will be resuscitated in the Day of Resurrection with the prophets, the truth lovers and the martyrs."⁴⁷

'Adl: an imperative of justice

Dignity, capacity and responsibility cannot be implemented in an environment lacking justice, and notably fairness towards the worker.

Justice implies that the worker is not overloaded and assigned tasks that he/she cannot bear. We read in the Qur' $\bar{a}n$ that: "God does not burden anyone, except with something within his/her capacity."⁴⁸

The Prophet said: "Your servants are your brothers. God has put them in your care, so feed them with what you eat, clothe them with what you wear, and do not burden them beyond their capacity; if you assign them for an unbearable burden, then help them."⁴⁹ He also said: "Anytime you alleviate your servant in his/her work you will be rewarded for it."⁵⁰

5.4— Haqq: the inseparable "duty-right" couple

Islamic tradition may be perceived as focusing on duties and not enough on rights. This is a false perception since in this tradition right is inseparable from duty. The Arabic word haqq (حق) used for right is also used for duty, as shown in the following two Qur'ānic verses:

1- "Prescribed for you when death approaches anyone of you if he/she leaves wealth, is that he/she should make a bequest for the parents and near relatives according to what is acceptable, this being a duty (haqq-an) upon the righteous."⁵¹

2- "Give the relative his right (haqq-ahu), and also the poor and the traveller, and do not spend wastefully." 52

The word wājib (واجب) commonly used in Arabic for duty conveys rather the notion of legal obligation.

The Muslim worker has duties. He or she must honour his/her work contract following God's injunction: "O you who believe, fulfil the contracts."⁵³ The work provider is also requested to do so.

In return the worker has rights. One of them is that he or she must be paid correctly and with no delay. The Prophet reported in a hadith that God will take as an adversary "a man who hired an employee, got the job done and did not give him his wage"⁵⁴. He also said: "Pay the employee before his sweat dries"⁵⁵.

6- Work as a voluntary act of goodness

Another form of work is the charitable unpaid work of goodness (عمل الخي). The reward for this type of work is in the hereafter.

6.1— Seven categories of work of goodness

Any work that provides rahma to the creatures of God is considered as a work of goodness. There are countless types of work that meet this aim and which could be grouped in the seven following categories. Between brackets is the modern categorization:

- 1) Call to God (missionary action)
- 2) Help the weak, assist the needy, and relieve the afflicted (humanitarian action)
- 3) Defend the victim of injustice (protection and promotion of human rights)
- 4) Restore the bonds (conflict transformation)
- 5) Approve the good and reprobate the bad (civic action)
- 6) Take care of animals (protection and promotion of animal rights)
- 7) Take care of all other creatures (protection and promotion of the environment)

6.2— Twenty-one principles for the work of goodness

These are twenty-one principles for the work of goodness, grouped in seven chapters, established in the framework of an Islamic Charter of Work of Goodness⁵⁶.

Clarity of the Basis 1) To please the Creator, 2) A mercy on the creatures, 3) No other goal

*Comprehensiveness in the Approach*4) Holistic vision, 5) Positive neutrality, 6) Impartiality

Complementarity in the Goal

7) Meet basic needs, 8) Capacity building, 9) Sustainable development

Transparency in the Mission

10) State the domain of goodness, 11) Specify the source of funding, 12) Specify the beneficiaries

Independence of the Decision

13) Independence from the donor, 14) Independence from the political & ideological authority,

15) Independence from the military and intelligence

Respect in Dealings

16) Respect of the will of donor, 17) Respect of the dignity of recipient, 18) Respect of the cultural environment

Good Performance 19) Cooperation with others, 20) Use of local resources, 21) Best practices

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- ⁵³ Qur'ān, Al-Ma'ida (5:1).
- ⁵⁴ Reported by Bukhari.
- ⁵⁵ Reported by Soyuti, Baghawi and Ibnu-Maja.

⁵⁶ Abbas Aroua. Moral requirements for international partnership: Towards an Islamic Charter of the work of goodness. Second Gulf Conference on Charitable Action. Doha, 21-22 February 2006.