

## *Imam Ali as the Greatest Representative of Pure Justice in Said Nursi's Thought*

Hamidreza Ayatollahy  
Associate Professor of Philosophy Department  
Allameh Tabatabaai University  
Tehran – Iran

Justice is the ideal goal and desire of those men who love human dignity. Although it is appreciated by human nature there can be found only few who have sensitive about it. Because there are a lot of desires that may conflict to acting justly for every body. The theoretical analysis of justice in its highest stage brings the suspicion that it can not be achieved. Is it possible to act according to those difficult criteria of pure justice which theoretical reason explains it? How can man appeal to those ideals?

Said Nursi, in his *Letters*, describes Imam Ali as the highest representative of pure justice. He believes that Imam Ali represented the reality of pure justice in his period. There were some conflicts and wars during his governorship of Islamic territory in his time. Said Nursi explains these conflicts because he wanted to govern on pure just. While the others who had brilliant antecedent in establishment of Islamic government could not bear this pure justice but believed in relative justice. When Said Nursi was asked about the wars during Imam Ali's time in the question: What was the nature of the wars that started in the time of 'Ali? In what way should we describe those who took part in them, and those who died and those who killed? He answered:

The war called the Event of the Camel between 'Ali and Talha, and Zubayr and 'A'isha the Veracious was the struggle between pure justice and relative justice. Ali took pure justice as fundamental and in accordance with his judgement of the Law. (*The Letters*, fifteenth)

Then he explained the reason for which the battle occurred:

Those who opposed him said that at the time of the prophet the purity of Islam permitted pure justice, but since with the passage of time various peoples whose Islam was weak had entered Islamic social life, to apply pure justice was extremely difficult. For this reason, their judgement of the Law was to proceed on the basis of relative justice, known as the lesser of two evils. (*Ibid*)

Said Nursi tries to describe the importance of pure justice as follow:

“Pure justice and relative justice may be explained like this: according to the allusive meaning of the verse,

*“If any one slew a person -unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land- it would be as if he slew the whole people”*(Quran 5:32)

the rights of an innocent man cannot be cancelled for the sake of all the people. A single individual may not be sacrificed for the good of all. In the view of Almighty God's compassion, right is right, there is no difference between great and small. The small may not be annulled for the great. Without his consent, the life and rights of an individual may not be sacrificed for the good of the community. If he consents to sacrifice them in the name of patriotism, that is a different matter.

As for relative justice, a particular is sacrificed for the good of the universal; the rights of an individual are not considered in the face of the community. A sort of relative justice is attempted to be applied as the lesser of two evils. But if it is possible to apply pure justice, to attempt to apply relative justice is wrong. It may not be attempted." (*The Letters*, fifteenth)

This was Said Nursi's account of Imam Ali as representative of Pure Justice. Why he describe Imam Ali as purely just man? This can be explained by both his sayings (in his sermons and letters) and his deeds during his life. We are going to illustrate his justness through both.

The most important sayings and letters and sermons of Imam Ali are gathered in the noble book "*Nahj Al-balagha*". One of the frequently discussed issues in the *Nahj al-balaghah* is that of government and justice. To anyone who goes through the book, it is evident to what extent 'Ali is sensitive to the issues related to government and justice. He considers them to be of paramount importance. Murteda Motahhari explained these issues in his book "*The Glimpses of Nahj Al-balagha*" very well and I refer to this book for explanation of place of justice in "*Nahj Al-balagha*".

### **The *Nahj al-balaghah* on State:**

For those who lack an understanding of Islam but have knowledge of the teachings of other religions, it is astonishing why a religious personage should devote himself to this sort of problems. Don't such problems relate to the world and worldly life! Shouldn't a sage keep aloof from the matters of the world and society?

'Ali's spirit had assimilated within itself the doctrines of Islam and the code of its laws. Therefore, it is not strange that 'Ali should have been such; rather it would have been astonishing if he wasn't such as we find him to be. Doesn't the Quran declare:

*"Indeed, We sent Our messengers with the clear signs, and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance so that men might uphold justice ... (57:25)*

In this verse, establishment of justice has been declared as being the objective of the mission of all the prophets. The sanctity of justice is so stressed that it is considered the aim of all prophetic missions. Hence, how were it possible that someone like 'Ali ('a), whose duty was to expound the teachings of the Quran and explain the doctrines and laws of Islam, might have ignored this issue or, at least, accorded it a secondary importance?

The *Nahj al-balaghah* deals with numerous problems concerning the State and social justice, a few of which, we shall discuss here.

The first problem to be discussed here is that of the necessity and value of a State. 'Ali has repeatedly stressed the need for a powerful government, and, in his own time, battled against the views propagated by the Khawarij, who, in the beginning, denied the need for a State, considering the Quran as sufficient.

'Ali, like other godly men and spiritual leaders, despises temporal power and political office for being lowly and degrading when an instrument of gratification of lust for power and political ambition. He looks down upon it with extreme contempt when it is desired as an end-in-itself and aspired as an ideal of life. He considers such kind of power to be devoid of any value and considers it to be more detestable than 'a pig's bone in a leper's hand.' But the same power and leadership if used as a means for the establishment and execution of social justice and service to society is regarded by him as a thing of paramount sanctity, for which he is willing to fight any opportunist and political adventurer seeking to grab power and illegitimate wealth. In its defense, he does not hesitate to draw his sword against plunderers and usurpers.

During the days of 'Ali's caliphate, 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas once came to him. He found 'Ali mending his old shoes with his own hand. Turning to Ibn al-'Abbas, 'Ali asked him, "How much do you think is this shoe worth?" "Nothing," replied Ibn al-'Abbas. 'Ali said, "But the same shoe is of more worth to me than authority over you if it were not to me a means for establishing justice, recovering the rights of the deprived, and wiping out evil practices." (*Khutab* 33)

In the sermon 216, we come across a general discussion about human rights and duties. Here, 'Ali states that every right always involves two parties. Of the various Divine duties the ones which God has ordained are duties of people towards people; they are framed in such a way that each right necessitates a duty towards others; each right which benefits an individual or a group, holds the individual or group responsible to fulfil some duty towards others. Every duty becomes binding when the other party also fulfils his duty. He says further regarding this issue:

But the most important of the reciprocal rights that God has made obligatory is the right of the ruler over the subjects and the rights of the subjects over the ruler. It is a mutual and reciprocal obligation decreed by God for them. He has made it the basis of the strength of their society and their religion. Consequently, the subjects cannot prosper unless the rulers are righteous. The rulers cannot be righteous unless the subjects are firm and steadfast. If the subjects fulfill their duties toward the ruler and the ruler his duty to them, then righteousness prevails amongst them. Only then the objectives of the religion are realized, the pillars of justice become stable and wholesome traditions become established. In this way, better conditions of life and social environment emerge. The people become eager to safeguard the integrity of the State, and thus frustrate the plots of its enemies. (*Khutab* 126)

### **Justice, a Supreme Value:**

The first consequence of the sacred teachings of Islam was the influence exercised on the minds and ideas of its adherents. Not only did Islam introduce new teachings regarding the world, man, and his society, but also changed the ways of thinking. The importance of the latter achievement is not less than the former.

Man, in his confrontation with social and moral problems, is inevitably led to adopt some sort of value-orientation. In his estimations he arrives at a certain hierarchy of values in which he arranges all the issues. This order or hierarchy of values plays a significant role in the adoption of the kind of basic premises and axioms he utilizes. It makes him think differently from others who have differently evaluated the issues and have arrived at a different hierarchy of values. This is what leads to disparity among ways of thinking.

When we say that Islam revolutionized the ways of thinking, what is meant is that it drastically altered their system and hierarchy of values. It elevated values like *taqwa* (God-fearing), which had no value at all in the past, to a very high status and attached an unprecedented importance to it. On the other hand, it deflated the value of such factors as blood, race and the like, which in the pre-Islamic days were of predominant significance, bringing their worth to zero. Justice is one of the values revived by Islam and given an extraordinary status. It is true that Islam recommended justice and stressed its implementation, but what is very significant is that it elevated its value in society. It is better to leave the elaboration of this point to 'Ali ('a) himself, and see what the *Nahj al-balaghah* says.

A man of intelligence and understanding puts the following question to *Amir al-Mu'minin* 'Ali:

Which is superior, justice or generosity? (*Hikam* 437)

Here the question is about two human qualities. Apparently the answer to the above question seems both obvious and easy: generosity is superior to justice, for what is justice except observance of the rights of others and avoiding violating them; but a generous man willingly foregoes his own right in favour of another person. The just man does not transgress the rights of others or he safeguards their rights from being violated. But the generous man sacrifices his own right for another's sake. Therefore, generosity must be superior to justice.

In truth, the above reasoning appears to be quite valid when we estimate their worth from the viewpoint of individual morality, and generosity, more than justice, seems to be the sign of human perfection and the nobleness of the human soul. But 'Ali's reply is contrary to the above answer. 'Ali ('a) gives two reasons for superiority of justice over generosity. Firstly he says:

Justice puts things in their proper place and generosity diverts them from their (natural) direction.

For, the meaning of justice is that the natural deservedness of everybody must be taken into consideration; everyone should be given his due according to his work, ability and qualifications. Society is comparable to a machine whose every part has a proper place and function.

It is true that generosity is a quality of great worth from the point of view that the generous man donates to another what legitimately belongs to himself, but we must note that it is an unnatural occurrence. It may be compared to a body one of whose organs is malfunctioning, and its other healthy organs and members temporarily redirect their activity to the recovery of the suffering organ. From the point of view of society, it would be far more preferable if the society did not possess such sick members at all, so that the healthy organs and members may completely devote their activities and energies to the general growth and perfection of society, instead of being absorbed with helping and assisting of some particular member.

To return to 'Ali's reply, the other reason he gives for preferring justice to generosity is this:

Justice is the general caretaker, whereas generosity is a particular reliever.

That is, justice is like a general law which is applicable to the management of all the affairs of society. Its benefit is universal and all-embracing; it is the highway which serves all and everyone. But generosity is something exceptional and limited, which cannot be always relied upon. Basically, if generosity were to become a general rule, it would no longer be regarded as such. Deriving his conclusion, Ali ('a) says:

Consequently, justice is the nobler of the two and possesses the greater merit. This way of thinking about man and human problems is one based on a specific value system rooted in the idea of the fundamental importance of society. In this system of values, social principles and criteria precede the norms of individual morality. The former is a principle, whereas the latter is only a ramification. The former is a trunk, while the latter is a branch of it. The former is the foundation of the structure, whereas the latter is an embellishment.

From 'Ali's viewpoint, it is the principle of justice that is of crucial significance in preserving the balance of society, and winning goodwill of the public. Its practice can ensure the health of society and bring peace to its soul. Oppression, injustice and discrimination cannot bring peace and happiness-even to the tyrant or the one in whose interest the injustice is perpetrated.

After the death of 'Uthman, 'Ali ('a) assumed power. 'Ali ('a) was advised by some to overlook whatever injustices had occurred in the past and to do nothing about them, confining his efforts to what would befall from then on during his own caliphate. But to this his reply was:

A long standing right does not become invalid!

Then he exclaimed:

"By God, even if I find that by such misappropriated money women have been married or slave-maids have been bought, I would reclaim it and have it returned to the public treasury, because:

There is a wide scope and room in the dispensation of justice. [Justice is vast enough to include and envelop everyone;] he who [being of a diseased temperament] finds restriction and hardship in justice should know that the path of injustice and oppression is harder and even more restricted. " (*Khutab* 15)

'Ali ('a) regards justice to be a duty and a Divine trust; rather, to him it is a Divine sanctity. He does not expect a Muslim who is aware and informed about the teachings of Islam to be an idle spectator at the scenes of injustice and discrimination.

He himself explains this in the aforementioned sermon:

(By Him who split the grain and created living things,) had it not been for the presence of the pressing crowd, were it not for the establishment of (God's) testimony upon me through the existence of supporters, and had it not been for the pledge of God with the learned, to the effect that they should not connive with the gluttony of the oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed, I would have cast the reins of [the camel of] the caliphate on its own shoulders and would have made the last one drink from the same cup that I made the first one to drink (i.e. I would have taken the same stance towards the caliphate as at the time of the first caliph). (Then you would have seen that in my view the world of yours is not worth more than a goat's sneeze.) (*Khutab 3*)

### **Justice Should not be Compromised:**

Favouritism, nepotism, partiality and shutting up of mouths by big morsels, have always been the essential tools of politicians. Now a man had assumed power and captained the ship of the caliphate who profoundly detested these things. In fact his main objective was to struggle and fight against this kind of politics. Naturally, with the very inception of 'Ali's reign, the politicians with their hopes and expectations were disappointed. Their disappointment soon grew into subversive conspiracies against 'Ali's government, creating for him many a headache. Well-meaning friends, with sincere goodwill, advised 'Ali ('a) to adopt greater flexibility in his policies for the sake of higher interests. Their advice was: "Extricate yourself from the ruses of these demagogues, as is said, 'sewing the dog's mouth with a big morsel'. These are influential persons, some of whom are from the elite of the early days of Islam. Presently, your real enemy is Mu'awiyah, who is in control of a rich and fertile province like Syria. The wisdom lies in setting aside, for the time being, the matter of equality and justice. What harm there is in it?"

'Ali ('a) replied to them:

Do you ask me to seek support through injustice [to my subjects and to sacrifice justice for the sake of political advantage]? By God! I will not do it as long as the world lasts and one star follows another in the sky [i.e. I will not do it as long as the order of the universe exists]. Even if it were my own property I would distribute it with justice, and why not when it is the property of God and when I am His trustee? (*Khutab 126*)

This is an example of how highly 'Ali valued justice and what status it held in his opinion.

Said Nursi explain the situation of Imam Ali in preferring justice to political benefits as follow:

That blessed person [Imam Ali] was worthier of important duties other than politics and rule. If he had been completely successful in politics and government, he would have been unable to truly gain the meaningful title of 'King of Sainthood.' Whereas he gained a spiritual rule far surpassing the external and political Caliphate, and became like a Universal Master; in fact, his spiritual rule will continue even until the end of the world.

When it comes to Imam 'Ali's war with Mu'awiya at Siffin, that was a war over the Caliphate and rule. That is to say, taking the injunctions of religion, the truths of Islam, and the hereafter as the basis, Imam 'Ali sacrificed some of the laws of government and pitiless demands of politics to them. Whereas Mu'awiya and his supporters left aside resoluteness and favoured permissiveness in order to strengthen Islamic social life with their politics of government; they supposed themselves to be compelled to do so due to the demands of politics, and choosing permissiveness, fell into error. (*The Letters*, fifteenth)

### **The approach of the *Nahj al-balaghah*:**

The approach of the *Nahj al-balaghah* to justice is based on belief in human rights. In sermon 216, from which we have quoted before, 'Ali ('a) says:

Allah has, by encharging me with your affairs, given me a right over you and awarded you a similar right over me. The issue of rights, as a subject of discourse, is inexhaustible, but is the most restricted of things when it comes to practice. A right does not accrue in favour of any person unless it accrues against him also, and it does not accrue against him unless that it also accrues in his favour.

As can be noticed from the above passage, God is central to 'Ali's statement about justice, rights, and duties. But 'Ali's stand is opposed to the aforementioned view according to which God has bestowed rights on only a handful of individuals solely responsible to Him, and has deprived the rest of people of these rights, making them responsible not only to Him but also to those who have been granted by Him the unlimited privilege to rule others. As a result, the ideas of justice and injustice in regard to the relationship between the ruler and the ruled become meaningless.

In the same sermon, 'Ali asks the people not to address him in the way despots are addressed:

Do not address me in the manner despots are addressed [i.e. Do not address me by titles that are used to flatter despots and tyrants]. In your attitude towards me do not entertain the kind of considerations that are adopted in the presence of unpredictable tyrants. Do not treat me with affected and obsequious manners. Do not imagine that your candour would displease me or that I expect you to treat me with veneration. One who finds it disagreeable to face truth and just criticism, would find it more detestable to act upon them. Therefore, do not deny me a word of truth or a just advice.

In another letter written as a circular to tax collectors, after a few words of advice and admonition, 'Ali ('a) says:

Fulfill the demands of justice in your relationship with the people and be patient in matters regarding their needs; because you are treasurers of the people (*ra'iyah*), representatives of the community (Ummah), and envoys of your imams. *Kutub 51*

In the famous epistle to Malik al-'Ashtar, which contains elaborate instructions about various aspects of government, he writes:

Awaken your heart to kindness and mercy for the people (*ra'iyah*) and love and tenderness for them. Never, never act with them like a predatory beast which seeks to be satiated by devouring them, for the people fall into two categories: they are either your brethren in faith or your kindred in creation ... Do not ever say, 'I have been given authority' or 'My command should be obeyed.' Because it corrupts the heart, consumes one's faith, and invites calamities.

'Ali shows an amazing sensitivity to justice and compassion towards the people and a great respect for them and their rights, which, as reflected in his letters, is an exemplary and unique attitude towards this issue.

There is another letter in the *Nahj al-balaghah* consisting of instructions to the collectors of *zakat*, and is entitled: 'To the officials assigned to the job of collecting *zakat*'. The title indicates that it was not addressed to any particular official but sent either as a general instruction in writing or delivered as a routine oral instruction. Al-Sayyid al-Radi has included it in the section of *kutub*, or letters, with the clarification that he is placing this letter here to show to what extent 'Ali was meticulous in matters pertaining to justice and rights of the people, being attentive not only to main points but also to minute details. Here are 'Ali's instructions:

Set out with the fear of God, Who is One and has no partner. Do not intimidate any Muslim. Do not trespass upon his land so as to displease him. Do not take from him more than Allah's share in his property. When you approach a tribe, at first come down at their watering place, stay there instead of entering their houses. Approach them with calm dignity and salute them when you stand amongst them, grudge not a proper greeting to them. Then say to them "O servants of God, the Wali and Khalifah of God has sent me to you to collect from you Allah's share in your property. Is there anything of His share in your property? If there is, return it to His Wali. " If someone says 'No', then do not repeat the demand. If someone answers in the affirmative, then go with him without frightening, threatening, or compelling him. Take whatever gold and silver he gives you. If he has cattle or camels, do not approach them save with his permission, because the major part belongs to him. When you arrive (into the cattle enclosure), do not enter upon them in a bossy and rude manner ... *Kutub 25*, also see 26, 27 and 46

The passages quoted above are sufficient to throw light on 'Ali's attitude as a ruler toward the people under his rule.

All above mentioned sayings of Imam Ali and more and more others show that the nation and race and every kind of preferences do not have any merit in his view



while the others who fought against him was thinking in this preferences. Said Nursi criticizes these Ali's enemies in this manner:

Since the principles of racialism and nationalism do not follow justice and right, they are tyranny. They do not proceed on justice. For a ruler of racist leanings prefers those of the same race, and cannot act justly. According to the clear decree of, Islam has abrogated what preceded it. There is no difference between an Abyssinian slave and a leader of the Quraish, once they have accepted Islam, Islam has abrogated the tribalism of Ignorance; the bonds of nationalism may not be set up in place of the bonds of religion; if they are, there will be no justice; right will disappear.

### **Justice in all Imam Ali's actions during his life**

In this matter Ali's words and actions conformed to each other. He was not like others who indulge in tall talk which their actions belie. He was prompted to say these words by his nature which formed the basis of his character. Ali was more kind to the people than anyone else and refrained from harming any person. He became oblivious of his own self in order to assist others and considered this self-abnegation to be a part and parcel of his life. His entire life was dedicated to the support of the oppressed and the helpless so that he might realize their rights from the tyrants who considered themselves entitled to usurp the rights of others on account of noble descent and racial discrimination.

His life is so brilliant that not only Muslim but also surprised others in highest position of human dignity. George Jordc, a Christian writer has written a book entitled "*Imam Ali, the Voice of Human Justice*" in Arabic.

He says in this book:

Imam Ali has been reported to have said: "Even if all the seven regions of the world and whatever is under the sky is offered to me so that I may disobey God and take away unjustly the husk of barley from an ant I shall not do so. In my eyes this entire world is inferior to a leaf which may be pressed in the mouth of a locust".....

One should not be surprised that Ali was just. It would have been a matter of surprise if he had not been just. The instances of his justice, which have been narrated, are the most valuable assets in human history and man should be proud of them.

There are a lot of instances of his justice from which we bring few of them that shows how highly just deeds he acted during his life.

1- Once a man lodged a complaint against Ali with Umar who was then the caliph. Umar summoned both of them and said: "O Abul Hasan! Stand side by side with the other party. Signs of displeasure appeared on the face of Ali. Thereupon Umar asked him whether he did not wish to stand by the side of the other person. Ali replied: "No. That is not so. However, I have observed that you have not maintained equality between me and my opponent. You have addressed me with my *Kunyah* and thus shown me respect whereas you have not meted out the same treatment to him.

2- Once Ali saw his coat of mail in the possession of a Christian. He took him in the court of a judge named Shurayh so that he might give a decision regarding its ownership. When both of them appeared before the judge Ali said: "This coat of mail is mine. I have neither sold nor gifted it to anyone". The judge asked the other person: "What have you to say about the claim made by the Commander of the Faithful? The Christian said: This coat of mail is mine. In spite of this, however, I do not consider the Commander of the Faithful to be a liar then the judge Shurayh turned to Ali and said: "Can you produce any witness who should depose that this coat of mail is yours? Ali smiled and said: "Shurayh is right. I cannot produce any such witness".

The judge gave a judgment in favour of the Christian who took the coat of mail and departed. The Commander of the Faithful kept looking at him from behind. After having gone a few steps, however, he returned and said:

"I testify that such an order resembles the order of the prophets, because one who is the Commander of the Faithful has appeared along with a person like myself in the court of the judge who is also his subordinate and the judge has given a judgment against him". Then he added: "O Commander of the Faithful! I swear by God that this coat of mail is yours and my claim was false".

Later the people saw that Christian serving in the army of Ali as a faithful soldier and he fought most enthusiastically against Khawarij in the Battle of Nahrawan.

3- Ali was so kind to the common man that when his brother Aqeel requested him to give him something more from the public treasury' than, his due share, he turned down his request and as a consequence thereof Aqeel went away to Mu'awiya. Ali tolerated separation from his brother but did not agree to give him anything from the public treasury of the Muslims without entitlement.

4- In Siffin war, Mu'awiya's army blocked the path of Ali's army to the Euphrates so that they might surrender on account of thirst but when Ali gained control of the bark of the river he did not stop Mu'awiya's army from utilizing the water. Many other similar incidents took place so far as Mu'awiya was concerned, but it is not possible to give their details here. All these events show that as demanded by his angelic soul he was kind even to his enemies and was just and magnanimous to all.

All the words and acts of Ali go to prove that he had perfect and firm faith in his actions. This was so because all his actions emanated from wisdom and capability. Because Imam Ali was infallible and he said and did everything in accordance with the inspiration and traditions of the prophet of Islam. Hence, he did not entertain any doubt about his views and actions.

