

# Intellectual Discourse

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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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# Conceptualizing Islamic Ethics for Contemporary Muslim Societies

Fethi B. Jomaa Ahmed\*

**Abstract:** Contemporary Muslim societies suffer from numerous endemic problems such as corruption, poverty, and gender inequality. In addressing these problems, scholars tend to consider sociological models, and overlook the potential of Islamic ethical perspectives. The Islamic sources, particularly the Qur'an provide pertinent insights on ethics that should be foremost in the minds of those seeking to alleviate social problems in Muslim communities. Essential writings on ethics, particularly *Tahdhib al-Akhlāq* by Ibn Miskawayh, *The Moral World of the Qur'an* by Draz, and *The Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* by Izutsu are major works in this field. This paper elucidates the meaning of Islamic ethics, with an overview from the Qur'an and the views of prominent scholars. It then analyses the current major problems in Muslim-majority countries and their ethical roots to emphasize the significance of Islamic ethics as a source of remedy. This is an interdisciplinary qualitative study, which uses the thematic commentary on Qur'an and *heremedy* methodologies, integrating the methods of sociology and ethics.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Muslim societies, Islam, Development, Methodology

**Abstrak:** Masyarakat Islam kontemporer mengalami banyak masalah endemik seperti rasuah, kemiskinan, dan ketidaksetaraan jantina. Dalam menangani masalah ini, para sarjana cenderung mempertimbangkan model sosiologi, dan mengabaikan potensi perspektif etika Islam. Sumber-sumber Islam, khususnya Al-Quran dan hadis, memberikan pandangan yang relevan mengenai etika yang harus menjadi yang paling utama dalam pemikiran mereka yang berusaha untuk mengatasi masalah sosial dalam masyarakat Muslim. Karya - karya penting

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mengenai etika, terutamanya Tahdhib al-Akhlāq oleh Ibn Miskawayh, Dunia Moral Al-Qur'an (The Moral World of the Qur'an) oleh Draz, dan Konsep Etika-Agama dalam Al-Qur'an (The Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an) oleh Izutsu adalah karya utama dalam bidang ini. Makalah ini menjelaskan makna etika Islam, dengan gambaran keseluruhan dari al-Quran dan hadis dan pandangan para ilmuan terkemuka. Seterusnya, ia menganalisa masalah besar semasa di negara-negara majoriti Muslim dan akar umbi etika mereka untuk menekankan pentingnya etika Islam sebagai sumber penawar. Ini adalah kajian kualitatif antara disiplin, yang menggunakan tafsiran tematik mengenai metodologi al-Quran dan hadis, mengintegrasikan kaedah sosiologi dan etika.

**Kata Kunci:** Etika, Masyarakat Islam, Islam, Pembangunan, Metodologi

## 1. Introduction

The main sources of Islam, the Qur'an and *ḥadīth*, essentially concern spiritual guidance pertaining to creed and ethical behaviour. Practicing Muslims know that their core aim in their spiritual journey is to improve the ethical quality of their thoughts and actions. A cursory survey of the development of Islamic ethics as an area of modern philosophical research shows that the field suffers from two major problems. On one hand, Western scholarship on ethics, from ancient to contemporary times, has left a vacuum concerning Islamic ethics. On the other hand, Muslim scholarship has not given enough systematic analysis of Islamic ethics to clarify misconceptions and confusions. Comparing the enormous *Fiqh* and *Tafsir* works with ethics in the Islamic heritage, one could easily observe that writings on ethics are minimal, and are chiefly included in Sufi literature, addressed as manners (*adab*). However, since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic ethics has been gaining some momentum due to the publication of some major works, including *La Morale Du Koran* ('The Moral World of the Qur'an') (1951) by Draz, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (1966) by Izutsu, and *Ethics in Islam* (2018) by Yusuf Al-Qaradawi.

Looking at the current situation in contemporary Muslim societies, operationally defined for the purposes of this paper as the 57 member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), one can easily observe that they suffer from many socio-economic, political, and environmental problems, such as corruption, dictatorship, disunity, poverty, gender inequality, and climate change. These problems have ethical roots as well as ethical impacts, and they inhibit development



efforts in Muslim societies. Political leaders, social scientists, and policy makers obviously tend to focus more on physical as well as technological aspects of development and overlook the ethical perspective, but development models that exclude ethics are manifestly unsuccessful. Islamic sources of knowledge, especially the Qur'an and *ḥadīth*, as well as historical evidences, show that moral decay is one of the main causes of the decline of civilizations, due to anomie and the disintegration of communities. One of the fundamental characteristics of Sharī'ah is that it is a blessing for the world (*rahmahtan lil 'aalm īn*), and one of its main objectives is to accomplish good character. The primary sources of Islam provide pertinent insights on ethics and morality. There are numerous verses in the Qur'an and various *ḥadīths* that deal specifically with ethics, which constitute a solid grounding for Islamic ethics that can help overcome the ethical problems in contemporary societies (e.g. Qur'an: *Al-Hujurāt*, 49; *Luqman*, 31; *Al-Nur*, 24).

This interdisciplinary qualitative study attempts to elucidate briefly the meaning of Islamic ethics to avoid confusions and fill in the theoretical vacuum on the topic. It provides an overview on the literal and technical meanings, highlights the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* perspectives, and reviews essential writings of prominent scholars on Islamic ethics. It then explains the importance of Islamic ethics in contemporary Muslim societies. To emphasize the urgent need for Islamic ethics and explain its significance, the researcher critically explores the unethical roots of the current major problems in contemporary Muslim societies, including corruption, tyranny, disunity, poverty, gender inequality, and climate change. This analysis uses the thematic commentary on the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* methodologies, and integrates the methods of sociology and ethics as disciplines of study.

## 1. Conceptual Framework

Ethics pertains to the description of character and judgement on human actions, whether good or bad, right or wrong, desirable or undesirable, and this field of philosophy has existed in all human societies at all times. Ethics as an ontological basis for social life in organized communities and academic inquiry exists in all religions, philosophies, and intellectual teachings. However, the field of ethics as a modern academic discipline has failed to advance understanding of Islamic ethics until recent decades. Many contemporary scholars and institutions

demonstrated great interest in the field by publishing books and articles, organizing seminars and conferences, and offering academic programs and training. The following paragraphs briefly discuss the essential meaning and scope of ethics in general and Islamic ethics in particular.

## 2.1 The Literal and Technical Meaning of Ethics

The Arabic noun *khuluq* (plural *akhlāq*) is the closest equivalent to the English word ‘ethics’. One of the classic Arabic dictionaries explains that *akhlāq* is lexically derived from ‘creation’, referring to physical features that can be perceived visually, while ethics relates to personal qualities that cannot be perceived with concrete visual abilities, but with inner states and perceptions (Al-Asfahani, 2007, pp. 96-97). The Arabic term *khuluq* also means religion, temper, and character (Ibn Mandhur, 2003, vol. 5, p. 140). Generally, the word *akhlāq* in Arabic literature refers to disposition, character, manner, and temperament, which could be classified as good or bad.

Technically, in modern Arabic dictionaries, ethics means a set of stable personal traits from which good or bad actions proceed, without thinking and speculations (Anis, Muntasar, Al-Suwalhy & Ahmad, 2004, vol. 1, p. 252). Ethics as a discipline is generally defined as the science that deals with qualitative judgements of whether conduct is considered right or wrong, good or bad. Islamic ethics refers to the ethical system derived from the Islamic worldview, whereby the main sources of Sharī‘ah lay down its foundation and constitute the parameters of moral judgement. This system addresses the virtues, duties, and attitudes of the individual and the society. Hashi (2011) argued that the Islamic ethical system is divine, transcendental, universal, and principle-guided. This study adopts a working definition for Islamic ethics as “universal standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do as taught by the Qur’an, and demonstrated in the exemplary life of the Prophet (PBUH)” (Zaroug, 1999, pp. 53-54).

## 2.2 Ethics in the Qur’an and Ḥadīth

The Qur’an and ḥadīth provide pertinent insights on ethics. It is very hard to count all the verses that deal with ethics either directly or indirectly, as they are numerous and scattered throughout the Qur’an. They clearly exceed one thousand, which makes them approximately double the quantity of legal verses (*Ayat al-Aḥkām*) in the Qur’an and the legal

texts of *ḥadīth* (*Aḥadīth al-Aḥkām*). Similarly, the Prophet's *aḥadīth* are numerous and very rich in ethical principles, commandments, and teachings.

The Qur'an was revealed to guide humanity to what is most right of character (Qur'an, 17:9); the religion of Islam in fact is all about ethics, described by Allah as *khuluqun 'aẓīm* (a great religion with a great moral code) (Qur'an, 68:4). Almost everything in the Qur'an relates to ethics, including its constituent five pillars. For instance, establishing regular prayers builds strong moral character and a powerful five-time daily reminder that helps prevent acts of evil and indecency (Qur'an, 29:45). Another illustrative example is paying *Zakāh* (alms), which purifies the soul from greed and selfishness, and promotes care for the poor and destitute (Qur'an, 9:60, 103). One of the most indicative commandments for Islamic ethics in the Qur'an is what Allah says: "God commands justice, and goodness, and generosity towards relatives and He forbids immorality, and injustice, and oppression..." (16:90).

The essence of Islamic ethics in the Qur'an is summarized in the verse "Be tolerant, and command decency, and avoid the ignorant" (7:199). To tolerate and forgive the offender is the maximum level of tolerance and courage. To command decency is to give to those who prevent you, extending your help to them is the highest level of generosity, and you would reach the highest level of goodness if you do not harm someone who cuts relations with you. Some prominent scholars, including Ibn Al-Qayyim, point out that there is no verse in the Qur'an, which is so comprehensive in its connotation to ethics and noble character, than the above-mentioned one. 'Be tolerant' means to accept from people their excuses, pardon them, and do not follow their mistakes, dig into their intentions and secrets, or invade their privacy. 'Command decency' means command anything good, and 'avoid the ignorant' means do not reply to the abuse of the ignorant in kind, or seek vengeance and retribution (Ibn Al-Qayyim, n.d., vol. 2, p. 317).

The Qur'an emphasizes that the noblest among the believers in the sight of Allah are those who are good in character (Qur'an, 49:13). It is also important to highlight that unethical behaviour and its negative consequences for the individual, community, state and the universe are from people's own selves (Qur'an, 3:165; 30:41). However, rectifying such unethical behaviour and changing immoral conditions is possible

by ethical education, commanding good and preventing evil, exemplary modality, and the role of elites in harbouring such activities (Qur'an, 8:53; 11:116; 13:11; 21:105; 22:40; 92:5-10).

It is very hard to circumscribe the number of *hadiths* that deal with ethics, as the entire corpus of Sunnah literature is essentially an ethical discourse. The actions, sayings and approvals of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as well as his biography promote the highest standard of Islamic ethics, concerning relations among Muslims, with unbelievers, and with creation in general including animals, plants, and the natural world. The Qur'an declares that the manners and habits of the Prophet (PBUH) are great and exemplary character, and testifies that he is an excellent model to follow (Qur'an, 33:21; 68:4; 3:159; 9:128). The Prophet (PBUH) stated that the higher objective of his noble message is to accomplish good character and perfect moral acts (Al-Albani, 2020, 14:273).

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) considered Islamic ethics as paramount, and this was clearly embedded in all his sayings, deeds, and tacit approvals. Among his prominent sayings in this regards "Certainly God looks not at your faces or your wealth; instead he looks at your hearts and your deeds" (Ibn Majah, 2020, 37:4282; Muslim, 2020, 45:42). He specifically enjoined people to behave well and commit themselves to good character, as it is valuable and heavy in the scale in the Day of Judgement. He said, "Nothing is placed on the Scale that is heavier than good character. Indeed the person with good character will have attained the rank of the person of fasting and prayer" (At-Tirmidhi, 2020, 27:109).

In fact, he declared that perfect ethics make the person a perfect believer. He said, "The most perfect believer in respect of faith is he who is best of them in manners" (Abu Dawud, 2020, 42:87). Aisha, the Prophet's wife (may Allah be pleased with her), reported that when the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) received the first revelation of the Qur'an in the Cave of Hira, he returned home in terror about his experience, whereupon his wife, Khadija bint Khuwailid (may Allah be pleased with her), comforted him with a few words that are perhaps the best description of the high ethical standards of the Prophet (PBUH) before as well as after his assignment to prophet hood: "By Allah, Allah will never disgrace you. You keep good relations with your kith and

kin, help the poor and the destitute, serve your guests generously and assist the deserving calamity-afflicted ones” (Al-Bukhari, 2020, 1:3). The following *hadiths* could be classified as the most comprehensive and essential pertaining to applied Islamic ethics: “Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should talk what is good or keep quiet, and whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should not hurt (or insult) his neighbor; and whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, should entertain his guest generously” (Al-Bukhari, 2020, 81:64). Also “Guarantee me six things and I guarantee you Jannah. Whenever you speak, say the truth. Fulfil your promises when you make them. When you are entrusted with something, carry that trust. Safeguard your private parts, lower your gaze and prevent your hands from harming others” (Al-Albani, 1995, 3:1470).

### **2.3 Classical and Contemporary Scholars’ Perception of Islamic Ethics**

#### *2.3.1 Abu Ali Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Miskawayh (d. 421AH/1030AD)*

Ibn Miskawayh’s key works on ethics were *Tahdhib al-Akhlāq* and *al-Fawz al-Aṣghar*. His ethical views were derived from his ideas about God, the universe, and the human soul. He viewed ethics as the noblest of sciences, the best discipline concerned with the refinement of Man’s character; for the nobility of each science depends upon its subject, and the subject of ethics is Man, who is the noblest of creatures and subjects (Ibn Miskawayh, 1985, pp. 30-33). Ibn Miskawayh’s doctrine of the Man encompasses his notions about happiness, morality, and justice. Thus, he defines ethics as a deep disposition, which is a soul-related state that causes the issuance of an action from a person without thinking and speculation. He divides disposition into two kinds; natural disposition, which springs from man’s nature and temper, and ordinary disposition, which is created in the soul because of habitual repetition (Ibn Miskawayh, 1985, pp. 25-26).

There are two essential concepts in Ibn Miskawayh’s ethical thought: happiness and virtues. In the light of moral teachings, humans refrain from badness and atrocity, and achieve virtue and happiness to the extent that they become the companion of the pure and the angels, and accept divine bounty. He discussed happiness in his book *Tahdhib al-Akhlāq* (‘Refinement of Ethics’), but devoted a separate work to the

subject, entitled *al-Saadah* ('Happiness'). He defined three categories of happiness:

- Happiness of spirit: Man's happiness lies in the perfection of his soul.
- Happiness of the spirit and body: Man's happiness is in the perfection of his spirit and body, such as wealth, reputation, success, beliefs, and health.
- The ultimate happiness: Man's real happiness is ensured when he achieves the ultimate goal of human being's creation. This third category is based on a comprehensive view of human beings and their existential dimensions (Ibn Miskawayh, 1985, pp. 66-81).

Virtue, according to Ibn Miskawayh means keeping a position between deficiency and excess, and between securing the maximum satisfaction of a desire and its total suppression. He identified the major virtues as wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice, and analysed the sub-virtues under each of these four major categories (Ibn Miskawayh, 1985, pp. 15-29). He elucidated the role of *Sharī'ah* in building the character of individuals and society, and emphasized the role of parents in educating and socializing their children to adopt virtues and achieve happiness. He believed that one's morality changes because of education and admonishment, and education could transform and change all human dispositions (Ibn Miskawayh, 1985, pp. 28-29).

### 2.3.2 *Abu Hamid Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Al-Ghazali (d. 505AH/1111AD)*

Al-Ghazali mastered various fields of Islamic sciences such as jurisprudence, philosophy, and theology, and wrote numerous books. His moral ideas, particularly concerning the meaning and scope of ethics, and the different types of virtues and manners (such as in eating and sexual relations) were expressed clearly in his book *Ihya' Ulum Ad-Din* ('The Revival of Religious Sciences'). He argued that a person can be described as having good *khalq* (physical appearance) and good *khuluq* (moral character) if both his inner world and outside are pleasant. He perceives ethics as a set of engrained personality traits that lead to actions without thinking or speculation. If beautiful and praiseworthy actions that are in conformity with common sense and religion proceed from a

disposition, then this disposition manifests good ethics. Conversely, if bad and blameworthy actions that are condemned by common sense and religion proceed from a disposition, it is exhibiting bad ethics.

He also emphasized that only good actions that are done in a consistent pattern could be categorized as good ethics. For instance, if someone donates money to the poor once, accidentally, he should not be considered a generous giver. Besides, he gave the intention behind the action great importance to make it good moral and he gave many examples. An illustrative example that could be cited here is that someone could have the moral trait of generosity, despite not actually spending or donating money (i.e. if he has no money or is otherwise prevented from manifesting his generosity). On the other hand, someone could be classified stingy even though he spends and donates money, because his behaviour was guided by ostentation or other hidden purposes, or the amount he spends is negligible relative to his hoarded wealth, while he is capable of assisting those with less material resources around him.

In other words, one's moral character should not be judged based on actions, which might be motivated by fear, shyness, social pressure, or other external factors, but by one's internal spiritual state and disposition. Al-Ghazali thus made a clear distinction between moral character and moral acts. Similar to Ibn Miskawayh, he pointed out that the main sources of good ethics are four: wisdom, courage, chastity, and justice. He also emphasized the fact that one's ethical predisposition is changeable – indeed, this is the core aim of Islamic spirituality – and the way to change bad character and habits is by education, training, and purification (Al-Ghazali, n.d., vol. 3, pp. 52-56).

### 2.3.3 *Ezz Al-Din Ibn Abd Al-Salam (d. 660AH/1262AD)*

Al-Ezz Ibn Abd Al-Salam, also nicknamed *Sultān al-'Ulamā'* (Sultan of Scholars'), defined ethics as innate instincts that deter people from engaging in questionable behaviour, which push them to abide by virtues. He asserts that anyone who realizes the nature and status of this life and the Hereafter is driven by his innate nature to seek the best ethics and steer away from evil ones. This helps them in their lives, especially during periods where no prophets are present. He offered four categories of ethics, and argued that they could be recognized and acquired by reason:

- *Noble ethics*: moral values that call people to what the Sharī‘ah regards as modesty, generosity, courage, mercy, and tenderness. These values help in building the earth and sowing the seeds of success in the Hereafter.
- *Evil traits*: bad qualities that motivate people to do evil, and prevent them from doing good deeds.
- *Beneficial desires*: basic instincts and desires that should be fulfilled within the realm of Sharī‘ah as permissible, recommended, or obligatory. They are beneficial in this world and in the Hereafter, or in either one of them only.
- *Harmful desires*: sinful acts, such as not fulfilling one’s religious duties or committing forbidden acts. They are harmful in this world and in the Hereafter, or in either one of them only (Ibn Abd Al-Salam, 2000, vol. 1, pp. 164-165)

#### 2.3.4 *Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziya (d. 751AH/1350AD)*

Ibn Al-Qayyim adopted a similar approach to his predecessors, particularly Al-Ezz Ibn Abd Salam and Ibn Miskawayh. He supported the idea that good character is founded on four pillars, which are patience, chastity, courage, and justice, and he attributed evil character to four pillars: ignorance, injustice, desire, and anger. He explained the values linked to the four pillars of good as well as bad character.

Ibn Al-Qayyim explained that blameworthy ethics breed blameworthy ethics, and praiseworthy ethics breed praiseworthy ethics. He pointed out that every praiseworthy character is surrounded by two blameworthy alternatives, falling between two extremes. For instance, humbleness falls between arrogance and abject disgrace, and mercy falls between harshness and cowardliness. He offered an understanding that ethics is divided into two parts, innate and acquirable, and elucidated the distinction between them.

Ibn Al-Qayyim also argued that bad ethics and immoral character are changeable through education, training, and the process of purification. He cautioned that changing human character is one of the most difficult tasks, and emphasized the fact that good character is the religion itself: the essence of faith, and the teachings of Islam. He concluded that Islamic ethics is all about exerting good and desisting from and repelling evil (Ibn Al-Qayyim, n.d., vol. 2, pp. 316-330).



### 2.3.5 *Muhammad Abdullah Draz (d. 1378AH/1958AD)*

Draz was one of the greatest modern Muslim scholars who contributed to the development of Islamic thought and Muslim scholarship with his original and innovative works. His work on ethics was originally written in French, entitled *La Morale Du Koran*, and later translated into English as 'The Moral World of the Qur'an'. This is perhaps the best illustrative example of an original and innovative contribution to the field of Islamic ethics in the modern age.

The work is centred on analysing the theoretical concepts of the science of ethics from the semantics of the Qur'anic texts. However, he did not lose sight of the legacy of traditional Muslim scholarship on ethics, which he categorized into three types: works that offer some scientific recommendations and enjoin people to follow the virtues; works that describe human nature and define virtue mainly by using the approaches of Greek philosophy; and works that combine the above two methods. He criticized such approaches, arguing that they are not innovative, and is heavily much influenced by Greek philosophy, and did not explore the Qur'anic insights on their own terms.

Furthermore, Draz criticized the tendency adopted by some classical Muslim scholars of confining the meaning of ethics to the concept of 'inner self'. He pointed out that the concept 'inner self' has various abilities and functions, such as the ability to perceive, think, imagine, and remember, among others. Thus, for instance he considered Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's definition of ethics as ambiguous, and in need of review, because the concept of 'inner self' is much more than just moral character, entailing also intellectual and emotional mechanisms (Draz, 2008, pp. 2-4).

Draz also criticized Western scholarship on Islamic ethics, arguing that Western analysts purposely overlooked the Qur'anic theory of ethics because of their bias toward their heritage, which disregards Islam and its civilization. He explained that when they study ethics they survey the Greek and the Judaeo-Christian heritage, and then skip the Islamic heritage and jump to modern and contemporary works on ethics in the West, particularly in Europe (Draz, 2008, pp. 1-2).

Draz's main contribution to Islamic ethics is in twofold: his strong methodology in approaching theoretical ethics moral concepts,

departing from the semantics of the Qur'anic texts and exploring the understandings of modern ethicists; and his deep analysis of the content of the Qur'anic theory of ethics, elucidating the moral themes and concepts of the Qur'an itself (Draz, 2008, pp. 6-9). He discussed major concepts of ethics including obligation, responsibility, sanction, intention, and inclination. He also offered an interesting typology and brief analysis of practical ethics that include personal, family, social, state, and religious ethics, as well as some virtues in the Qur'an (Draz, 2008, pp. 295-345).

### 2.3.6 Toshihiko Izutsu (d. 1414AH/1993AD)

Izutsu wrote extensively about many religions including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. His strong background in philosophy, linguistics, and semantics helped him to offer a deep understanding of religious traditions concepts, and a great ability in addressing issues of comparative religion. His moral ideas are explained in his famous work *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*. Izutsu explained that there are two categories of ethical terms: those of the ethical life of Muslims in the Islamic community (*Ummah*), and those of an ethico-religious nature. He focused on the second category, believing that in Islam human character is religious and ethical at the same time (Izutsu, 1966, pp. 16-23).

To build his argument about Islamic ethics in general and in the Qur'an in particular, Izutsu offered some interesting analysis of the relationship between the moral ideas in ancient, pre-Islamic Arabia (*Jahiliyyah*) and Islam. He argued that pre-Islamic Arabs were endowed with a great sense of morality that enabled them to distinguish between right and wrong, or good and bad, in addition to possessing many virtues such as nobility, courage, veracity, patience generosity, and sheltering the weak. However, he highlighted that these moral abilities lacked a theoretical basis, and thus in many instances they could be influenced by their tribal affiliation and traditions, because the source of their moral virtues was the legacy of their fathers and ancestors, which were criticized and reformed by the Qur'an and Islam. The 'Islamization of *jahiliyyah* virtues', or in other words the transition from the tribal code of conduct to Islamic ethics, was laid down by Islam from the early days of its emergence, established upon fear of Allah who is the Divine Judge and Lord of the Day of Judgement (Izutsu, 1966, pp. 45-104).

Finally, Izutsu explained a set of major ethico-religious concepts in the Qur'an by applying the methodological principles that he developed and presented in the first part of the book. In addition to discussing the concepts of *kufr* (disbelief), *iman* (belief/faith), and *nifāq* (hypocrisy) and their structure and scope, he analyzed the terms that correspond in meaning to the English words 'good' and 'bad'. These Qur'anic terms include numerous concepts such as *ṣāliḥ* (righteous), *fasād* (corruption/evil-doings), *khayr* and *sharr* (good and evil), and *tayyib* and *khābiṭh* (good and bad, pure and impure) (Izutsu, 1966, pp. 119-249).

### 3 Significance of Islamic Ethics

Contemporary Muslim societies evidently suffer from many social, economic, political, and environmental problems, including corruption, tyranny, disunity, poverty, gender inequality, and climate change. To address these problems, it is necessary to identify the main reasons for their causation, and propose potential solutions. As noted previously, scholars and experts tend to overlook the ethical dimension. It is very important to emphasize that in Islamic ontology, the ultimate cause of all social, economic, political, and environmental problems is the unethical behaviour of humans, thus the reform of human ethics is the key to changing negative manifestations in the world. As Allah says, "Corruption has appeared on land and sea, because of what people's hands have earned, in order to make them taste some of what they have done, so that they might return" (Qur'an, 30:41).

*Corruption* in this context refers to decay or disorder, rather than political / systemic corruption discussed below; the latter is one manifestation of the more general corruption attributed to failings in human ethics. The significance of Islamic ethics for Muslim countries stems from the opportunity and potentials that it could provide to unveil the unethical roots of the major problems and challenges toward overcoming or reducing them, based on the logic that if a problem is caused by ethical failings, the remedy is to enhance the lacking ethical principles that form actions.

#### 3.1 Corruption

Corruption is a widespread moral problem in Muslim-majority countries, manifest in activities such as bribery, nepotism, favouritism, money politics, and the abuse of public offices. Many scholars argue

that corruption impedes all sectors of society, including the social, political, economic, and bureaucratic systems, in both the short and long term (Ahmed, 2005, pp. 85-109). Since the launch of the Corruption Perceptions Index in 1995 to the present, the majority of Muslim countries ranked in the bottom of the list, which classifies world countries from highly clean to highly corrupt (Transparency International, 2020).

Contemporary history, especially since 2010, tells us that corruption was the main drive behind the 'Arab Spring' revolutions, beginning in Tunisia and subsequently spreading throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The demand for transparency, political and economic reform, prosecution of corrupt leaders, and eradication of all types of corrupt affairs has become an obvious slogan across all such revolutions and public unrest in Muslim societies. The general people felt the devastation of the impact of corruption on their lives and future generations, and therefore revolted to change the situation, initially through peaceful demonstrations, subsequently escalating into violent conflict and a protracted civil conflict and breakdown of normal society in cases such as Libya and Syria. The response of the regimes was generally violent and resulted in the loss of lives, uncountable injuries, a huge wave of internal displacement and refugees, and heavy destruction of cities, villages, and infrastructure. Some reports estimate that between 400-570,000 Syrians have been killed since 2011, and about 10 million Syrians have been internally displaced, with nearly 7 million refugees. The reconstruction of Syria is predicted to cost at least US\$250 billion (HRW, 2019; UNHCR, 2019).

These corrupt acts and problems could be attributed to major weakness of ethical teachings, particularly unethical qualities such as human greed, love of power and power retention, rapacious avarice, deceit and betrayal of trust, and bad leadership qualities (i.e. tyranny). The high-level corruption practiced by political leaders is perhaps the worst type of corruption, because of the scale of harm it inflicts on the state and society. Reports show that former heads of state in the Arab Spring had hoarded enormous amounts of money from their countries' wealth while their people were struggling to survive, including Zeine El-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia (US\$17 billion), Muammar Gaddafi of Libya (US\$75-80 billion), Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen (\$35-60 billion), Bashar Al Assad of Syria (US\$122 billion), and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt (US\$70 billion) (Galbreath, 2017; Sahajwani, 2016).

Ibn Khaldun considered the passion for luxurious living as the root cause of corruption among the ruling group, and asserted that luxury corrupts the character. He explained that luxury causes the soul to acquire diverse kinds of evil and sophisticated customs, and consequently people adopt bad qualities that ultimately lead to the disintegration and death of societies (Ibn Khaldun, 1967, pp. 109, 134-135; Ahmed, 2005, pp. 62-66). Moreover, corrupt political leaders set a bad moral example to their subjects, which in turn encourages corrupt dealings among civil servants and the people. It was reported that Ali Ibn Abi Talib (RA) told Omar Ibn Al-Khattab (RA) that the people were clean and transparent because he was a leader with high standard of integrity and transparency, while corrupt leaders embezzling money from the state treasury would have led their followers to also be corrupt (Ibn Al-Jawzi, 1978, p. 155).

### 3.2 *Tyranny*

Many Muslim countries are ruled by totalitarian regimes, in which autocratic dictators and their cliques rule unrestricted by any laws, subjugating their peoples and committing many aggressions against human rights, banning freedoms, ruling with injustice, and impeding their countries' socio-economic development, entrenching economic and political crises. It is obvious that the 'Arab Spring' revolutions occurred as a reaction against such regimes, seeking reform. Dictators are generally morally sick, indicated by symptoms such as their inflated ego and megalomania, feelings of superiority and arrogance toward others, with ownership, humiliation, subjugation, and killing their populations, and the rejection of any opinion other than theirs, inflicting cruelty and injustice on their peoples. Ibn khaldun pointed out that when a ruler takes position of power, he becomes too proud to let others share in his leadership and control over the people, or let them participate in it, because the qualities of haughtiness and pride are innate in animal nature. Thus, he develops the quality of egotism (*ta'alluh*), which is innate in human beings (1967, p. 123). The epitome of tyranny in the Qur'an is Pharaoh, whose unethical behaviour was expounded in many verses throughout the Qur'an, but perhaps the most striking passage is the adumbration of his unethical deeds, "Pharaoh exalted himself in the land, and divided its people into factions. He persecuted a group of them, slaughtering their sons, while sparing their daughters. He was truly a corrupter" (28:4), "Pharaoh said, 'O nobles, I know of no god for

you other than me” (Qur’an, 28:38), and “He [the Pharaoh] said, “I am your Lord, the most high” (Qur’an, 79:24).

The Arab Spring revolutions disclosed the unethical acts of the dictators such as corruption, nepotism, cronyism, favouritism, abuse of public office, and trust for private benefits and the like. As a result, many dictators were removed from office, meeting with various fates after their regimes collapsed. Zein El-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia fled to Saudi Arabia as a refugee and died there; Muammar Qaddafi of Libya was murdered by an angry mob, Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen was shot by a Houthi sniper, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was released from prison and then died in military hospital, and Omar El-Bashir of Sudan was brought to some form of justice. Many other dictators are still in office, although they have caused heavy loss of human lives and casualties, and have caused almost a total destruction of their countries just to remain in power. The most notorious example of the resisting dictators is Bashar Al-Assad of Syria.

Banning or committing aggressions against freedoms is a dark facet of tyrannical dictatorships. Fundamental freedoms, including freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and movement are absolute, preserved by all religious traditions, philosophies of life, human rights conventions, and international law. For instance, one of the golden rules in the religion of Islam is freedom, as Allah says, “There shall be no compulsion in religion...” (Qur’an, 2:256; 10:99); “And say, the truth is from your Lord. Whoever wills—let him believe. And whoever wills—let him disbelieve” (Qur’an, 18:29). Besides, article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (UN, 2015, p. 40).

Freedom has a great impact on the media and is inseparable from democracy. Dictators always try to silence journalists under the principle ‘whoever is not with us is against us’. This means that people who go against the regime or ruler will face all sorts of punishment, including assassination, imprisonment, dismissal from jobs, harassment, deprivation of rights of travel, and being put on blacklists etc. Reports on

freedom of journalism show that hundreds of journalists are being killed each year, many others have been abducted or jailed, and numerous others have been sacked from their job. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) confirmed that between 1992 and 2020 about 1369 journalists and media workers were killed, and about 872 (approximately 64%) of them were murdered; most of them were assassinated in Muslim countries. The savage murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Arabian Consulate in Istanbul in October 2018 by Saudi agents is a striking example (CJP, 2020). Moreover, in its 2019 annual report, the CPJ reported that 250 journalists in the world were imprisoned (CPJ, 2020). History shows that tyrannical dictatorships breed unethical behaviours, violence, terrorism, anarchy, and all kinds of corruption.

### 3.3 *Disunity*

The Sharī'ah calls for all ethical behaviour and virtuous dealings among Muslim individuals, groups, communities, and nations. These virtues include unity, cooperation, love, and mutual respect. Uncountable texts from the Qur'an (e.g. 49:10, 8:46, 2:103, and 5:2) and *ḥadīth* (e.g. Al-Bukhari, 46:7; Muslim, 45:4) support this tendency. Based on the virtues of the Sharī'ah and the principles of Islam, the OIC is the collective voice of the Muslim World, and its Charter clearly states that its prime role is to unite Muslims and support cooperation and collaborations among member states (OIC, 2020, 1:1).

However, today as well as in the past, there are numerous political problems, conflicts, disputes, fragmentation and hostility, sectarian hatred, bigotry, political hypocrisy, and economic inequalities among Muslim countries. These problems have weakened the unity of the Islamic *Ummah* and contributed to the decay of its civilization. The OIC failed in resolving these conflicts, disputes, and tensions, including the 'Gulf Crisis' caused by the Saudi-led blockade on Qatar since June 2017. The on-going conflicts in Yemen, Syria, and Libya are just examples. The failure of OIC in resolving the problems of the Muslim *Ummah* was the main reason that prompted the leaders of Malaysia, Turkey, and Qatar to convene the Kuala Lumpur Summit, which took place on December 18-21, 2019, in Kuala Lumpur to address the urgent problems of Muslim countries and minorities. Hence, unity is a moral responsibility of all Muslims, especially the leaders, and "a tremendous need of Ummah [which] could not come into being with narrow sectarian,

ethnic prejudiced, national and ethnic discriminations” (Hassan, 2015, p. 28).

Looking at the causes and factors that have fuelled disunity among Muslim countries, besides political, economic, and foreign interference dynamics, there are numerous unethical acts and attitudes such as hatred, arrogance, and the inflated ego of some political leaders, manifest in the way stronger countries despise small or weak states, as in the case of the Saudi war on Yemen and the current Gulf Crisis.

### 3.4 Poverty

According to the World Bank (WB, 2020), there are about 734 million people living in extreme poverty worldwide and estimates that around 60 million people will fall into extreme poverty (under \$1.90/day) in 2020, due to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic and the oil price drop. Half of the extreme poor live in just five countries, two of which are Muslim-majority countries (Nigeria and Bangladesh). Furthermore, the UN (2019) released the list of the Least Developed Countries for 2019, and 21 out of 47 of them were OIC member states. Moreover, more than a half (13 out of 25) of the poorest countries in the world in 2019 are Muslim countries (World Population Review, 2020).

Does Islam as a religion and Sharī‘ah as a code of life cause poverty, as colonialist doctrines assert? Do the poor cause their own poverty by resigning themselves to a culture of poverty, in which nothing can be done to change their situation? Reading the Sharī‘ah sources of knowledge and the writings of well-established Muslim scholars, one can easily conclude that they are all against poverty and have extensive injunctions to fight it. The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) sought refuge with Allah from poverty, and equated it to *kufir* (disbelief), supplicating: “O Allah, I seek refuge with You from *kufir* and poverty”. A man said, ‘Are they equal?’ He said, ‘Yes’” (An-Nasa’i, 2020, 50:58).

One of the major ethical roots of poverty is human greed and selfishness of dictators, oligarchs, and national and multinational companies. In a capitalistic system, the goal of many wealthy people and companies is maximizing the financial benefits and fortune at the expense of the poor. For instance, among some of the negative aspects of multinational companies is the driving of local operators out of business and in some cases killing traditional domestic businesses in many



countries, particularly in Africa and Asia, leading to the unemployment and impoverishment of local people who exclusively depend on their labour for survival (Tirimba & Macharia, 2014). Besides, many wealthy people and companies are tax evaders, and do not share a portion of their wealth with poor people. McGee (2012) maintains that evading one's duty to pay tax is an immoral act, because everyone has a moral obligation to pay tax for the support of the poor and for the legitimate functions of government. A common feature of developing countries is that dictators' "inflated ego and megalomania drives them to build gigantic monuments, opulent mansions and palaces, statues of themselves, and treat themselves to bathrooms with solid gold fixtures, private jets, a fleet of luxury cars and other extravagances, with no concern for the fact that their people are living in abject poverty and starving to death" (Galbreath, 2017).

In the modern world, poverty does not exist as an intrinsic reality, but as a result of an active, unethical process of impoverishment, which creates social injustice, division, and corruption in societies.

### 3.5 *Gender Inequality*

Islam's insistence on the rights of women was revolutionary, such as delineating property rights for married women not achieved in the West until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but paradoxically gender inequalities are a rampant and striking characteristic of Muslim societies. For instance, none of the Muslim countries is among the top 20 best countries ranking for women in 2019 (U.S.News.com, 2019). Furthermore, the gender inequality in the MENA societies is far bigger than any other global region, particularly compared to North America and Europe. Muslim countries are generally rated the worst in the Global Gender Gap Index, and it could take some 100 years to close the gap between men and women in many fields including jobs, education, economic and political participation, access to resources, and appointment in public and private sector positions (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Can the above situation be explained by the teachings of Sharī'ah or people's ethical behaviour and attitudes? The Qur'an guarantees women the right to live with dignity and prosperity in all aspects as equals to men, and an integral part of their societies (Qur'an, 2:180-182, 228; 4:1, 32; 9:71; 16:97; 26:37-38; 30:21; 49:13). Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) articulated many *ḥadīths* in this regard,

including “The most complete of the believers in faith, is the one with the best character among them, and the best of you are those who are best to their wives” (At-Tirmidhi, 2020, 1:628). Besides, the Prophet (ﷺ) strongly recommended that men care for women and fear Allah in dealing with them (Al-Mubarakpuri, 2009, p. 299; Al-Bukhari, 2020, 67:120; Muslim 2020, 17:80).

However, looking at the current situation of women in Muslim societies and the findings of some empirical studies on this matter, including Lussier and Fish (2016), it is convincing that the problem lies in traditional cultures and social practices manifesting unethical acts and attitudes. However, this does not rule out other contributing factors including the economic level, inequalities, and erroneous or narrow understandings of the teachings of Islam.

### 3.6 *Climate Change*

Climate change is a global problem, with particularly acute impacts in Muslim countries, with a high percentage of damage in their environments. With its 57 member states, the OIC is the second largest international organization after the UN. The total population of OIC countries is approximately two billion Muslims, representing around 24% of the world population (OIC, 2020; WorldData.info, 2019). However, Muslim societies have been great contributors to the current environmental catastrophe in its anthropogenic dimensions because of unethical acts and unsustainable policies toward the environment, including wastefulness in using Allah’s bounties (natural resources), pollution of the air, sea, and land by irresponsible acts such as open burning of waste and fossil fuel, dumping into the sea, heavy illegal forest logging, and a lack of control of carbon dioxide emissions from petrochemical and gas plants. Moreover, Muslim countries are among the lowest contributors to resolve the problem of global greenhouse gas emissions (Haghamed, 2016). This situation points to lack of awareness of the danger of climate change and absence of clear plans to tackle environmental issues, despite the fact that the Sharī’ah commands Muslims to care for the environment and be morally responsible in their actions because each one of them supposed to be a *khalifa* (vicegerent) on earth.

In view of the analysis of the ethical roots of the major problems in contemporary Muslim societies, it is important to emphasize that

the divine revelation treats Islamic ethics seriously, calls to build an ethical community and protect it from all kinds of unethical acts and habits that are harmful to social unity and cohesion. There are numerous commandments and prohibitions as well as reminders and alerts to uphold good character and avoid bad acts that harm the social fabric of society and the international community. These injunctions are scattered throughout the Qur'an however it is important to bring to lime light the Qur'anic call for global ethics particularly mutual respect, cooperation, upholding justice, avoiding suspicions, propagating fake news, spying on one another, backbiting one another, and spreading slender (49:9-13).

It is also equally important to emphasize the importance of early childhood ethical education to bring up ethically upright children by teaching them essential ethical values, including thankfulness to the Creator and parents; kindness to parents, particularly the mother; responsibility and accountability for all actions; and moderation, patience, modesty, and righteousness (Qur'an, 31:13-19).

Moreover, the Qur'an extensively addresses a wide range of ethical problems and enjoins people to avoid bad social ethics and acts like *Zinā* (adultery), false accusations, false witnessing, slander, and advocating immorality and obscenity. Besides, it encourages people to monitor their tongues, be forgiving, help the poor and needy, follow good etiquettes for exchanging visits, and upholding chastity (24:2-33). Contrary to the popular misconception, Sharī'ah is not merely *hudud* punishments, or punishment in general, rather it seeks to direct people to protect freedom of religion, life, property, honour, and lineage. It sets out the fundamentals of the straight ethical path by clear legislations in all sectors of life, as articulately summarized in the Qur'anic passages 6:151-153 and eloquent *ḥadīth* of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) (Muslim, 2020, 45:40).

In addition, the Qur'an emphasizes the significance of the commitment of the elite and people with wisdom, including political leaders, religious scholars, ethicists, educationists, policy makers, sociologists, and others in reform and development efforts. Allah says, "If only there were, among the generations before you, people with wisdom, who spoke against corruption on earth—except for the few whom we saved..." (Qur'an, 11:116).

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper explores the issue of Islamic ethics in contemporary Muslim societies. An attempt has been made to discuss two major issues, namely the conceptual framework, and the significance of Islamic ethics for contemporary Muslim societies. In investigating the first issue, the discussion centred around exploring the literal and the technical meanings of ethics in addition to reflecting on the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, and the views of some prominent classical as well as contemporary scholars on Islamic ethics. It was concluded that the two main sources of Sharī'ah, the Qur'an and *ḥadīth*, lay down the foundation of Islamic ethics. Moreover, a critical examination of the views of Ibn Miskawayh, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, Al-Ezz Ibn Abd As-Salam, Ibn al-Qayyim, Draz, and Izutsu, revealed that although they differ in their approaches to Islamic ethics, they mainly draw their moral idea from the Qur'an and *ḥadīth*. Besides, they consider Islamic ethics as essential to human life, targeting the refinement of ethics, changing bad character and habits through education, training, and good practices.

In addressing the second issue, an attempt has been made to deliberate on the importance of Islamic ethics for contemporary Muslim societies in a non-conventional method by analysing the ethical roots of the current major socio-economic, political, and environmental problems and challenges. These problems include corruption, tyranny, disunity, poverty, gender inequality, and climate change. It has been argued that all these problems and challenges are rooted in unethical behaviour and evil character, such as arrogance, human greed, love of wealth, desire for power and power retention, selfishness, hatred, bigotry, inflated ego, and irresponsibility. It has also been emphasized that there is a gap between the lived reality of modern Muslims, replete with evil and vice, and the ideals, virtues, and teachings of the Sharī'ah.

In line with analysing the ethical roots of the five major problems discussed above, an attempt was based on moral principles and virtues learned from the Qur'an (particularly the chapters *Al-Hujurat* (The Chambers), *Luqman*, and *An-Nur* (The Light)), to emphasize the need for ethical reform. The Qur'an calls for global ethics such as cooperation, mutual respect, strengthening the fundamentals of social ethics relating to social cohesion, social relations, social justice, inculcating ethical education from early childhood and avoiding fake news and slander.

Furthermore, the study highlights the great value of engaging the elite as well as the general people in the reform and development process by incorporating Islamic ethics in all segments of life. Political leaders, religious scholars, ethicists, educationists, sociologists, policy makers, and media workers have vital roles to play in their commitment and contributions to enable contemporary Muslim societies to adapt to modern development efforts and address the challenges ahead. In view of the above analysis, the following recommendations are put forward for the implementation of Islamic ethics in order to overcome the major socio-economic, political, and environmental problems faced by the world today, to adapt to modern challenges:

- Reform the education system and change or amend the education philosophy to produce global citizens endowed with strong ethical values. There is an urgent need to include Islamic ethics in theory and practice as a subject and program of study in all levels of education, with special emphasis on professional and applied ethics.
- Encourage research, publication, collaborative works, seminars, and conferences on Islamic ethics in Muslim countries and throughout the world. It is important to implement the outcomes of these researches in government policies across all sectors and areas.
- Encourage Islamic ethics exemplary models and personalities to play a vital role in society, and enhance practical good character in public spheres.
- Boost the ethical behaviour of the youth, professionals, and the public by awareness campaigns, relevant training, media programs, and incentives.
- Review and develop all professional and penal codes to consolidate Islamic ethics in all segments of contemporary Muslim societies.

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