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The state of ethics & responsibility in some traditional societies of middle east countries

ABSTRACT

The implication and definition of ethics and social responsibilities are different in various societies. They cannot be considered similar in all aspects for all places. Their roles and implementations vary in different situations and usually change according to different attitudes, religions, customs and so on.

However all religions in the world lead to general ethical principles but sometimes their interpretations differ for different people which mostly depend on their educational background, culture, beliefs, etc.

We cannot provide a unique prescription for all societies all over the world. Any ethical rule & order should be based on the local characteristics of the area we live in. However, there are some general ethical rules that all people are to obey them but unfortunately some people in traditional societies are not aware of them. To them some of their behaviors which may be considered wrong in most part of the world seem right!

As a whole, ethics and responsibility depend on many factors such as religion, geographical situation, customs and traditional beliefs, kind of government and the rate of people's trust to their officials, social education, economical potentialities, technologies and so on.

Directly or indirectly, these factors influence on ethics and environmental policies in a society and consequently in the world that will cause welfare for future generation or vice versa. This paper tries to talk about above mentioned factors, particularly in traditional societies.

INTRODUCTION

What does ethic mean?

According to dictionary it means the principle of right or good conduct or the study of general nature of morals and of the specific moral choices to be made by the individual in his relationship with others and the word ethics means the rules or standards governing the conduct of the members of a profession. (American Heritage dictionary-1982)

The above definition is only a lexical meaning. It is clear that there are other definitions related to philosophy, politics, religion and so on. Axiologically it is the study of values and value judgments.

Ethical Values

As a whole, there is not a general and an absolute meaning for the value in ethics in all places and in all times, it depends on many other factors and can be divided to some branches as follows:

1-Humanitica l Values such as biological, emotional, rational, religious values which are not stable and similar in all societies and depend on many other factors such as education, politics, culture & customs and....

2-Intrinsic Values which are internally and originally beautiful and adorable such as a flower, pure nature, sight seeing of stars at night and so on. All people in all societies and in all period of history admired and worshiped them.

3-Extrinsic Values or Instrumental Values such as financial matters; car, house, job, race, nationality and ... which originally do not have any values but we have given them some financial values in our social relations; gold does not have any value in desert when there is nobody there. Unfortunately these values have overcome the other ones and at present everything is compared to them.

However there have also been other schools such as existentialism, naturalism, egoism, altruism, hedonism, secularism, spiritualism, rationalism, emotionalism, Evolutionism, determinism, etc. which may have different views on ethical values. (Dadbeh-2002)

Ethics in the past

If we go back to some thousands years ago when the first human being were captured in their traditional beliefs, the ethical problems were the actions and thoughts which were related to the simple way of living such as hunting rules, the ways of ownership of tools or land, nature, simple communications. Now, if somebody tries to obey those rules he would be laughed at. Then step by step, by developing human way of living, inventions and explorations; new families, communities, new languages, new cultures and new beliefs appeared. Then the older beliefs and ethical views which could not be adapted to new way of civilizations, changed, eliminated or even considered unethical, they got new definitions and new applications.

However, there have always been general ethical rules for all ages in the history which I think comes from the pure nature of humanity. For example, robbery, lying, dishonesty and so on have never been approved and agreed as right doings by all people in all periods of time and everywhere.

Most of the ethical rules depend on the way we live and the tools we use. In the past, the ancient people were not aware of the natural events such as thunder or stormy wind & rain and etc., Because of their ignorance they made some rules & laws which were considered unethical if somebody did not follow them. For example, in Zoroastrian time, fire was considered very important to them, because it took them warm and alive in the very cold weather of those times so if somebody in the ancient Persia was impolite to it or put it off deliberately, it was considered unethical and a big sin. Too (Farah Varshi-1975)

The ways the ancient people lived and the way they thought caused to follow the theoretical rules of ethics. In those times the towns and villages were not so complicated and industrialized as today. The people had a very simple way of living and simple relations with each other. It was usual that they obeyed some unwritten rules which were prescribed orally by the respected old men of their tribes. Regarding this fact that those communities were small and limited to few families, so it was helpful to preach the people and aware them of the ethical rules orally. But this way of teaching ethics cannot be so useful in present crowded societies with various tribes and families. This is the main problem of traditional societies that try to preach the people for the right doing rather than recognizing the causes of corruption and establishing the logical rules to prevent the unlawful activities.

Fortunately, the crimes happened those times were not so complicated as today and the societies were not corrupted and ruined as present ones. Everything came from nature and was adapted by it. Even the various religions were formed according to natural characteristics of human beings and because of this reasons we could find great happiness and appropriate relationships, pleasure, honesty and pure relations among the religious communities of those times. Experts think that prehistoric religions arose out of fear and wonder about natural events, such as the occurrence of storm and earthquakes and the birth of babies and animals. To explain why someone died, people credited supernatural powers

greater than themselves or greater than the world around them. They made the ethical rules regarding their fears and ignorance. It was so till that new inventions and new industries and new civilizations step by step have been formed. Gradually new religions appeared and ethical values changed or vanished or got new definitions, deeply in contrast with past.

During the two thousands of years, since Aristotle, i.e. the 4th century BC, till the 17th century, the philosophers gradually transferred their views from theoretical ethics to practical ethics. The philosophical areas such as Skepticism, Stoicism, Epicureanism and Neoplatonism tried to follow the philosophy which were similar to religious attitudes (Saney, 2002).

As I mentioned above new societies with new inventions and civilizations appeared. Little by little then the old religious rules and beliefs could not solve the problems of those societies and it caused to Renaissance in Europe in Middle age, then new philosophers such as Martin Luther, Spinoza, Kant, Steward Mill, Nietzsche and W. Durant and others presented their philosophies in ethics. But, regarding the different schools and philosophies, we have not been able to vanish and eliminate the unethical problems yet. To my opinion, the most important question in this field is not ethical philosophy but the basic training of the people and the materials that we teach them; They depend on economical & social and cultural institutes, political, educational, social laws and the ways the authorities legislate and execute them and the rate of people's trust to them.

Conflicts of traditional societies to new changes in ethical values

The main problems which traditional societies have today is the conflicts of their traditional rules, customs and attitude which are in contrast to the new industrialized culture in 21st century. One of the main characteristics of these societies is that they try to follow the same social laws that were followed hundred and thousands years ago. Many officials, educators and clergymen always preach their people to be honest, do this or do that and so on. Unfortunately at present there are so many evidences of corruption and evil actions in some traditional societies because of their illogical and unscientific behaviors. The fact is that we should behave professionally not emotionally.

Unfortunately, in the eve of post modernism and in the eve of exploration the farthest space, some people of these traditional societies are so deeply rooted in their traditional beliefs that can not be understood, analyzed and adapted by social scientific laws!! They have always conflicts with using new technologies in conformity with their traditional beliefs. However, when the individual benefit arises they try to ignore and forget these conflicts only for themselves but not for others!! The big disaster or misery happens when the legislators, high authorities and the academic thinkers of these societies think traditionally but act and live modernly.

We talk about ethics and morality as if they are absolutes, yet morality is always the customs of one's country and current feeling of one's peers. Morality can be both normative and relativistic at the same time. It depends on the situation and cultural, economical potentiality of the society.

The Corruption in traditional societies

As a whole all kinds of corruption are linked to each other and they effect, directly or indirectly, in other part society. we can generally name some reasons of corruption in traditional or even modern societies as follows:

1-Economical Corruption

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There is little doubt that the absence of a free and competitive market, red tape, high inflation and declining income are, among other things, responsible for the disturbing trend in economic corruption. Such bitter realities notwithstanding, economic pundits are divided over how to tackle this ugly and harmful trend whose impact is visible in almost all facets of public administration.

Corruption in general stems from shortfalls in the legal and judicial apparatus as well as weak economic rules and regulations. But other factors such as the political and cultural climates, should not be disregarded in the spread of a variety of social ills, not the least corruption, embezzlement, misappropriation of public money, nepotism and misuse of public office for personal and factional gain.

2-The widening social rifts

Dwindling purchasing power of fixed-wage earners, lack of job security... are among the main factors contributing to corruption at the middle and lower ranks of the traditional society. Hence it is obvious that putting people behind bars (some prisoners are already overflowing with economic offenders) will not resolve the deepening crises of economic chaos in the long term.

These and other positive changes will come into effect if and when the overall climate is democratic, people's rights are respected and the government has the trust of the informed masses. Although corruption in a society like ours has all the trappings of sick and declining economy, it is basically rooted in politics. Common sense dictates political development be given priority which by extension will bring economic growth and accountability in its fold. As long as this paramount consideration is postponed to another day, we will see more, not less, of the criminals and corruption will continue to spread its tentacles with disturbing momentum.

First of all we must come to terms with the reality that there are deep social rifts in traditional society. Issues such as social justice and fair distribution of wealth continue to be serious sources of concern.

The remedy lies in proper planning, higher production and investments, transparency and accountability at the higher levels.

3-Lack of social cohesion and security in a society

There are three sides to social security. One is linked to economic growth, second based on traditional approach towards security and the third is the function of cultural development.

Unfortunately in traditional societies, these aspects have been considered in almost all planning schemes while the important criteria of security on the basis of social welfare has been overlooked. In mean time, it must be noted that the elite and the masses do not necessarily share the same views when it comes to security consideration. On the basis of the first view for instance, dams should be constructed while the second view point maintains that all members of the society should have equal social rights. The third view subscribes to the notion that only popular and elected bodies should be at the helm of affairs.

The simple rule is that the less we have social security, the more will be the threat of our social corruption. Among the threats to these societies are the weak economical modus operandi and the ineffectiveness of the administrative system with its unending layers of bureaucracy and red tape which cause do not trust and obey the legislators and the laws. The big misery happens for a society when the trustful and honest men do not feel security but the law breakers and dishonest people feel security and deserved respectfully!

Disaffection in society causes ethical corruption

Fortunately or unfortunately, the Western model of development has failed in some countries in Middle east, because it has been based on the particular cultures and characteristics which can not be so helpful in traditional societies. Culturally the traditional societies are different with the European people. I think the big problem and the main obstacle in development in traditional societies are cultural rather than economical.

All cultures have features that result from basic needs shared by all people. Every culture has systems for assigning power and responsibility, including social ranks and governments.

Anthropology suggests that when peoples and cultures are squeezed, extreme ideologies sometimes emerge, inspired by strange and unexpected beliefs.

True peace and security for the 21st century will only come about when we find a way to address the underlying issues of disparity, dislocation and dispossession that have voked the madness of our age. We desperately need a global acknowledgement of the fact that no people and no nation can truly prosper unless the bounty of our collective ingenuity and opportunities are available and accessible to all.

We must aspire to create a new international spirit of pluralism, a true global democracy in which unique cultures, unique language, unique government in which all societies in the world, large and small, are allowed the right to exist equally. We must learn to live together in peace and enriched by the deepest trusts, kindness, co-sympathy and co-operations.

Exploitation of children can be an important factor of ethical corruption in traditional societies

The voices of the poor, who deal each moment with the consequences of environmental degradation, political corruption, overpopulation, the gross distortion in the distribution of wealth and the consumption of resources, who share few of the material benefits of modernity, will no longer be silent.

The issue of children suffering exploitation, abuse and violence was a hushed-up matter, but after much open discussion, governmental authorities have pledged to combat these deplorable situations.

Millions of children are living under especially difficult situations due to war and conflict. The goals for this category did not carry a target year and can be said to be the most vague and difficult to define among the four topics addressed. HIV/AIDS is not only killing young people, but also turning children into orphans. I was impressed by the speech of a young speaker who said " you call us future, but we are also the present now"(Agnes-Chan).

Hard Facts in Iran

The State Welfare Organization of Iran presented shocking facts and figures at a recent conference on ' The Role of Youth in Social Activities' It was said that close to 4 million youth suffer from some form of depression while 57 suicide attempts are reported every 110 days.

This year the number of girls who fled their homes shot up by 20 percent and Iran has the fourth largest divorce rate in the world. According to the SWO, every two months nearly 220 bodies of unidentified drug addicts are found across the sprawling capital. The organization blew the whistle on the quality of life and categorized the unfolding social crisis as disturbing. Prevailing conditions have been singled out as supercritical.

It is beyond the scale and scope of this column to identify those responsible for such a disastrous situation. But it is crucial to scrutinize the matter and reissue a warning to higher ups who have a problem coming to terms with the stark realities of today's Iran.

It cannot be denied that social maladies basically stem from political wrong doings. It is obvious that the way our political affairs are being handled largely affect the governing social conditions.

However, the painful point is that some in the society pursue their own brand of political interests amid the mounting critical conditions of the country. It is only logical to devise workable and comprehensive plans to overcome social crises. (Iran Daily- 2002)

Unlawful actions, lack of education and lack of social responsibility cause to Environmental Corruption

Deputy head of Tehran Municipality in charge of transportation and traffic, Mohammad Mehdi Khorasani-Nia, said that the rising air pollution in the capital claims an annual 7,800 lives, talking to IRANA on the occasion of the International Environment Day (June 5) he added, 20 urban dwellers, mostly old people and children, lose their lives per day due to escalating environmental pollution in Tehran"

The official stressed that a firm national determination is needed to effectively cut the level of pollution in the metropolis. " eight million liters of gasoline-equal to one-fifth of the total national demand - are consumed in Tehran every day", he exclaimed. " Every private automobile in capital transports an average 1.3 people in each trip; whereas a bus can carry people and a subway train (Metro) between 1,000 to 1,700 ones. " Compared to other big cities in the world, Tehran is lacking the appropriate infrastructure for delivering and easy public transportation (Iran Daily June 2002).

Unfortunately, in some traditional societies, breaking the traffic rules is considered as brave action by some people!, if you want to obey the rules you are laughed at . Police has lost his power and the people actually are free to break the traffic rules every where and every time. There is no security for the old men and young children or the blind to cross the streets safely. Sometimes you are alive only by chance or random even when you walk in the pavements! These social characteristics can destroy both people and their environment. The best remedy is to cultivate a strong will in the society to respect the laws of the land and defend social values. Regrettably enough our political elite have long remained content with slogans. If we are to overcome our social corruption, we must first respect public demands. We must follow a policy that the people trust us and educate them laws are necessary for their social happiness and welfare.

We should also have powerful and educated police to punish lawbreakers legally. The children and the people must be trained permanently in Schools, through some media such as Radio and T.V. etc.

The big problem is that Some people of these societies are unaware of some unethical jobs they do which destroy their natural environment. For example it is very common for them to cut the trees, make fire in forests and throw away their rubbish and waste materials everywhere and they do not care or they don not know what corruption they do in the nature. Most of these people think and live just for his or his family. They have not been taught to live in society and try to obey the others' social rights. May be, most of them do not know what social law mean? The other reason is that there is not serious and clear laws against them to keep them of their wrong doings.

A chance to Secure our Future

Over the past two centuries remarkable gains in living standards encouraged some of us to believe that natural limits to human well being had been conquered . But now the sheer number of human being , the natural desire of all of them to share the prosperity so far

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enjoyed only by a few , and the unprecedented rates at which we are using the energy and other resources, have taken us into uncharted territory. We should no longer imagine either that one fifth of humanity can indefinitely enjoy prosperity while much larger numbers live lives of deprivation and squalor, or that pattern of production and consumption which destroy the environment can bring us lasting prosperity.

The issue is not environment versus development , or ecology versus economy. It is how to integrate the two.

Of course , one summit by itself will not change history. But I believe this summit will be seen to have marked a turning point, if we win clear commitments to change, and new initiatives to make it happen, in five specific areas:

1- Water, In order to save the more than three million people who die, each year from water related diseases, we must improve water and sanitation services and access to them in order to save two thirds of the world's population from facing serious water shortages in the decades ahead, we must reduce leakage and waste .

2- Energy, in order to give poor people a chance to escape from poverty, we must provide clean energy for the two billion people who now lack it. In order to reduce disastrous climate change, we must improve energy efficiency , use more renewable energy.

3- Health. In order to save lives of millions who die each year from an unsafe environment dirty water, indoor air pollution, toxic wastes, insects that transmit deadly diseases- we must redouble our efforts to create a safe environment, make immunization and treatment available to all.

4- Agriculture. In order to ensure that food production keeps pace with the number of mouths to feed , we must find ways to halt land degradation and reverse the sharp decline in agricultural productivity.

In all these areas there are things we can do now- with the technologies already at our disposal, provided we give the right incentives. But science will bring us many more solutions if we make the right investment in research. Knowledge has always been the key to human development. It will also be the key to sustainability. (Kofi A . Annan)

Conclusion

Across the world, from the present post modernized societies to the most underdeveloped ones, and from New Age ecologists to religious moralizers, all believe that ethical corruption increasingly articulates a fear that the world is degenerating into a global destruction. Everything is falling apart. Nothing can be relied upon. We are being overrun and undermined by various wrong influences. The moral and cultural core of our societies are being eaten away from within.

To me, the killer of global ethics is our unscientific and traditional beliefs, cultural & economical poverty, discrimination, consumer culture, hedonism, nationalism, racism, individualism, evil politicians and the most important of all is the people's ignorance of their rights which threaten and unravels the families, communities, friendships and humanity all over the world.

While the poorest 20 per cent of the word's population accounts for just 1.3 per cent of its spending; that perhaps a billion people do not have secure access to clean drinking water and 2.4 billion to adequate sanitation; that a quarter of a billion children are forced to work, most of them in agriculture, and that another 100 million subsist on the streets; that an estimated 1.3 billion people breathe deeply polluted air, mainly in the enormous cities of the developing world. How can we expect to have ethical societies all over the world.?

Yet I think of some other figures; The problem is not the corruption which happens only for the under-developing and developing countries but also it would transfer to the developed and industrialized countries too in future. If the Corruption in ethics, culture, economics, environment and everything else is not eliminated, it would be such a deadly disease, AIDS and so on, which will threaten all people on the earth. There is an emerging recognition among national governments that they share common problems that often can only be addressed cooperatively: terrorism, crime, environment pollution, social security and so on. Let me bring you some verses of poem of the late Iranian poet related to this idea:

*All men are members of the same body
Created from one essence*

*If the fate brings suffering to one member
The others cannot stay at rest*

*You who remain indifferent to the pains of others
Do not deserve to be called human being (Saadi-Shirazi-)*

Instead of wasting so unbelievable amount of time, thought, money and human energy and ... on wars, why do not we use them in educating the people and improving their thoughts and their ways of livings. If they can be achieved, there is every reason to expect that the world will live together in peace and exist in happiness. There will not be any kind of crime, terrorism, overpopulation, exploitation, discrimination and ethical corruption. The Only Key is true and appropriate Education for All. Fortunately, I am optimistic to the future of human being because he has no alternative for surviving rather than removing any aspects of corruption he has made so far. He has to do it to survive.

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