

Charity in Islam is a comprehensive concept. It encompasses a wide variety of activities. These include monetary sacrifices, good deeds as well as acts of kindness and friendship.

A central theme that runs through a great number of verses in the Quran is about feeding the poor and the needy. These verses exhort Muslims to care for the poor, the needy and the orphan. They paint vivid images illustrating the great reward awaiting those who give charity and cast in a harsh light those who do not give.

A large number of the sayings of the Prophet is devoted to urging Muslims to give charity. These sayings stress the comprehensive nature of charity. A Every good deed is a charity@ , A meeting people with a smile is charity@ , An act of kindness to a living being is a charity@.

ZAKAT

A related concept is the concept of Zakat. Zakat is an obligatory monetary contribution to be paid by the rich to the poor (in the first instance) and to other categories of people that have been named in Quran. This type of charity is called in Arabic AZakat,@ which means growth but can also mean purity. Muslims understand the term to mean growth in wealth as a result of its purification. This is like pruning a tree. By removing the excess branches, one helps the tree to grow. It also has the spiritual implication that paying Zakat purifies oneself from greed and niggardness and purifies the beneficiary from jealousy and hatred. The purifying aspect of Zakat is mentioned in verse 103, Chapter 9 in the Quran:

Of their wealth, take alms, that so you might purify and sanctify them.@ [103:9].

Zakat is a fundamental act of faith in Islam. In fact, it is the third of the five pillars of Islam. It has been mentioned repeatedly in Quran in connection with establishing prayers. These verses emphasize the link between establishing prayers and paying Zakat on one hand and the strength in faith, the goodness of deeds and the excellence of God's reward in this life and in the hereafter on the other hand.



WEALTH BELONGS TO GOD

Zakat is a practical application of a fundamental concept in Islam: wealth belongs to God. Human beings are entrusted with the management of wealth on earth and it is our responsibility to spend it in appropriate ways. And spend (in charity) out of that which He has made you heirs@ [57:7]. This concept has far reaching implications: social, and economic. It implies that the society is a close knit family. It is the responsibility of the rich in the family to look after the poor. The system of Zakat maintains a balance between the personal drive to accumulate wealth and the interest of the society as a whole. An economic aspect of Zakat is that it provides the incentive for people to invest their money. This leads to creating more jobs and minimizes unemployment.

A PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Paying Zakat is a personal responsibility. It can be either paid directly to those who deserve it or it can be given to the state for distribution. In either case, the dignity of those who receive it is to be protected. Paying Zakat is a duty for those who can afford it and receiving it is a right for those who are eligible for it. The following verses describe the etiquette of paying Zakat.

AThose who spend their wealth for the cause of God and do not follow their spending with taunts and insults shall be rewarded by their Lord; they shall have nothing to fear or regret.

A kind word and forgiveness is better than charity followed by injury. God is self-sufficient and indulgent. O believers, do not mar your almsgiving with taunts and mischief-making, like him who spends his wealth for the sake of ostentation and believes neither in God or in the Last Day. Such man is like a smooth rock covered with earth: when rain falls on it leaves hard and bare.

But those who give away their wealth with a desire to please God and to reassure their souls are like a garden on a hill side, when rain falls on it yields up twice its normal crop.@ [2:262-265]



WHO CAN RECEIVE ZAKAT?

The categories of people eligible for receiving Zakat money are clearly indicated in the Quran. On the top of the list are the poor and the needy. The tradition of the Prophet, may God's peace and blessing be upon him, explicated the kinds of wealth and the percentage of money that should be paid. Zakat is paid once a year as a percentage of wealth that exceeds a certain limit. Farmers pay Zakat at harvest time.



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Charity & the System of Zakat in Islam

