

Is faith political? Must we allow others to suffer? Must we voluntarily give charity to those in need? Or is everyone rightfully entitled to a fair share of the world's resources? Must we accept the deprivations or privileges brought by the accident of our births? Does social justice include economic justice? Are some more equal than others?

Each major faith has clear teachings with regard to the concept of equality and the distribution of a society's resources according to people's needs.

Christianity

To Christians the parable of the Good Samaritan is key. We have a duty to care for one another.

Every Christian has a social mission in the world and is called upon in the New Testament (Matthew 5 and 25) to 'serve the least of us', to 'hunger and thirst for justice', and to be a 'peacemaker'. Catholics are called by God to protect human life, to promote human dignity, to defend the poor and to seek the common good.

Islam

Muslims are not associated in Islamic society because of their need for one another – that would be selfish. Rather, they are obliged to look after one another and to be responsible for the welfare of all. In accordance with the Divine law, the concept of social justice lays down certain conditions to treat man as an individual with liberty and equality as his birthright.

The concept of social justice is achieved by giving individuals an understanding of one's duties in society and their reward. Education was made obligatory by the Prophet as knowledge enables one to distinguish right from wrong.

Equality is important in Islam. The highly-placed man cannot take advantage of one's position and the weak person is not exploited or made to despair. Humans are all Slaves of God. In Islam, no superiority, no distinction and no pre-eminence can be lawfully claimed by one over the other except by virtue of piety. All people are equal in their social status.

Buddhism

Buddhism focuses on individual salvation through inner transformation. However this does not exclude social justice. Selflessness can serve as a link that allows Buddhists to be socially engaged even while pursuing the goal of individual salvation.

The communal good can be realised through the promotion of individual morality.

The Buddhist concept of Karma (where justice will be meted out to each individual for his acts and thoughts) should not act against a concept of social justice towards which we all must strive.

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Judaism

Social justice in the here and now lies at the heart of Judaism. The great ancient scholar, Hillel, was asked by a Roman soldier to summarize Judaism 'while standing on one foot', in other words, to put all of Jewish theology in a nutshell. Hillel's response was to repeat Judaism's Golden Rule: 'That which is hateful to yourself, do not do unto others,' (Leviticus 19).

Torah teaches us that the guiding principle for achieving social justice is shalom – the establishment of true, positive peace among family, neighbourhoods and nations – secured by the respect for the dignity of everything created in God's image, especially the poor, the weak and the vulnerable. The practice of tikkun olam – repairing the world – requires us to work for peace and social justice for all.

Jews are expected to give charity, but the concept of tzedakah extends beyond charity and includes the dual concepts of righteousness and human responsibility, something a Jew is required to do as a part of her or his Jewishness, not simply a voluntary act.

Hinduism

Hindus are encouraged to live according to their dharma (path of spiritual discipline which leads to God) and discover their own truth that is in harmony with their lives. Dharma is an ancient philosophical concept that has the following attributes: rationality, sense of duty, justice, peace, truthfulness, compassion, non-violence, humanity, spirituality, tolerance, ethics, service to others and philanthropy. This path will lead to social justice for all.

Also central to the Hindu faith is the concept of Karma, the belief that souls pass through a cycle of successive lives that are influenced, for better or for worse, by how their previous life was lived. This need not lead to a fatalistic attitude towards social justice, where for example, the caste system appears to work against the concept of justice for all.

Want to learn more? Want to get involved?

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