

***Ihsan* as Ethical Virtue for Neighborhood Community**

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Abstract

This study demonstrates that there is a need of addressing neighborhood relationships in contemporary times. And in this regard, a position from Islam is considered in which neighborly relationships are based on Quranic ethical virtue *ihsan* i.e., doing good to others. The word neighbor in the Quran and Hadith is a general term that is not discriminatory. It includes Muslims and non-Muslims. This insight is very useful for building relationships in multicultural and multireligious communities for harmony and peace. To locate a neighbor, though there are jurisprudential opinions, leaving it to its customary use is preferred in this study. The neighborhood rights and duties are given in detail. And it is also demonstrated that those prophetic narrations in which harming neighbors or committing sins against them is considered as the consequence of the absence of faith in fact show the disgust of such sinful acts; therefore, a sinful Muslim is not considered as a non-believer. The harm is especially illustrated with infringing the privacy of a neighbor. It has been shown that *Ihsan* includes ethically both non-maleficence and beneficence. Most of the prophetic traditions can be classified under these two categories. In addition to this, it is also shown that the neighborhood relations in Islam also include the Golden Rule which is all-encompassing and in principle exhaustive.

Keywords: Neighbor, Islam, Golden Rule, *Ihsan*, beneficence

Introduction

In this article, the researcher argues while considering the Quran and Sunnah that the behavior of a Muslim in Islam towards his neighbor and maintaining a healthy, happy, peaceful, and secure neighborhood is based on an ethical virtue, *Ihsan*: An Arabic term used in the Quran, which means literally “doing good to others”. Highlighting such an aspect of Islamic ethics becomes important when in contemporary times societies have become individualistic and neighborhood relationships are founded on reciprocity and bargain rather than being based on doing good to each other selflessly and to live, share, and care about each other unconditionally.



Therefore, the sense of neighborhood community is eroding. The true Islamic sense of neighborhood relationship is based on beneficence therefore it is above any conditional cooperation and mutual agreements between neighbors. On the other hand, the societies have become multicultural, diversified, pluralistic, multireligious, and multiracial; in such a case it becomes also important that a Muslim should know how to be part of a diverse community and remain responsible by the call of his faith and religious values. To conceptualize Islamic stance on the subject, the term *ihsan* as mentioned in the Quran in the context of the neighborhood is most appropriate and its application and meaning are evident in the prophetic traditions that include sayings, deeds, and approval of the Prophet Muhammad (PSU) which is embodied in Hadith canon of Islamic heritage. Therefore, though the literal meaning of *ihsan* is “doing good to others” but it's moral and technical valid conceptualization is only possible by investigating the various prophetic narrations (Hadith) to have a sound understanding of this term. And the accurate and highly valid meaning and explanation of the Quran is the one that is understood from the teachings of the Prophet as the Quran states, “He is the One who raised amidst the unlettered people a messenger from among themselves who recites to them His verses, and purifies them, and teaches them the Book and the wisdom, while they were earlier in open error” (The Quran, 62:2).

In the following details of this paper, after giving a general overview of the neighborhood problems in our contemporary world, I will discuss firstly the Quranic guideline on the neighborhood relationship with some explanation that comes from Islamic theological sources; secondly, prophetic traditions will be mentioned and various guidelines from those narrations will be elaborated which are related to neighborhood relationship. The overall discussion will clarify the fuller understanding of *Ihsan* as an ethical virtue for neighborhood relationships and the discussion will end with the insight that *Ihsan* is a virtue of beneficence, non-maleficence, and it includes Golden Rule which is comprehensive and exhaustive in its nature.

Neighborhood Issues and Problems

Living in a good residential area is desirable. The people who have choices and means make thoughtful decisions where they should stay or build a house, and those who cannot afford so wish to have a good neighborhood and think of improving their surroundings, they may live in. Most importantly, neighborhood safety has become a serious concern in our time and careful people always try to make sure that they are going to live in a crime-free neighborhood. Making better neighborhood choices has become sophisticated as social statistics, area criminal reports and records, and internet gadgets are being used to map the overall neighborhood landscape from various angles. This research is particularly about the neighborhood environment among Muslims because the ethical discussion in this article is about Islam and Muslims, though other communities also share most of these concerns and values in their neighborhood relationships.

Sketching a general list of problems, disputes, and issues of the neighborhood is possible by looking at many news reports and media. The problems are sociological, psychological, and environmental mostly. For example, noise, pets, unruly children, the physical appearance of homes, cleanliness, property boundaries, criminal behavior, parking, etc. are some of these problems. Along with these problems is the presence of harm from the ethical point of view in neighborhoods that need to be addressed and removed. Abdul Aziz Faudan writes that the most common possible forms of harm to neighbors are stalking their women, digging and pursuing their hidden matters, eavesdropping, spying, revealing their secrets, spreading evil talk about them, slandering their honor, seeking to create a rift among them, spreading the news about their flaws, obliterating their morals, and harming them by



playing loud musical instruments and forbidden singing, as well annoying them by noises, especially during the time they sleep or while they take rest. Moreover, keeping animals and birds that harm neighbors with their smell and disturb them with their sounds, as well as placing litter at their doors, and so on (Faudan, 2021).

In addressing the neighborhood issues and problems and having an ethical viewpoint on them, Islam treats the subject in its primary sources: the Quran and Sunnah. The Islamic gives an ideal view of the neighborhood by giving ethical guidelines and thus giving a sense of community. These Islamic teachings on the subject can be brought under a general ethical virtue Ihsan as mentioned in the Quran.

Ihsan in Islam as an Ethical Virtue

Ihsan means literally “doing good to others”. It is used in the Quran as an ethical virtue. Especially given the nature of this subject, the Quran speaks of neighborhood relationships by using the word ihsan which means literally “doing good to others” in other terms doing good to neighbors would be a more accurate translation given the context of the Quranic verse. The Quran states that “Serve Allah, and join not any partners with Him, and do good (ihsan) - to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (ye meet), and what your right hands possess: For Allah loveth not the arrogant, the vainglorious” (Ali, 2001, pp. Chap.4, Verse.36-37).

The statement of the Quran is literally and explicitly clear. However, there is still a need to enrich understanding of the verse by giving a theological interpretation of the word “neighbor” and then understanding the complete verse and its spirit by the Prophetic traditions: the reports that are narrated from the Prophet Muhammad (May peace be upon him).

The verse of the Quran divides neighbors into two kinds: neighbors who are near (aljaari zilqurbaa) and neighbors who are strangers (aljaaril junubi). It is evident from the verse that the word neighbor (aljaar) in the Quran is a general term that is non-discriminatory, and it is not only restricted to Muslims but includes non-Muslims. Ikrimah, Mujahid, Maymoon bin Mahran, Ad-Dahhak, Zaid bin Aslam, Muqatil bin Hayyan, and Qatada hold that (aljaari zilqurbaa), means those who are relatives, and (aljaaril junubi) are those who are not relatives. And Abu Ishaq said on the authority of Nawaf al-Bukali that the (aljaari zilqurbaa) means the Muslim neighbor, and (aljaaril junubi) is a Jew or Christian (Ibn Kathir, 1419 AH, pp. 261-2). Al-Tabari in his commentary of the Quran after recording different meanings of the “neighbors who are strangers” (aljaaril junubi) states that: “The most correct of the two sayings in this regard is the saying of the one who said: “The meaning of the junub in this place is: the distant stranger, whether he is a Muslim or a polytheist, a Jew or a Christian” (Al-Tabari, 2001 A.D, Vol. 7, p.10).

The prophetic narrations on the subject of how to treat a neighbor are many but the whole guidelines and teachings can be summed up under one main prophetic narration that is: the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “Allah’s Apostle, Jibril kept on recommending me about treating the neighbors in a kind and polite manner, so much so that I thought that he would order (me) to make them (my) heirs” (Al-Bukhari, Sahih Al-Bukhari, Hadith No.6015). The interpretation of this Hadith also includes both Muslim and non-Muslim neighbors as it could be illustrated by the report on the authority of Abd Allah bin Amr that he had a Jewish neighbor, and whenever he slaughtered a sheep, he said to his servant: send a portion of it to the Jewish neighbor because I heard the Prophet Muhammad said “Jibril kept on recommending that I treat neighbors well until I thought that he would

order me to treat them as my heirs (Al-Bayhaqi, 2003, Vol.12, p. 106). Mohammad Rasheed Rida after mentioning this also endorses the view that "This is an evidence that Ibn Umar understood from the general commandments that are about the neighbor that they include the Muslim and non-Muslims" (Rida, 1990 AD, Vol. 5, p.75). This Hadith is narrated in the numerous books of Hadith by Hadith authorities such as Abu Dawood, Tirmidi, Tahawi, Abu Neeim, Humadi, Kharaiti, Ahmad; and Imam Bukhari has mentioned the narration with the following wording: "Mujahid said, "I was with Abdullah ibn Amr while his slave was skinning a sheep. He said, "Boy! When you finish, start with the Jewish neighbor". A man there exclaimed, Jewish? May Allah correct you! "He replied, "I heard the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, recommend that we treat our neighbors well until we feared (or we thought) that he would order us to make them our heirs." (Al-Bukhari, Aladab Almufrad, 1998, p.58); and Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani has categorized the narration as sound with Sahih (authentic) status (Al-Albani, 1997 A.D, p.72).

The second important issue is that who should be considered as neighbors. How to locate them? The Muslim jurists have different opinions about it. According to Abu Hanifa, neighbors are those who are adjacent to the residence because the neighborhood means being in proximity. But his two companions Imam Abu Yusuf and Imam Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani, basing their opinion on juristic preference (istishan), hold that neighbors are the close ones and others who live in the neighborhood, those who are united by the neighborhood mosque, meaning those who pray in the same mosque. However, the opinion of Abu Hanifa is treated as preferred or valid in the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. The Malikis say: neighbors are those who are adjacent to the residence from the six directions (the four, the top, and the bottom) and those on the opposite to the residence if there is a small street between them. The Sahafis and Hanbalis say that neighbors are forty houses from each side of the four sides of the house, because of the prophetic saying, as narrated by Ahmad: "The neighbor: forty houses like this, and so on, and so on." (Al-Zuhaili, Vol.10, p. 7513).

However, Muhammad Rasheed Rida states the opinion of his Imam (Mohammad Abdu) that he believed that the neighborhood is not specified by the houses, such specification is narrated from al-Hasan and some have set it by the measurement of forty cubits, but the right position is not to specify it in those ways but to refer it to the Arabs, meaning Arab culture and customs, and the closest neighbor has the more right, and honoring a neighbor is from the ethics of the Arabs before Islam, and Islam emphasized on it further by its primary sources, the Quran and Sunnah (Rida, 1990 AD, Vol. 5, p.75). Likely, Al-Alusi holds that the apparent (zahir) in the case is that the concept of neighborhood is based on customs (urf) (Al-Alusi, 1415 AH, Vol.3, p.28). Based on this, what custom considers to be neighbor, then it is neighbor. And Abdul Aziz Faudan considers this position as the most correct (alraajih) (Faudan, 2021). Another important aspect of this discussion is that one should not be judgmental and discriminatory about who to count as a neighbor and who not to count so. Ibin Hajar has captured this point as he states, "The term neighbor includes a Muslim and non-Muslim, righteous and transgressor, friend and foe, stranger and local, beneficial and harmful, and the relative and stranger" (Ibin Hajar, 1379, Vol. 10, p.441). Therefore, a neighbor can not be stripped of having a right as neighbor because of any reason or any judgment his neighbors may hold against him.

The term ihsan in the Quran is translated in this verse as doing good. So, it is a general term that includes every act that could be considered good. However, the fuller and more explanatory nature of the relationship between neighbors could be understood from the prophetic narrations on the subject. There are three aspects of these narrations: one is



how some narrations link the neighborhood relationship with the strength and validity of faith of a believer, the second aspect is that how the prophetic narrations stress non-maleficence and beneficence. And finally how the neighborhood relation is set of Golden Rule that is encompassing and exhaustive.

Neighbor Relationships and Validity of Faith

The Quran and Sunnah contain precepts and ethical teachings. And the nature and level of their obligation and prohibition is the subject matter of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). However, the commission of some prohibited acts is considered due to the absence of faith in Islam. This shows, on the one hand, the disgust and heinousness of such acts. And among such categories of prohibited acts is committing crimes and sins against neighbors as well. On the other hand, such condemnation of certain acts shows the importance of certain rights which need to be safeguarded with due care.

Before discussing how neighborhood relationships are connected to the belief system in Islam, it is necessary to understand the nature of this issue. There is a scholarly discussion on the nature of Faith (imman) in Islam. A person with imman is considered a believer. The unanimous opinion in Sunni Islam is that a person with imman who is called mumin (believer) if he commits sins, then he is a transgressor (fasiq). So, to put it simply, good deeds are signs of faith and more of such deeds show increase and strength of faith. Sins do not turn a believer into a non-believer. But for many sins, given their severity, the Prophet denies that such a sinful act can be an act of a believer. The unanimous position in Sunni Islam is that committing such kinds of sins is not disbelief (kufr) as long as the doer does that act without the denial or denial of the prohibition of that act, thus treating it permissible (halal). The Quran states, "Anyone who, after accepting faith in Allah, utters Unbelief, - except under compulsion, his heart remaining firm in Faith - but such as open their breast to Unbelief, on them is Wrath from Allah, and theirs will be a dreadful Penalty" (The Quran, 16:106). Al-Nawawi states that " the doctrine of the people of correct position (ah-lul-haq) is that no one of the people of the Qiblah (Muslims) can be said is disbeliever for sinning...and that whoever denies what he knows from the necessities of the religion will be condemned with apostasy and disbelief ...and so is the ruling for the one who makes adultery, alcohol, murder, or other taboos of which the prohibition is known as necessities to be permissible (istihlal)" (Al-Nawawi, 1392 AH, Vol.1, p.150). To the same concern which I had in this section of the paper, Al-Nawawi had the same concern that prophetic narrations should not get misconstrued literally on the issue when committing sinful acts are treated as a consequence of absence of faith; therefore he further writes, " These are some of the issues related to faith (iman) that I presented at the beginning of the book as a prelude to the fact that they are much needed and because they are frequently repeated in Hadiths (Al-Nawawi, 1392 AH, Vol.1, p.150)."

It was important to mention the above issue at the outset of what is going to be discussed next in this research to remove any possible misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the narrations that will follow because in such narrations committing some sinful acts against a neighbor are treated as a consequence of the absence of the faith. The more correct view would be such condemnations show the disgust of such sinful acts.

The prophetic narrations that are to be illustrated regarding the above case point to an important ethical principle and that is non-maleficence. The relationship between neighbors should be based on non-maleficence and beneficence. These both ethical principles are enshrined in the prophetic narrations as an adequate understanding of the virtue of Ihsan as mentioned in the Quran. The following prophetic narrations would be enough to show how the relationship between neighbors is crucial and connected to the very

essence of the faith (imman). The foremost issue is that neighbors should not inflict any harm on each other. It is mentioned in the prophetic narration "...whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should not hurt (or insult) his neighbor..." (Al-Bukhari, Sahih Al-Bukhari, Hadith No.6018). The same message is reported in many other narrations as well along with other details. However, the strongest warning message is the narration that reports the Prophet saying, "By Allah, he does not believe! By Allah, he does not believe! By Allah, he does not believe!" It was said, "Who is that O Allah's Apostle?" He said, "That person whose neighbor does not feel safe from his evil" (Al-Bukhari, Sahih Al-Bukhari, Hadith No.6016). Moreover, that the Messenger of Allah said: "He will not enter Paradise whose neighbor is not secure from his wrongful conduct." (Ibin Al-Hajjaj, Vol. 1, p.68). The above three narrations include non-maleficence, security, and good behavior. And these are important features of a civilized community and neighborhood.

Privacy of Neighbor

One type of harm could be classified as infringing the privacy of a neighbor. Islam safeguards the privacy of neighbors. The Quran explicitly says, "O ye who believe! enter not houses other than your own, until ye have asked permission and saluted those in them: that is best for you, in order that ye may heed (what is seemly). If ye find no one in the house, enter not until permission is given to you: if ye are asked to go back, go back: that makes for greater purity for yourselves: and Allah knows well all that ye do" (The Quran, 24:27-28). Right to privacy of a house or household is further mentioned in the prophetic tradition as Abu Huraira reported having heard Allah's Messenger say: "He who peeped into the house of people without their consent, it is permissible for them to put out his eyes" (Ibin Al-Hajjaj, Vol. 3, p.1699). Furthermore, the Prophet said: "... He who sees the letter of his brother without his permission, sees Hell-fire..." (Abu Dawood, 2009, Vol.2, p. 607). In the neighborhood, it is also important that people should avoid gossip about each other and suspecting each other, the Quran states, "O ye who believe! avoid much suspicion; verily some suspicion is a sin. And espy not, nor backbite one another: ..." (The Quran, 49: 12).

Kindness and Good Behavior

Most of the prophetic narrations on the neighborhood relationship come under the virtue of beneficence. The important factor in maintaining a healthy community is having neighbors who are righteous in their character and behavior. To this fact, the prophet stated that "Part of the happiness of the Muslim man includes a spacious dwelling, righteous neighbor ..." (Al-Bukhari, Aladab Almufrad,1998, p.54). Righteousness is about having a good personality that is virtuous, free from vices. Being best and excellent is a human desire and part of a progressive human personality development therefore "... the best of neighbors in the sight of Allah is the best of them towards his neighbor" (Al-Bukhari, Aladab Almufrad,1998, p.53). Being the best includes all aspects of humanity that are important to a neighborhood and one of such characteristics is being kind to each other. The Prophet expressly mentions this characteristic as he says, "... he who believes in Allah and the Last Day should treat his neighbor with kindness..." (Ibin Al-Hajjaj, Vol. 3, p.1352). This kindness is not just a charity but a social responsibility. As the Prophet says that "...a man is not a believer who fills his stomach while his neighbor is hungry" (Al-Bukhari, Aladab Almufrad,1998, p.52). This is more important about the neighbors in times of some devastation. Covid-19 pandemic is the contemporary case as many people became needy because of the closure of markets and businesses. So, humanitarian relationships especially with neighbors are to be upheld according to Islamic teachings.

Connected with this issue is the very important value and that is upholding human dignity. Respecting and upholding human dignity is highly valued in Islam. The Quranic



verse: "We have bestowed dignity on the children of Adam... and conferred upon them special favors above the greater part of Our creation" (The Quran, 17:70) is such a foundational ethical value that can be applied to every domain of ethics. In particular, the Prophetic narrations mention the neighbors to be dealt with respect as it is stated "...he who believes in Allah and the Last Day should treat his neighbor with respect (ikram) ..." (Ibn Al-Hajjaj, Vol. 3, p.1352). And respecting a neighbor includes socially caring and having warm feelings and one way of doing so is to exchange gifts as the Prophet says, "Give gifts and you will love one another" (Al-Bukhari, Aladab Almufrad, 1998, p.208). Giving gifts and receiving gifts is emotionally a sensitive case. One should be thankful for whatever he may receive as the Prophet says, "A female neighbor should not look down upon the present of her neighbors even it were the hooves of a sheep" (Al-Bukhari, Sahih Al-Bukhari, Hadith No.1165). And sharing and giving gifts to neighbors should be without any discrimination as Mujahid reported that a sheep was slaughtered for Abdullah ibn Amr. He asked his slave, "Have you given any to our Jewish neighbor? Have you given any to our Jewish neighbor? I heard the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, say, "Jibril kept on recommending that I treat my neighbors well until I thought that he would order me to treat them as my heirs" (Al-Bukhari, Aladab Almufrad, 1998, p.50).

Right of Preemption

Expanding dwelling and house is a natural need and, in a case, if a person wants to sell his house, he should sell it to his neighbor. Neighbors sometimes wish to buy property in the neighborhood or wish to expand or extend the boundaries of their residence because of family needs. Therefore, having someone stranger buy the property instead of a neighbor may in some cases cause indirect harm. On this issue, the Prophet said: "Whoever has land and wants to sell it, let him offer it to his neighbor" (Ibn Majah, Vol.2, P.833). It applies both to land and dwelling as the Prophet stated "A neighbor has the best claim to the house or land of the neighbor" (Abu Dawood, 2009, Vol.5, p. 376). In another narration, some more relevant information is given as "The neighbor is most entitled to the right of pre-emption, and he should wait for its exercise even if he is absent when the two properties have one road (Abu Dawood, 2009, Vol.5, p. 377)".

Golden Rule for Neighborhood

In human relations, a very comprehensive ethical, social, psychological, and human value is the principle of the Golden Rule. It is the principle of treating others as one wants to be treated and it is relevant to all human relations. However, in terms of neighborhood, the rule becomes more meaningful and applying it could bring results in having a secure and peaceful neighborhood in which people can live with dignity, respect, and enhance their emotional and psychological well-being. It is a principle to humanize the social and community structure. The golden rule regarding neighbors is what you love for yourself you should love for your neighbors. This is clearly stated in one of the prophetic narrations as, "By Him in whose Hand is my life, no bondsman (truly) believes till he likes for his neighbor, or he (the Holy Prophet) said: for his brother, whatever he likes for himself" (Ibn Al-Hajjaj, Vol. 1, p.68). Furthermore, it is stated in another narration, "Be kind to your neighbor and you will be a believer; love for the people what you love for yourself, and you will be a Muslim" (Al-Tirmidhi, 1975, Vol.4, p.551).

Conclusion

From the above discussion, some important points became clear that are crucial in understanding neighborhood relations from an Islamic perspective. And there is a clear implication of such understanding to a neighborhood community life. Neighborhoods need

humanization. Without any discrimination, a neighbor deserves good treatment from an Islamic perspective for just being a neighbor. Importantly, non-Muslims also enjoy the same rights and treatment as Muslims; this insight opens a realm of nature of relationships in a multicultural and multireligious society and it could lead to co-existence, harmony, peace, and a good sense of community that is alienation free. From the ethical point of view, the discussion entails that the virtue of Ihsan as mentioned in the Quran includes as understood from the prophetic narrations both non-maleficence and beneficence. And it leads to an all-encompassing Golden Rule that has wider application and it is in principle exhaustive.



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