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Imam al-Riḍā (PBUH) and Cultural Justice*

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Abstract

Social justice in the modern state is among those concepts whose essence and implementation are difficult to trace historically, particularly in Islamic history and the conduct (*sīra*) of the Infallibles. Understanding concepts such as the state, democracy, and social justice from religious foundations is itself a formidable task. The challenge becomes even greater when this complex notion of social justice is further subdivided into more specific domains, such as cultural justice, and examined through the lens of the *conduct*. This study aims to analyze Imam al-Riḍā's activism in promoting cultural justice through a descriptive-analytical method. His engagement appears to be explicable across three main areas. First, the debate between agency and structure within justice studies can be specifically traced in Imam al-Riḍā's *conduct*. Notably, he not only advanced justice through individual actions but also created structural opportunities, having directly entered existing structures. Second, cultural diversity—recognized as a pillar of cultural justice—is evident in his practice. Third, in the tension between teleology and deontology within cultural justice, teleology holds a distinguished position in Imam al-Riḍā's *conduct*. This article elucidates these three dimensions.

Keywords: Imam al-Riḍā, social justice, cultural justice, structure

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1. Introduction and Problem Statement

Among the most arduous intellectual endeavors is understanding Islamic and religious interpretations of concepts either produced in the modern world or whose earlier meanings have evolved. Based on the premise that Islam—comprising the Qur'an and the Sunna—can guide contemporary individuals and societies, offering solutions to both personal and collective issues, we confront the challenge of interpreting modern concepts such as social justice through the *conduct* of the Infallibles.

Stating that social justice is a modern concept does not imply that the issue of justice was absent during the early Islamic period, the time of Qur'anic revelation, or the era of Imam al-Riḍā. Rather, the formation of the modern state and the transformation of governance requirements have altered the concept of social justice to some extent. It is perhaps more accurate to assert that historically, what prevailed was individual justice, discussed within the realms of ethics and jurisprudence, addressing fairness in personal interactions or embodied in the character of individuals such as witnesses and judges.

Another traceable form is distributive justice, concerning the allocation of resources and opportunities. However, social justice lacks a long historical trace.

The distinction between distributive justice and social justice warrants extensive discussion, though it lies beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to note that the term "social justice" entered scholarly discourse in the late nineteenth century with the publication of *Social Justice* by Westel Woodbury Willoughby. Schools of thought like Marxism were not particularly sympathetic to the notion, viewing social justice as a tool capitalism employed for its survival. Marxists contended that capitalism, founded on exploiting the working class, must collapse rather than reform.

The multiple confrontations among notions such as welfare, the state, insurance, capital, money, individual freedoms, meritocracy, equality, democracy, structure, taxation, and others further complicated the meaning of social justice. Domains such as economic justice, criminal justice, educational justice, and gender justice are all subsumed under social justice and are not merely issues of distribution.

This complexity is even more pronounced within cultural justice, given the intricate nature of culture itself. Moreover, in an Islamic and Shiʿi context, expanding justice in the cultural realm is inconceivable without reference to the *conduct* of the Imams (PBUT). Imam al-Riḍā's *conduct* is particularly pertinent because he accepted the

position of crown prince (*vilāyat ʿahdī*), integrating into the structure of governance, at a time when cultural transformations—such as the translation movement—were flourishing. His experience thus offers a critical case study for examining efforts to expand cultural justice.

Therefore, this research aims to investigate initiatives undertaken during Imam al-Riḍā's time to promote cultural justice. Admittedly, this task is formidable due to the lack of developed literature on cultural justice and the challenges of applying modern concepts to historical contexts. Nevertheless, the paper endeavors to take an initial step and initiate discussions in this area.

2. Cultural Justice

Justice is primarily evaluated within moral philosophy and political philosophy but also intersects with other domains, generating combinations such as economic justice, political justice, judicial justice, and more. One significant yet often overlooked field in justice studies is culture. This neglect has resulted in a reductionist approach, confining the relationship between justice and culture to merely the "culture of justice," a culture promoting justice. However, the relationship between justice and culture clearly extends beyond this narrow framework.

When examining the realm of culture, two principal factors emerge: individuals as public agents of culture and the system as a cultural structure. Both can be characterized as just or unjust. Furthermore, considering the mission of all prophets (PBUT) and, subsequently, the Islamic community, to expand and disseminate justice, special attention must be paid to culture as a critical arena for the manifestation of just or unjust actions. In this regard, culture stands alongside economy and politics as an independent field subject to justice. Regardless of how justice is interpreted—whether as equality, granting rights, proportionality, or otherwise—justice must be extended into the cultural sphere.

In discussing cultural justice, the primary question arises: can the domain of culture, like economy, politics, and healthcare, be subjected to distributive justice? Just as we speak of the fair distribution of political and economic goods, can we also speak of a fair distribution of cultural goods under the rubric of cultural justice? (Vaʿizi 2019)

Undoubtedly, culture, like other domains of collective life, encompasses goods and opportunities that can be subjected to distribution, enabling the application of

distributive justice to cultural matters. These cultural goods may include commodities, opportunities, or the right to cultural existence. Some argue that, since part of culture comprises beliefs and convictions, which are not amenable to distribution, cultural justice does not apply to that segment. However, regarding cultural resources and opportunities, it is possible to speak of distributive justice, which in this context is cultural justice (Vaʿizi 2019).

Thus, within the broader scope of social justice, just as we discuss economic, political, and judicial justice, cultural justice, too, can be a central focus of scholarly and operational inquiry.

3. Analyzing the Conduct of Imam al-Riḍā in Expanding Cultural Justice

3-1. Moving Beyond Individual Justice

When treated as an attribute, justice is commonly associated with three composite expressions: the Just God, the just individual, and the just government (or society). Discussions about God's justice originate in *kalām* (theology), although related debates may extend into other fields such as philosophy. In theology, justice concerns God's dealings with His servants in this world and the hereafter, and the just nature of divine commandments.

Individual justice, by contrast, pertains to persons and is explored within ethics and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Examples include discussions of the justice required of witnesses and judges or the cultivation of justice as a moral virtue.

However, once we move beyond the individual to consider humans in society, individual justice alone proves insufficient. In a collective setting, questions emerge concerning the distribution of goods, the fairness of procedures, and the criteria for accessing rights, especially when resources are limited and human differences abound. It is within society, with all its complexities, that discussions of justice evolve into discussions of social justice.

Just as theology is the primary discipline for divine justice and ethics and jurisprudence for individual justice, so too political philosophy, law, political science, economics, sociology, and related disciplines shoulder the discourse on social justice. Unlike individual justice, which is an attribute of a person, social justice addresses relationships and structures.

Two dimensions of social justice are especially prominent: "distributive justice" and "procedural justice." Distributive justice—arguably the most fundamental form—concerns the equitable distribution of benefits, goods, rights, and interests among members of society. It is often the first meaning that comes to mind when justice is invoked. Procedural or processual justice, by contrast, emphasizes fairness in procedures, rules, laws, and regulations. Its primary focus is on just processes rather than outcomes, although fair outcomes may naturally result from just procedures.

Imam al-Riḍā, by accepting the position of crown prince, entered the realms of structural and procedural justice. His conduct thus represents a rare integration of individual and structural justice, a phenomenon not seen among the other Imams part from the governance of Amīr al-Muʾminīn ʿAlī (PBUH).

A fundamental question in justice studies concerns the agent of justice: Who is responsible for delivering and expanding justice? In human society, all seek justice, but this quest primarily manifests as a demand, raising the issue of who must respond. Who—or which entity—is the agent granting rights and expanding justice? In certain definitions, such as "giving each rightful claimant their due" (*iʿṭāʾ kull dhī ḥaqq ḥaqqah*), the critical inquiry remains: from whom must this act of giving originate?

This discussion is crucial because it clarifies the duality of duty and obligation and sheds light on the persistent public demand for justice from the people's side. In pre-state societies where humans lived without centralized governance, the demand for justice was largely interpersonal, directed from one individual to another. However, with the emergence of modern states assuming responsibility for public affairs, this demand transformed into a permanent, collective expectation directed at the state.

"Contemporary debates on justice revolve around the question of the state's duty in guaranteeing and distributing rights and resources. In its modern sense, justice expects the state to ensure fair societal distribution (Fleischacker 2004, 4). In contrast, thinkers like Robert Nozick argue that the state should not intervene in resource distribution, as it conflicts with individual freedoms and personal choices. According to Nozick, the government's role is limited to ensuring that individuals do not violate each other's rights (Swift 2014, 60).

On the other hand, if the state is expected to regulate resources in the economy, goods in culture, and power in politics, should not the people, especially in the economy and culture, also be expected to participate in expanding justice? In other words, should they not contribute to creating justice for themselves and others?

It appears that the granting of rights and the implementation of justice are not solely the duty of the state but also an obligation of the people. Undoubtedly, after the emergence of the nation-state model, with its rapid growth, enhanced power, and increased public demands for services (Modelski 1974, 59-64), the state must act as the primary agent in promoting justice across various sectors. Nonetheless, this does not absolve individuals of their duty to contribute to expanding justice.

Both structural mechanisms and individual roles are visibly significant in culture and cultural justice. Every member of society is responsible for establishing cultural justice and, as previously mentioned, must fulfill their duty through "cultural work." Emphasizing the people's role in advancing cultural justice reflects a people-centered approach to justice rather than a state-centered one. While states bear the responsibility of promoting social justice and equitable distribution, this in no way diminishes the essential role of the people in institutionalizing justice.

Religious traditions such as Islam also address this matter. The Qur'an, under the verse "that the people would uphold justice" (Qur'an, 57:25),[1] designates the people as the agents of justice, implying that individuals must be cultivated and shaped to act as implementers and promoters of justice (Makarim Shirazi 2001, 372). Furthermore, Tabataba'i (1995, 12: 478), in his commentary on the verse "Truly God commands justice, virtue, and giving to kinsfolk" (Qur'an, 16:90), writes that God commands every individual to establish social justice.

The state also plays a decisive role in the expansion of justice, particularly in societies characterized by maximalist government structures. Based on this premise, cultural policymaking becomes a critical element within cultural justice. Cultural policymaking is the state's and ruling authority's deliberate management of the cultural domain through policies and regulations (Vahid 2007). This policymaking can occur at two levels: the first—i.e., cultural politics—concerns the overarching values and principles that govern culture, referred to as the general cultural policies of the system; the second—cultural policy—involves the specific strategies, guidelines, and executive measures directed at cultural affairs (Zaka'i and Shafi'i 2010, 91).

At both levels, the state can adopt an idealistic approach, seeking to implement its cultural ideals (Azad Armaki and Munavari 2010, 66) based on its ontological and theoretical understanding of the world, humanity, society, and culture. In such an approach, cultural policymaking is grounded in the normative mandates emerging from the state's worldview, often leading to prescriptive cultural governance

(Ashtariyan 2002, 38). Alternatively, the state may adopt a realist approach, grounding its policies in existing cultural realities and the recognition of cultural pluralism (Azad Armaki and Munavari 2010, 66).

Here, I do not intend to determine which approach aligns more closely with cultural justice, as it is evident that the selection of a policymaking approach stems from foundational choices previously legitimized by the society. Put differently, cultural justice at this stage primarily refers to the conformity of cultural policymaking with the collective principles that have already attained legal legitimacy.

The critical issue, however, is that of "cultural membership," which must be accounted for within the state's and ruling authority's cultural policies. Cultural membership addresses who is considered a member of a cultural community, and which entity, authority, or mechanism distributes, confirms, and solidifies this membership. As Rawls (1999, 115) suggests, answering this question should prevent justice from being restricted to a particular segment of society; rather, all individuals must be considered the subjects of justice.

Importantly, cultural membership here does not refer to groups' rights but to general cultural inclusion encompassing all members of society. It is not a formal membership (Edgell and Tranby 2010, 177) but an informal yet profoundly consequential status. One of its most significant consequences is mutual aim (See Walzer 1983, 33). Just as individuals in the economy require one another's cooperation for growth and access to resources, so too in the cultural sphere, individuals need each other to achieve cultural flourishing. This mutual aid becomes possible only when individuals recognize each other as cultural members.

If the culture of a society lacks an expansive and inclusive approach to membership, individuals lose the capacity for mutual cultural aid. Before people can extend this membership to one another, the state and ruling authority have a critical role in formally recognizing and legitimizing cultural inclusion. As Walzer (1983, 34-35) notes, if a universal, global state existed, a single, universal belonging would prevail, rendering the distribution of membership unnecessary. However, as long as terms like "insider" and "outsider" or "member" and "non-member" retain meaning, the necessity of distributing cultural membership remains.

Part of this distribution is conducted by the state and ruling authorities through an expansive cultural approach in their admission policies; another part depends on the people's acceptance of one another as fellow cultural members.

It appears that Imam al-Riḍā, beyond his individual actions aimed at establishing cultural justice—which can be understood within the broader framework of his guiding conduct—also actively engaged with the structural dimension of cultural justice. One of his major initiatives was creating a space for interfaith dialogue. While instances of individual intercultural and interreligious debates can certainly be found during the times of other Imams, during Imam al-Riḍā's era, there was a noticeable preparation of the groundwork by the ruling authority itself to facilitate such dialogues. This effort represents an attempt to promote justice within societal structures, offering benefits that surpass those of individual actions alone.

The historical context, motivations, and processes surrounding Imam al-Riḍā's acceptance of the crown prince position are beyond the scope of this discussion. However it occurred, the result was that Imam al-Riḍā made full use of the opportunity.

Although Maʾmūn's (ruler authority) motivation in organizing scientific and theological debates was, in his view, to diminish Imam al-Riḍā's stature, the actual outcome worked to the Imam's advantage and against Maʾmūn's intentions.

Imam al-Riḍā himself is reported to have said, during the period when Maʾmūn personally arranged and participated in debates against the opponents of the Ahl al-Bayt and attempted to demonstrate the superiority of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib over all the Companions in order to gain favor with Imam al-Riḍā. Despite such attempts, Imam al-Riḍā told his companions: "Do not be deceived by his words; by God, no one but him will kill me. However, I have no choice but to be patient until the appointed time decreed in the Book arrives!" (Shaykh Ṣadūq 1999, 1: 179).

Despite al-Maʾmūn's ulterior motives, Imam al-Riḍā strategically advanced these debates on a structural level. His participation was not solely aimed at affirming the truths of Shiʿi beliefs but also at teaching the process of dialogue itself and establishing a framework for the pursuit of truth. Such a foundation constitutes one of the most critical actions toward expanding cultural justice.

As previously mentioned, Imam al-Riḍā's efforts centered on establishing a continuous, structured process of dialogue to elevate and enhance the culture of society, particularly the soft dimensions of culture such as beliefs and worldviews. This was a profound move toward the expansion of cultural justice.

3-2. Cultural Diversity

The principle of cultural diversity is a sociological foundation in Islam that explains social differences and variations. Although a shared *fiṭra* (primordial nature) is embedded within all human beings, their differences remain evident. These differences are observable in external appearance and behavior and across the entire spectrum of social life, from economics to culture. The Qur'an affirms this in several verses. For instance, 49:13 states, "O mankind! Truly We created you from a male and a female, and We made you peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another." Likewise, Q 11:118 declares, "And had thy Lord willed, He would have made mankind one community. But they cease not to differ." Similarly, 17:84 indicates, "Say, 'Each acts according to his disposition, and your Lord knows well who is more rightly guided on the way.'" The notion of *shākila* (disposition) here points to behavioral and intellectual, thus cultural, divergence, not to any inherent disparity in *fitrah* (Ḥuwayzī 2004, 5: 112). These differences in behavior, *shākila*, and culture constitute a dimension of divine wisdom and serve numerous social benefits. According to Imam ʿAli (PBUH), this diversity safeguards humanity: "People will continue to be in a good state as long as they differ; when they become the same, they perish" (Shaykh Ṣadūq 2011, 531, 718).

In sociology, attention to difference and multiplicity is typically framed within the concept of differentiation—a process referring to the formation of various groups and strata based on distinctions (Afrough 2019, 105). These variations, alongside cultural volition, lead to the emergence of cultural groups and subcultures.

Yet, from an axiological perspective, the principle of difference does not necessarily imply endorsing all cultural variations or cultural relativism. Since culture is rooted in *fiṭra*, legitimate cultural differences must orient toward human perfection, which is aligned with *fiṭra*. As Murtaza Motahhari notes, if we believe in human *fiṭra*, that is, if we take human standards as fixed and grounded in *fiṭra*, then humanity obtains meaning; and not only humanity, but the perfection of humanity also becomes meaningful (Motahhari 2011, 208). A dynamic culture moves—this movement must be guided by *fiṭra* toward human perfection. Therefore, if cultural differences—arising from human will and choice—impede this teleological progression, they must be either moderated or eliminated.

In other words, "alongside the process of differentiation, with its attendant sense of belonging, a complementary process of integration must ensure the connection and

cohesion of these differences to prevent disintegration and fragmentation between individual, group, national, or regional units; this integration must be oriented toward shared goals and responsibilities" (Afrough 2019, 106). Such integration should be defined concerning the essence of *fiṭra*, the divine nature of God and humanity, and the ultimate end of human existence. Reducing it to general moral axioms is insufficient.

Cultural unity does not entail complete homogenization or suppression of subcultures and agency, just as cultural pluralism, understood as an unbridled legitimization of all subcultures, is also inadequate. The ideal model is cultural unity-in-diversity (Salihi and ʿAzimi Dawlatabadi 2017), a model that affirms shared cultural elements while recognizing the legitimacy of diverse cultural expressions under those commonalities. This is the universalism based on *tawḥid* (divine unity), which Emad Afrough refers to as "*tawḥīdī* universalism" (Afrough 2019). Such universalism, while honoring cultural difference and individual agency, calls for commitment to shared values and a return to one's cultural ground zero—namely, the divine *fiīra*. Here, universalism is not a denial of cultural history or the role of national identities in shaping societal culture; rather, it reflects an essentialist view of culture aimed at connecting it to the shared horizon of human nature. Universalism does not negate local traditions or historical-national identities, for such a view would undermine human cultural volition and the authenticity of diversity. The Islamic perspective on culture instead insists upon the *tawḥīdī* essence of humanity. In this sense, universalism contrasts with cultural particularism that seeks to suppress differences, choices, and distinct identities.

Fundamentally, there are two approaches to cultural differences: viewing them as problems or as capacities and opportunities. When seen as a problem, cultural diversity is interpreted through a purely worldly lens, neglecting shared human and spiritual foundations and leading to conflict. This is the type of discord referred to in the Qurʾanic verse: "And obey God and His Messenger, and do not quarrel among yourselves lest you falter and your good fortune depart. And be patient; truly God is with the patient" (Quran 8:46). In contrast, understanding diversity as a capacity highlights its significance and benefits in advancing society and human civilization (Babaʾi 2020, 312-315).

In general, justice emerges in the context of competition over resources. This competition can result from individualism and self-interest. When there is

competition over resources among individuals, social justice mediates and resolves disputes. Cultural spheres are no exception—conflicts also arise there.

Part of culture arises from creativity, ideas, thought, reflection, and both individual and collective cultural action. Thus, cultural resources are no longer economic—even if they may produce economic consequences. When cultural resources spring from one's mind, heart, ideas, and reflections, the cultural sphere becomes a site for manifesting choices and actions. As such, it also becomes a domain in which differences are observable—differences rooted in personality, mentality, psychology, and status. Each acts within the cultural domain based on their personality: formulating ideas, engaging in reflection, and demonstrating creativity. The cultural actions of people—emanating from cultural thought, human reflection, and creativity—constitute a fundamental part of culture itself, being disseminated throughout the broader cultural framework. Once these actions pass through socialization and cultural internalization processes, they form a significant component of culture, and thus, culture is constructed. It is therefore natural for the cultural field to be characterized by difference and diversity.

Imam Riḍā seems to acknowledge this diversity. By participating in and facilitating dialogue, he affirms the personality of the other, not necessarily their belief, and allows conversation to occur. Despite holding the position of crown prince—a role that would permit him to negate or eliminate opposing cultures—his just perspective leads him instead to embrace diversity. By granting adherents of other religions and cultures the opportunity to engage in dialogue, he effectively acknowledges their right to speak and legitimizes it.

Moreover, in his view, access to and benefit from correct belief is itself a right—one he does not wish the misguided to be deprived of. This stems from the Imamate, which seeks guidance and leadership, not necessarily eliminating or marginalizing opponents. All criteria for just cultural engagement are manifest in Imam Riḍā's approach to cultural diversity: attention to difference, respect for the right to speak, concern for the good that others should seek, and recognition of the right to be guided.

The goods is what justice seeks to secure for people. When we speak of social justice, we refer to justice in distributing social goods. While benefiting the individual, these goods also pertain to society as a structure and collective entity. At its core, social justice aims to establish justice between individuals and structures, which is expanding benefits to all, i.e., the collective. Culture, too, is a collective phenomenon,

and a cultural good is likewise a collective good. Though cultural benefits can be seen as both individual and collective, the collective good takes precedence in the broader discussion of culture. Since cultural justice is examined as a subset of social justice, society becomes an essential part of the equation.

In guiding people toward the collective good within cultural diversity and difference, Imam Riḍā adopts the path of forbearance. He explicitly articulates this ethic in a well-known narration:

> A believer is not truly a believer unless he possesses three traits: one from his Lord, one from his Prophet (PBUH), and one from the Friend [*walī*] of God. The trait from his Lord is to keep secrets; the trait from his Prophet is to show forbearance toward people; and the trait from the Friend of God is patience in hardship and difficulty. (Ibn Shuʿba Ḥarrānī 2003, 442)

Unlike economic justice, where one may distribute vast material resources among a fixed population, cultural justice pertains to growth, elevation, and process. It necessitates that each person be granted their cultural right so that they may flourish. Accordingly, Imam Riḍā selects forbearance to cultivate the conditions for growth and secure the right to guidance.

This approach is particularly striking given the socio-political context of the time, which may not have seemed conducive to such tolerance. Thus, a deeper explanation is warranted.

The transmission of Greek sciences began following the Muslim conquest of Egypt, extending through the Umayyad and subsequently the Abbasid periods. However, most translations of scientific and medical works—from Greek into Syriac or Arabic—took place from the mid-second to the mid-third century AH (Zahmatkesh 2019, 84). During this surge of translation activity, the risk of syncretism and misguidance naturally increased. At the time of Imam Riḍā, in the absence of competent institutions or scholarly bodies to examine the content of these translated works, the Imam himself, drawing on his profound knowledge and mastery of the sciences, took measures to mitigate potential harms (Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī 1990, 134). Compounding this intellectual challenge was the widespread fabrication of hadiths and efforts to distort or redirect the leadership of the Shiʿi community.

These were critical cultural dynamics of the era, demanding vigilant and principled engagement. Imam Riḍā's strategy of forbearance amid such pressures reflects both a

theological commitment and a deliberate cultural policy aimed at preserving justice, enabling growth, and securing rightful access to truth and guidance.

3-3. The Essence of Culture

The central question is whether culture possesses a fixed essence that is necessarily immutable, or whether it is entirely constructed and devoid of any inherent essence. Alternatively, is there a third position in which culture is partly essential and partly constructed? This debate is crucial: if culture is entirely essential, human agency is effectively nullified—no intervention or modification is possible. Conversely, if culture is wholly constructed, it loses its primacy, and once again, human agency may be paralyzed by the absence of a clear direction for change. The third view, however, seeks to reconcile the two extremes.

The theory of the primacy of culture, articulated by Hamid Parsaniya in response to the ontological question of society (Seyyidi Fard and Farqani 2015, 134), and the cultural theory rooted in *ḥikmat-i mutaʿāliya* (Transcendent Theosophy), strongly affirm the essential dimension of culture. Based on the *ḥikmat-i mutaʿāliya* tradition, Parsaniya (2008, 52) conceptualizes culture as a shared knowledge dimension entering the human lifeworld. This entry signals an origin beyond the human, indicating an essential source that precedes humanity. Upon entering human experience, the human being internalizes and activates this embedded meaning within the domain of daily action and behavior (Parsaniya 2012, 125). According to this view, human beings inherit aspects of culture from God, particularly its inner, meaningful, spiritual, and doctrinal layers. The origin of diverse intellectual systems worldwide lies in applying this transcendent teaching within the framework of the sensible world (Nasr 2003, 30).

The other layers of culture derive their substance from this foundational stratum via commentators' interpretations, teachers' instruction, and lawmakers' legislation, forming the outermost layer of culture, which comprises individual and collective behaviors (Mahouzi 2011, 16).

Nevertheless, even a culture with an essential core remains subject to transformation. As mentioned, human beings possess free will, enabling them to move toward alternate semantic systems and integrate them into their cultural fabric (Parsaniya 2012, 119). This constructive capacity can, at times, generate inner-cultural conflict. When individuals—driven by new insights and emergent

interpretations—depart from the shared cultural meanings of their society and adopt new cultural forms, or at the very least express conflicting actions, these tensions become visible (Parsaniya 2012, 177). The observability of such cultural tensions is, in itself, evidence of the constructed aspect of culture.

Ultimately, culture comprises two components. The first descends from the higher realm and becomes embedded in a shared, essential knowledge. The second is the constructed dimension, wherein the free and autonomous human being—under the influence of various factors—modifies or reconstructs this shared knowledge. To ignore the first dimension is to negate human nature and *fiṭra*; to ignore the second is to render cultural transformation and evolution unintelligible.

In his pursuit of expanding cultural justice, Imam Riḍā emphasized the essential nature of culture, grounding his actions in *fiṭra* and the inherent dimension of culture. His orientation toward this essential layer is evident in his following hadith: "Praise be to God, who inspired His servants to praise Him and created them upon the knowledge of His Lordship" (Kulayni 2014, 1: 56).

This statement indicates that the culture Imam Riḍā advocated is teleological—purposeful and oriented toward an end.

The idea of *ghāya* (end or *telos*) is central in justice discourse, particularly in moral philosophy's long-standing debate between deontology and teleology. Deontologists, as the name suggests, prioritize duty over outcomes. Duties are binding and non-negotiable, even if they do not yield visible good triumphs over evil (Frankena 1988, 16-17). Immanuel Kant, one of the most resolute deontologists, argued that moral actions must be performed out of duty, irrespective of their apparent benefit (Kant 1998, 12).

Teleological theories, by contrast, assess actions in light of their consequences. An action is deemed morally right if it brings about desirable outcomes. For teleologists, the measure of an action's value lies in the extent to which it achieves its intended good (Bernard 1993, 82). These theories posit the independence and primacy of good over right. In contrast, deontologists argue that identifying what is right and duty does not rely on any particular conception of the good (Vaʿizi 2019, 73). Rawls's theory of justice exemplifies a deontological model, asserting that his proposed principles derive their moral legitimacy independently of any notion of the good, as they are chosen in an original position where individuals are unaware of such conceptions (Vaʿizi 2019, 73).

In contrast, al-Fārābī's theory of justice is grounded in a teleological ethics that affirms a conception of the good (Vaʿizi 2019, 129-130). Within Islamic thought, good holds a pivotal and well-defined place. For many Qurʾanic exegetes and Muslim thinkers, the good is that which, when attained, leads the human being to felicity (*saʿāda*). In other words, human felicity is identified with a form of good that is particular to human nature and compatible with the soul and body (Ṭabāṭabāʾī 1995, 9: 18).

Islam's moral vision is fundamentally teleological. Numerous Qurʾanic verses support this orientation, including: "Truly God has purchased from the believers their souls and their wealth in exchange for the Garden being theirs" (Quran, 9:111). "O you who believe! Shall I direct you to a commerce that will save you from a painful punishment?" (Quran, 61:10). And "O you who believe! Be patient, vie in patience, persevere, and reverence God, that haply you may prosper" (Quran, 3:200).

These verses highlight reward—Paradise, salvation, and success—as the intended outcomes of virtuous acts such as patience, charity, and struggle, thus reinforcing a teleological ethics (Shirvani 1999, 40).

At the same time, given humanity's limitations in consistently discerning the good, individuals must refine their conception of good through revealed divine guidance. It is implausible for human beings to construct a framework of rights and obligations without regard for purpose or outcome. The underlying question inevitably arises: if this right is granted to me, where will it ultimately lead, and what form of good will it secure for me?

Some perspectives attempt to reconcile deontology and teleology by asserting that Islam inherently adopts a teleological view since the goodness of actions is contingent upon their direct connection to divine proximity. Simultaneously, Islam also embodies a deontological stance because it calls humans to a rational submission to revelation (Javadi 2004, 373). Ultimately, regardless of whether one's orientation is teleological or deontological, what remains essential is that God and divine knowledge must define the telos and good and the duty and right. Within the Islamic framework of ontology and theology, humans cannot independently discern their ultimate felicity or the duties that lead to it.

Thus, the Qurʾān states: "It may be that you hate a thing though it be good for you, and it may be that you love a thing though it be evil for you. God knows, and you know not" (Qurʾān 2:216). Humanity suffers from a diagnostic deficiency that necessitates

recourse to God and to what He has revealed to understand the good. This good is ultimately identified with God Himself, as expressed in the verse: "Say, 'Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen.' Is God better, or the partners they ascribe?" (Qurʾān 27:59). Therefore, all social and cultural goods must ultimately lead to this absolute good.

Accordingly, Imam Riḍā emphasizes a telos—namely, divine lordship and knowledge of God. All his hadiths and teachings chart a path toward this ultimate good. As previously noted, justice cannot be meaningful without a conception of the good. Imam Riḍā, by affirming both the end and the essence of culture—rooted in the human *fiṭra*—presents divine lordship and knowledge as the good itself. Consequently, cultural justice naturally entails the movement toward this end and this good.

3-4. Classification of the Current of Cultural Justice

Once the criteria of cultural justice are established—derived from the foundational principles of culture and justice—they manifest across three interconnected levels: foundations, structures, and products.

Foundations and values constitute the core of cultural policy and are central. Though not actions per se, these foundations and values can be deemed just or unjust once assessed against defined criteria. A value or a foundational principle, located in the substratum of culture, may thus possess a just or unjust character. Shafritz (Shafritz and Borick 2008, 45-46) describes the expansion of any element within culture through policy-making, which requires a doctrinal framework as a mediating layer that translates philosophy into concrete policy.

Cultural justice is brought into the procedural justice domain at the structures and institutions level. At this level, cultural justice involves evaluating the fairness of procedures and processes employed in distributing cultural goods, benefits, and resources (Yamaguchi 2009, 21-31). As extensive and formal components of the cultural domain, cultural structures and institutions are the primary sites where these processes unfold.

The level of cultural products is the most tangible layer, where cultural justice must also find clear and perceptible expression.

Admittedly, examining these three levels during Imam Riḍā's lifetime requires more thorough scholarly investigation. However, certain examples may be highlighted to initiate inquiry and offer preliminary insights.

At the level of values and foundations, Imam Riḍā articulates cultural values grounded in the revelatory sciences of Islam and Shiʿism. His famous *ḥadīth al-silsila al-dhahab* is a paradigmatic statement that defines such values: "The word *lā ilāh illā Allāh* is My fortress; whoever enters My fortress is safe from My punishment." While articulating values and foundations alone does not suffice to establish cultural justice, it constitutes a necessary component within the first level of the tripartite model of value, structure, and product.

At the level of structures, Imam Riḍā capitalizes on his political position to redirect governing structures toward cultural justice. For instance, organizing public theological debates under his patronage may be interpreted as structural reform. Similarly, the expansion of Shiʿi belief during his presence in Khurasan reflects the realization of cultural justice at the structural level. Historically, Khurasan had become a center for early Shiʿism. Following the ʿAbbāsid overthrow of the Umayyads and their subsequent dominance in Khurasan, many locals initially saw no distinction between the ʿAlids and the ʿAbbasids as members of Banū Hāshim. However, the arrival of Imam Riḍā in the region led to the spread of authentic, doctrinal Shiʿism (Muẓaffar 1989). When Imam Riḍā delivered sermons at the court of Maʾmūn, it marked a strategic use of political structures to disseminate authentic cultural values (Ashabi Damghani 1971).

At the level of cultural products, we observe how Imam Riḍā actively promoted the Qurʾān as a cultural artifact. In all scholarly debates and intellectual discussions, he consistently referenced the Qurʾān to demonstrate its authority and significance (Shaykh Ṣadūq 1999, 2: 90, 93). Naturally, in dialogues with adherents of other religions, the Imam also cited their respective scriptures. A clear example is his debate with the Christian jāthaliq, where he invoked passages from the Gospel to support his arguments (Shaykh Ṣadūq 1999, 2: 420–427).

4. Conclusion

Cultural justice is a paradoxical concept—simultaneously simple and complex. On the one hand, its simplicity lies in the premise that culture must conform to a monotheistic, *tawḥīdī*, framework. On the other hand, it becomes complex when

confronted with individuals' diverse and autonomous choices. Imam Riḍā utilized the political opportunity of his appointment as crown prince to foster cultural justice structurally. His participation in state-sponsored debates exemplifies this structural intervention toward steering culture in a just direction.

At the same time, the Imam acknowledged cultural diversity as an intrinsic feature of every society. Consequently, he upheld the right to dialogue for people of varying backgrounds. Nevertheless, he never deviated from the collective cultural good, which is inherently tied to the nature of culture and aims ultimately at servitude and divine knowledge. These instances reflect Imam Riḍā's deliberate and multifaceted efforts to expand cultural justice.

It is, of course, evident that these findings are not exhaustive. A fully developed theoretical framework requires a more comprehensive account of Imam Riḍā's contribution to cultural justice, returning to his conduct to extract additional actions that further illuminate his role in advancing cultural justice.

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Notes

[1]. All Qur'anic citations in this paper are drawn from Nasr et al.'s 2015 translation; however, for the sake of brevity, only chapter and verse numbers are provided, omitting the mention of "Nasr et al." and the publication year.