



A Reflection on the Life and Teaching of Imām Ali al-Riḍā from a Christian Perspective

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Abstract

As I delve into Imām Riḍā's civilizational thought, exploring the concept of justice and its implications, I find myself drawn to the parallels between his teachings and those of Jesus Christ. Imām Riḍā's legacy of justice for everyone and injustice for no one resonates deeply with the core teachings of Christianity, particularly as embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Both figures exemplify a profound commitment to mercy, compassion, and the pursuit of righteousness. One striking aspect of Imām Riḍā's teachings is his emphasis on mercy for all believers, a principle that finds resonance in Jesus' teachings on love and forgiveness. The example set by Imām Riḍā in praying for the prosperity of all believers reflects Jesus' call to love one another and to pray even for our enemies. Moreover, Imām Riḍā's respect for all individuals, regardless of their social status or background, mirrors Jesus' interactions with people from all walks of life. Both figures demonstrate a deep reverence for the inherent dignity of every human being, challenging us to overcome prejudice and embrace the inherent worth of all individuals. The theme of caring for the needy is another point of convergence between Imām Riḍā and Jesus. Imām Riḍā's choice to stay with the destitute during his travels and Jesus' teachings on caring for the poor highlight the shared imperative to uplift the marginalized and alleviate suffering in our communities. Furthermore, both Imām Riḍā and Jesus exemplify affability toward others, emphasizing the importance of kindness, humility, and compassion in our interactions with one another. Their teachings remind us of the transformative power of love and the profound impact of acts of kindness on individuals and communities. Imām Riḍā's emphasis on forgiving the faults of others echoes Jesus' teachings on forgiveness and reconciliation. Both figures challenge us to overcome resentment and bitterness, extending grace and mercy to those who have wronged

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us. Additionally, Imām Riḍā and Jesus share a commitment to humane treatment of all people, regardless of their faith or ethnicity. Their teachings emphasize the importance of respecting human rights and promoting justice and equality for all members of society. Imām Riḍā's civilizational thought offers valuable insights into the shared values that unite humanity across religious divides. As Christians and Muslims, we have much to learn from one another's traditions, and through dialogue and cooperation, we can work together to build a more just, compassionate, and inclusive world.

Keywords: justice, Imām Riḍā, Jesus Christ, Christian-Muslim dialogue, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, cooperation, tolerance, empathy

Introduction

In this paper, I examine the life and teaching of Imām Ali al-Riḍā as summarized in the *Razavi Codes of Ethics* (n.d.), comparing and contrasting them with ethical instructions taught by Jesus Christ found in the four Gospels of the New Testament. However, I will elaborate more on the teaching of Jesus to illustrate similarities and differences to create avenues for mutually enriching a dialogue between the two traditions, without prioritizing one over the other.

This will not however, be an exhaustive or comprehensive analysis of Islamic and Christian ethical codes, but rather a comparison of some of the 13 examples contained in the *Razavi Codes of Ethics* with similar statements found in the teaching of Jesus.

The *Razavi Codes of Ethics* were written to help prepare pilgrims visiting the shrine of Imām Ali Al-Riḍā in Mashhad.

Through studying this book, it is hoped that the dear readers, respected pilgrims, and lovers who bore great pain and suffering for going on a pilgrimage to Imām Riḍā's tomb will become more familiar with Imām Riḍā's words and manners, will be determined to follow his teachings in their daily life, and make their life more fruitful and prosperous in this world and the world to come. (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d., Chap. 15)

The booklet also concludes with this helpful statement,

Unlike some other religions and schools of thought that invite their followers to blindly obey them and want them to accept the orders of the leaders unquestioningly and thoughtlessly, the Ahl al-Beit's school and Ithna Ashari Shiites not only do not forbid people from questioning about the main issues of the religion but they also encourage them to do it. (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d., back page)

In my own engagement with Muslims, I am deeply indebted to the Syrian Christian scholar, Chawkat Moucarry. In his life and teaching, he promotes Christian-Muslim

dialogue, as well as challenges many popular stereotypes held by Christians of Muslims. In a paper entitled “A Plea for Dialogue between Muslims and Christians,” Moucarry (2025) defines dialogue in these terms:

I take dialogue to mean a deliberate effort to engage genuinely and respectfully with each other; willingness to listen and understand; a readiness to learn and be challenged; a desire to relate to, communicate with, and be understood by one another. In Christian-Muslim dialogue, the focus is the Christian and Muslim faiths and their implications for individuals and communities in this life and the next.

For many centuries Western Christians have ignored or confronted the Muslim world. Ignoring Muslims is no longer an option in our “global village” where Muslims and Christians live next to each other. Some Christians seek to reach out to Muslims in confrontation, attacking Islam in a war of words. This approach is counterproductive as it usually inspires Muslims to become more radical in their beliefs, and often provokes an offensive reaction, too—Muslims attacking Christianity even more vehemently. A polemical engagement with Islam is also incompatible with “the gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6:15), which is about love, reconciliation, and forgiveness... Even in a heated debate the Christian apologist must refrain from polemics, personal attacks, and derisive arguments about Muslims and their religion.

Dialogue should be understood more broadly than verbal engagement. It is a way of life: an open attitude toward others, seeking to reach out and to welcome people, including those who are different or even antagonistic.

With that objective in mind, let us now examine the *Razavi Codes of Ethics* and compare them with the example and teaching of Jesus Christ.

1. The Mercy for all Believers

Imām Riḍā

While praying for believers, he would pray for their prosperity and would ask Allah, “O’ Bounteous Lord! Forgive every believer man or woman in the east and west.” (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d. Chap. 3)

Jesus Christ

I pray for them ... for those you have given me, for they are yours [...]. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one [...]. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:9, 15-17)

The character of God, expressed in compassion and mercy, is rightly emphasized in the first and most important of the *Razavi Codes of Ethics*: “The mercy for all believers.”

Forgiveness is also central in the teaching of Jesus, which even included his enemies. From the cross Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

In John 17 we find Jesus praying for his disciples as well as those who would come to believe in him. He did not explicitly pray for their prosperity but did so for their protection from Satan and for their unity. However, in what is known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did promise God’s blessing when we are generous in giving to others, “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38).

2. Respect for All

Imām Riḍā

Attending a gathering, he never sat in a way suggesting disdain and his disregard for others. He treated his servants with respect and did not speak harshly or rudely to them. Being respectful of humanity’s high status, he sat beside his servants for eating without [any] arrogance. (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d., Chap. 4)

Jesus Christ

When he had finished washing their feet ,he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” (John 13:12-17)

On the night before he was betrayed, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, something only a menial slave would be asked to do. Then he explained why he had done so – to set them example of how he expected them to treat one another.

Jesus repeatedly demonstrated the necessity of humility, not thinking less of oneself but thinking of oneself less. For example, when invited to a meal in the home of a prominent religious leader, “he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table”. In response, he gave them this advice. “When you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honoured in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:10-11). Unless we humble ourselves, others will, and we will be humiliated.

3. His Care of the Needy

Imām Riḍā

Traveling from *Medina* to *Khorasan* by Maʿmun’s force, Imām Riḍā (PBUH) stayed with the needy in the deprived areas Although it was a short stay, the Imām chose to be the guest of a destitute lady named Pasandide, whose house was in Blush Abad or Plus Abad, a region with poor living conditions. It is evident that Imām’s arrival at such regions or houses not only made those destitute people respectful but also poured in charitable contributions towards them. (Razavi *Codes of Ethics* n.d., Chap. 5)

Jesus Christ

Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (Luke 14:13-14)

Care for the poor clearly features prominently in the example and teaching of Imām Riḍā as well as that of Jesus Christ. In his first sermon Jesus set out his manifesto, quoting the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. (Luke 4:18-19, Isaiah 61:1-2)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus elaborated on this, pronouncing blessings on the poor and woes on the rich who have exploited the poor or are not generous with the resources the Lord has entrusted to them.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied... "But woe to you who are rich,

for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now,

for you will go hungry. (Luke 6:20-21, 24-25)

Care for the poor and needy is central to the will of God. So much so, in his final public sermon, Jesus goes as far as to insist that how we treat the poor is a reflection of how we treat God, and indeed, will be the criteria for determining our eternal destiny.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats ... "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:31-40)

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 25:41-46)

4. His Affability toward Others

Imām Riḍā

Everyone who smiles at his Muslim brother's face not only for his own benefit but for the sake of Allah and his humility before Him, Allah will enter him to Paradise. To be kind to people is half of wisdom. (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d. Chap. 6)

Jesus Christ

"But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked." Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:35-36)

While it is difficult for a non-Muslim to confidently interpret Imām Riḍā's teaching at this point (Al-Riḍā 1274, 398; Al-Ḥarrānī n.d., 15: 52; Majlisi n.d., 78: 435), it is clear that humility, as well as "kindness toward others", are an essential attribute of godliness. Jesus expected his followers to show love, compassion and mercy not just to friends and neighbours but even toward enemies because this an attribute of God.

One of the most notable conversations recorded in the Gospels was between Jesus and a Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42). Even his disciples, as well as the woman, were shocked that he broke with cultural norms to speak with her and even ask her for water. Jews looked down on Gentiles and the two communities did not mix, let alone speak to, or help one another. However, because of Jesus' kindness to her, many people in her community came to faith in God.

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. (John 4:39-41)

In the face of rising religious and racial prejudice, we can help diffuse tensions by showing compassion to others irrespective of their ethnicity or religious beliefs.

5. Being Supportive to Believers

Imām Riḍā

If you feel certain that you are able to follow the Prophet's instructions shouldering the responsibilities, to choose your assistants from among righteous and qualified people, and to use

Jesus Christ

"Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to

the facilities of which you are in charge to help the poor, it does not cause any problems. You are supposed to serve your Muslim brothers; otherwise, it is not permissible for you to be employed in the Abbasid government. (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d., Chap. 7)

pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him. (Mark 12:13-17)

In this instruction Imām Riḍā offers ethical guidance to an individual wishing to work for the Abbasid government. The Code reminds pilgrims that

The Holy Qur'an recommends the believers not to help the oppressors and evil rulers and not to take on any responsibilities in their governments. Shouldering responsibility in their corrupt governments is regarded as an act of cruelty towards people and hinders the divine religion from being established and spread. (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d., Chap. 7)

Although Jesus does not directly address the same issue, first century Palestine was part of the Roman empire. Roman taxation was immensely unpopular. Some Jews refused to pay because it implied that the idolatrous emperor was king, not God. Others worked for the Romans or cooperated with them like the Jewish religious leaders known as the Pharisees.

So, the religious leaders tried to trap Jesus. Should they pay the tax or not? If Jesus refused they could report him to the Romans. If he agreed, they could accuse him of collaboration. Instead, Jesus turns the tables on them. On one side of the denarius coin was an imager of Caesar, and on the other side, an inscription "Son of divine Augustus."

Jesus rejects the 'either - or' choice and insists we must pay our taxes, but our true loyalty is to the God in whose image we are created. God is sovereign and we must serve him, and him alone. All earthly rulers, including the most powerful Caesars today – like the US President and the Israeli Prime Minister, are accountable to him, just as we are. If forced to choose, we must always obey God and be prepared to suffer the consequences.

6. His Love and Affection for his Followers

Imām Riḍā

The narrator asked the Imām, “Did you know the man? He said, “Yes, he was one of our followers (Shiites). We are always aware of our followers” circumstances. If we see those committing sins, we ask Allah for their divine forgiveness. If we find them doing good deeds, we wish them divine assistance. (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d., Chap. 8)

Jesus Christ

If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matthew 18:15-17)

In this instruction, the text of the *Razavi Codes of Ethics* acknowledges that “all humanity is Allah’s servants and dear to Him, He bestows His blessings upon all” This closely parallels the teaching of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount in which we are reminded that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45).

Both faiths, however, recognize the special responsibility we have to bless and encourage fellow believers, especially when they fall into and need restoration. In the passage from Matthew 18, above, Jesus gave specific instructions on how to achieve that and what to do if they refuse.

7. Respect for the Father & Mother

Imām Riḍā

Obeying your father is obligatory on you, unless his requests lead you to His disobedience or committing sins. (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d., Chap. 9)

Observing the mother’s right is among the most obligatory actions... so you should be always immensely grateful to her, treat her kindly for all the troubles and

Jesus Christ

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, “Woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her

sufferings you caused her. (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d., Chap. 10) | into his home. (John 19:26-27)

Imām Riḍā had much to teach about responsibility to both our father and mother. From childhood we learn in the Gospels that Jesus was obedient to his parents (Luke 2:51-52), and in his teaching, emphasized the 5th commandment to “honour your father and mother” (Exodus 20:12; Luke 18:20). From the cross, now unable to care for his mother, Jesus entrusted her to his disciple John.

8. Making Efforts and Showing Great Concern for the Family

Imām Riḍā

Everyone who is hardworking to earn the living of one’s family through lawful ways will be rewarded more than the mujahids and soldiers fighting in Allah’s Path. (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d., Chap. 11)

Each rich man is supposed to keep his family in peace and comfort, provide his family with peace and quiet, and settle their affairs. Lest his family members get into difficulty because of his stinginess or miserliness while he can solve their problems and meet their needs. (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d., Chap. 11)

Jesus Christ

You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, “Honour your father and mother,” and, “Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.” But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that. (Mark 7:7-13)

The *Razavi Codes of Ethics* emphasizes our responsibility for our parents, family and relatives. Failure to fulfil these responsibilities is rebuked. Some of Jesus strongest condemnations are directed at religious leaders who twisted the scriptures to suit their own greed, as in the example above.

9. Forgiving Each Other’s Faults

Imām Riḍā

Believers do not seek vengeance, harbor hostility or act vindictively towards

Jesus Christ

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your

others. They do struggle against injustice and defend their own rights. But they forgive the others' faults when they are in power... even if a person forgives his fellowman's faults for the sake of Allah, He will punish the wrongdoers and ill-mannered people who do not deserve to be forgiven. (*Razavi Codes of Ethics* n.d., Chap. 12)

brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. (Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15)

Forgiveness and reconciliation with God, and with one another, are central to both Christianity and Islam. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus emphasizes both our responsibility to seek, as well as to give, forgiveness where there is repentance in order that there be reconciliation and restored relationships. And Jesus places the emphasis on reflecting on our own sin and need for forgiveness and not the sins of a brother or sister.

In what is known as 'The Lord's Prayer' (but should actually be called 'The Disciples Prayer', since it is how Jesus taught his disciples to pray), Jesus explains that forgiving a brother or sister is a prerequisite to receiving God's forgiveness for our own sin. "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Matthew 6:12). A few verses later Jesus elaborates why.

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15)

Forgiving others their sin against us demonstrates our thankfulness to God for forgiving us our sin against Him. In answer to the question, "but what if a brother or sister who has sinned against you, refuses to listen to you, what should you do?", Jesus outlines the steps to be taken to stop the sin proliferating, bring the person to repentance, avoid division and maintain harmony among believers.

If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:15-18)

In response, and presumably thinking he was being magnanimous, the apostle Peter asked Jesus,

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (Matthew 18:21-22)

By this Jesus probably meant “stop counting, just forgive”. In Luke’s Gospel, reiterates why we should be quick to seek as well as show mercy.

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Luke 6:36-38)

Conclusions

We have seen that there are indeed many parallels between the *Razavi Codes of Ethics* and the New Testament Gospels. This is perhaps to be expected given that both Christianity and Islam build on the ethical teaching of the Hebrew scriptures and that chronologically, Christianity preceded Islam. There are differences however, notably in the means and ends of achieving righteousness. John Span, points out:

Christian ethics is focused on an end-result. This goal is to be Christ- like in every way and so bring glory to God... rather than an emphasis on divine commands – important as they are – Christian ethics focuses on a Christ-like heart disposition that has an over flow of right action, rather than prescribing right actions that will effect a change of heart disposition. (Span 2021)

This is because the ultimate source for Christian ethics is the moral character of God, rather than the commands of God. This distinction, albeit subtle, between Muslim and Christian ethics, is perhaps worthy of further discussion on another occasion.

Chawkat Moucarray helpfully describes the commonality in Christian- Muslim dialogue, which this presentation has sought to emulate.

Christian-Muslim dialogue is an encounter at three levels, like Jesus’s encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26). First, Christians and Muslims meet each other as human beings, with common needs and aspirations, joys and sorrows, hopes and struggles. Second, they meet as monotheistic believers, sharing many beliefs and ethical values, despite differing understanding of these. Finally, Christians and Muslims claim to be God’s witnesses. An integral part of dialogue is removing the

huge misunderstandings we have about each other's faith, so bearing witness. A fruitful dialogue is measured by its outcomes: a better understanding of each other's faith and of one's own. It should also lead to better relationships between the two communities, strengthening their social commitment. Dialogue is also an excellent school for tolerance. It helps us overcome our ignorance, our prejudice, our self-centeredness, our fanaticism, and our spiritual pride. (Moucarry 2025, 2-3)

Beyond this brief comparison between the life and teaching of Imām Riḍā with that taught by Jesus Christ, living in a divisive and volatile world characterised by intolerance and extremism, it is important to hold on to the common ground of religious belief shared by Muslims and Christians, which provides ample motivation for mutual respect, for deeper engagement and lasting cooperation.

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