50716 - Taking Money from Non-Muslims by Treacherous Means

the question

We live in a western country where one of the brothers receives money from the government under the “social services” program. He made a deal with them on the basis of specific conditions, one of which was that he will tell them of any income he receives from any source.
After a while he found work but he did not receive any payment from the boss until after four months. During these four months he did not tell them anything because he had not received anything. In the fifth month he received his money in full from the boss, but he spent it all paying off debts that he owed. Then after that he told the social services that he had found work and signed off the dole. What is the ruling on the money that he received during those four months? Does he have to repay it to the government, knowing that he was obliged to tell them about the debt but he did not?
Another issue is that he does not have the full amount that he took from them. Thirdly, if he tells them now the matter may go to the police and he will have a big problem but may be pardoned, depending on the official who examines the case. The brother regrets it now and wants to set matters straight.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Taking wealth from non-Muslims in treacherous and deceitful ways is haram (impermissible), because deceit is haram in Islam, whether it is done to a Muslim or to a non-Muslim.

What a Muslim is obliged to do is to respect the agreement that exists between him and that country, even if it is a non-Muslim state, because the fact that it is non-Muslim does not mean that it is permissible for him to violate that agreement or betray it and consume its wealth unlawfully.

The brother should have disclosed his work regardless of the debt that he concealed from them.

If Allah guides a Muslim to repent from taking people's wealth unlawfully, then one of the conditions of this repentance is that he should return to people what is rightfully theirs, even if they are non-Muslims. If there is the fear of humiliation or criminal charges if he returns money to the social services department, then it is permissible for him to look for a suitable way of preserving his dignity whilst also returning money to its rightful owner without embarrassing himself, such as sending the money in the mail or delegating someone to take it to them without mentioning his name or what he did to them. It is not essential for the one who wants to return things to their rightful owners to disclose himself or his identity, because the purpose is to return things to their rightful owners.

For information on the evidence for this ruling, the views of the scholars and what he must do after having repented, please see the answers to questions no. 47086, 7545, 14367 and 31234.

If he does not have the whole amount, he may return what he can afford now, and the rest will remain a debt that he owes, which he must return when he is able to.

And Allah knows best.