

A Universal Ethic of Justice in The figure of Imam Husayn and his Progeny

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During these 10 nights Muslims and especially Shia Muslims congregate in all corners of the world to remember what took place on the 8th of January, 680 A.D. A tragedy and sacrifice of little parallel occurred in a little known area of southern Iraqi dessert. To provide a short historical backdrop, just a year or less before the caliph or leader by the name of Yazid the son of Mu'awiyya was ushered into power by his father. At this point and time the Muslim world had never had a ruler of this kind- an individual so morally bankrupt with no concern for the welfare of his people, and with no consciousness of God. Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad would not and could not allow for business as usual, he would and could not stand in absolute silence in the face of such moral bankruptcy...

Husayn took the bold step, to state on the record that a person like him, that is a person who shares his spiritual characteristics would never pledge allegiance to a person like Yazid. That is to say, those rich with morals, ethics and devotion to God, such as Husayn would never pledge their allegiance to a morally bankrupt tyrant like Yazid. Husayn, would pay a heavy price for this stance, however there were signals that a group of Muslims were willing to support him in his cause, he marched forth from the city of Mecca (in modern day Saudi Arabia) destined for

the city of Kufa in southern Iraq. However, he was stopped and cordoned off by the army of Yazid while on route. Husayn named this place, Karbala. Husayn, his family (including his infant children, nieces and nephews) and a few supporters numbered about 72 or so, were eventually cut off from all access to water, and after several days of encampment, thirst, and estrangement they continued to make every attempt to avoid physical conflict and avoid bloodshed. The only thing Husayn was not willing to negotiate with was his giving the pledge of allegiance to Yazid. On, the tenth day of the month of Muharram-‘ashura- they were forced to face off in battle against an army numbering in the thousands. They were brutally massacred, their tents were looted, and their children and womenfolk were taken prisoner. The lovers and followers of Husayn gather to recall these events and to remind themselves that acquiescing to and accepting tyranny is not an option. Imam Husayn and his beloved family and companions would and could not tolerate the status-quo and in doing so he tread the path of his grandfather, the Prophet Muhammad and his father, Imam Ali. He was truly a voice of justice, reason, and mercy.

I am not here to discuss how the religious nightmare of Yazid’s rise to power took place, for that is best kept to a detailed history lesson for which I am not here to discuss today.

Needless to say, the identity badge of being a Muslim is not mutually inclusive with being a righteous servant of God and a sincere follower of the Prophet Muhamamd. We do not have vested spiritual interests in identity badges or bumper stickers and I do not think any religious tradition is in the business of doing so. More precisely, the badge of being a Muslim, Christian, Jew or Sikh holds little value in and of itself when one does not practice the tenets of their faith. With this crucial caveat in mind, I shall proceed. Moving on....

The religiously and spiritually grounded position of Imam Husayn was not something without precedent....

Rather on the contrary, he was humbly following in the cherished footsteps of his grandfather the Prophet Muhammad and his father Imam 'Ali. Their every breath, their every step, their every word was a manifestation of justice, fair play in the world and humility before God. If there was one thing they could not sit back and swallow, it was the recognition and pledge of allegiance to an unjust leader, a leader who treats the public treasury as his personal bank account, a leader who tramples over the dignity of the citizens he swore to protect, a leader who pounces on the weak and needy as a wild lion does over its prey. After all, the miracle of the holy Qur'an and the recipient of its revelation the Prophet Muhammad was such that it stood tall in the midst of the injustice and the barbarism of Meccan society, it was and continues to be a ray of hope and promise. The Prophet

Muhammad made this glimmer of hope a reality such that within a period of twenty or so years, as the messenger of God and the recipient of the revelation, he brought about an entirely new social-spiritual order to which the annals of history of Muslim and non-Muslim provenance have dedicated thousands of pages in an effort to not only document but also in an effort to comprehend the spiritual and philosophical foundations of this new and promising Godly sisterhood and brotherhood. The Prophet Muhammad established his new government in the city of Madina (in modern day Saudi Arabia), built upon the foundation of a common humanity, mercy, compassion, and servitude to God and none else as revealed to him in the holy Qur'an. I shall now give two concrete historical examples of the struggle for compassion and fair play- one in the life of Imam al-Husayn's grandfather, the Prophet Muhammad and the other in the life of Husayn's father, Imam Ali.

The following verse best characterizes the achievement of the Prophet Muhammad in his life time but also serves as a warning to the early Muslim community as well as today:

وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا^٥ وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ
بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا

“Hold fast to the rope of Allah together and do not separate from one another, recall the blessing of God which has been bestowed upon you, for you (oh

Muslim) were enemies and he (God) brought your hearts together, and as a result of his blessing he made you into a brotherhood”

The central message of this verse is that, God through the hand of the Prophet Muhammad executed an incredible social and moral revolution in the Arabian peninsula, such that the basis of their brotherhood, morality, and their treatment of one another was a recognition of God, a recognition that they have someone greater to answer to, a recognition that the Prophet Muhammad is the messenger of God and the days of petty animalistic feuds were over. A new brotherhood has been founded upon a profound sense of sobriety before God and most importantly a moral and ethical vision governed by the Qur'an and the example set by the recipient of its divine revelation. The warring clans of Aws and Khazraj had been united- and the basis of this unity was love and respect and a system of fair play and justice where the needy, the weak, black, the white, the Arab and non-Arab were given their due sense of humanity and recognition as implemented by the Qur'an and the Prophet.

Fredrick denny distinguished University of Colorado Professor: (This must be a reminder for all Muslims (King or peasant) which should pervade their world view and consciousness) :

“Muhammad had known privation and marginality as an orphan and poor member of his clan and tribe. He early gained an appreciation of and compassion for the plight of vulnerable persons such as widows, orphans, strangers, sojourners , slaves, and victims of oppression. Muhammad (saws) is depicted in the sources as a person who continued, during his career as prophet and leader of

the Muslim community in Madina, then all of Arabia, to mend his own sandals and manage his own meagre assets, sometimes going without sufficient food rather than demean his office by begging..” his example lived on emanated in the character of his righteous heirs and companions.

Imam al-Husayn in his every breath, every stride, and his every word manifested this Prophetic tradition of fair play, humility before God, and compassion for humanity. This can never be lost from the minds of those who wish to understand those tragic yet momentous events on the sands of Karbala.

The second profound example of Godly justice and fair play I wish to shed light upon is taken from the life of the father of Imam al-Husayn, that is none other than Imam ‘Ali the son of Abu Talib who is revered by all Muslims alike today. In the year 656, Imam ‘Ali was elected the leader of Muslims by popular demand.

However a tricky situation would quickly present itself to Imam Ali- brothers and sisters of all faiths, this is an important example (cited in Tabari) so your attention would be most cherished.

Imam Ali had now become the leader of Muslim, but he was posed with a predicament, which was- what was he to do with the religiously and morally crooked governors previously appointed by his predecessor? At this point, Ibn ‘Abbas, a friend and follower of ‘Ali, offered up some political advice. He tells ‘Ali not to rock the boat for now and to leave the existing governors of Egypt and Syria where they are for now, for if you confirm their appointments they will not

cause political trouble for you- because all they are concerned with is the materialistic life of this world. For, if you remove them from their positions, they will cause discord and begin to spread propaganda against you. In other words,-- let them lye where they are and we will deal with them later.

‘Ali now responds with words of spiritual precision:

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: اما ما ذكرت من اقرارهم فو الله ما اشك ان ذلك خير في عاجل -
--الدنيا لاصلاحها¹,

“As for what you have mentioned regarding keeping the already appointed governors in their positions..By God I don’t argue that is best for the purpose of this world” ie.— setting keeping it in order.

However....he now follows up this statement:

Keeping in mind all you have said...I am compelled by the truth of what I know regarding the appointments of my predecessor--- فو الله لا اولى منهم أحدا ابدا-- For by God I shall never delegate the authority of governance to any one of them ...

My brothers and sisters, the Prophet Muhammad, Imam ‘Ali, and Imam al-Husayn and the righteous amongst their supporters stood for this kind of justice. That is, the type of justice which cannot be bought and sold with the allure of temporary or superficial worldly comfort. The kind of justice implemented with the goal of

¹ Tarikh al-Tabari, 4:440, year 35.

seeking the pleasure of God in this life and the hereafter and this pleasure of God is directed by the moral-ethical vision of the Qur'an and the tradition of Muhammad and the chosen amongst his decedents.

On this note, God in the Qur'an issues the following command:4:1

“ O humankind, have a consciousness/deep seated recognition of your Lord who created you from a single soul (that of Adam) and from that created its partner (Eve)..and from this pair an abundance of men and women were created...”

This statement of God, is a call to humanity to come to the acceptance that they have been created (*makhluq*), they have been created by their Lord. It is this sober recognition that I have come from somewhere, I am accountable to God my creator, and I shall return to my creator. Despite our language, race, culture or even religion- this Qur'anic verse calls humanity first and foremost to the recognition that they have been created and however high they rise, they must remember that God is above them. This sober recognition and humility before God is intent to keep humankind grounded, and instil within them a sense of universal compassion for their neighbour, the oppressed, the poor, and the disenfranchised. For however tall and mighty we may feel, we shall stand before God in a state of awe, humility, and reverence. It is for this reason in the absence of this much needed sobriety human beings of various delusionary religious persuasions have the potential to

commit the most vile of deeds. It is for this reason that Imam Ali warns his future governor against the perpetration of injustice by telling him: **وَلَا تَنْصِبَنَّ نَفْسَكَ لِحَرْبِ**

اللَّهِ - “Do not set yourself up to be at war with God.”

Imam al-Husayn was aware of the gravity of the situation of his time and he could not sit idly as our humanity gifted to us by God was being trampled upon and desecrated at the hands of Yazid. Put succinctly and acutely, Yazid had violated the rights of man and the rights of God----he had taken God to war.

I will end with the following verse from the Holy Qur’an 4:135

“O you who believe, be those who maintain fair play and be witnesses for the sake of God, even if it means you shall witness against yourselves, or your parents and near relatives, and whether it be someone rich or poor. For God takes precedence before them..

And do not follow your petty animalistic inclinations, for you shall swerve from implementing justice and you shall distort justice or decline to implement it altogether. For, God knows entirely what you do.”

