

## Ali as an Apostle of Peace

Ali as the right arm of Islam and the shield and buckler of Muhammad, is a vast and a complex subject. But Ali as an Apostle of Peace is a subject just as vast and just as complex. Few men, if any, have loved peace more or hated war less than Ali.

The students of history know that appeals in the name of peace, justice and fair-play, are made only by those people who are weak and who are on the defensive. There is no reason for the strong and the aggressive to make appeals in the name of peace. Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane and other great conquerors of history didn't make any appeals for peace to the nations they had defeated.

If Louis XIV and Napoleon ever sued their enemies for peace, it was only when their own armies began to suffer reverses. In our own times, it was not Hitler who was appealing to anyone for peace; it were the nations he had overrun which were appealing to him for peace in the name of humanity.

If there is any pattern in history which is consistent, it is that the mighty, heady with power, rides roughshod; the weak seeks or tries to seek refuge in moral imperatives and ethical doctrines.

To this general and universal rule, there is, however, one exception, and that is in Ali ibn Abi Talib. Even when he was strong and his enemies were weak, he appealed to them for peace in the name of humanity, and he appealed to them to refrain from shedding blood. Even when he was victorious, he acted toward his defeated enemies as if they would do him a favor by forswearing war.

If an enemy was overcome, and he wished to save his life, all he had to do was merely to ask Ali to save his life, and he (Ali) saved his (the enemy's) life. And he did so with no preconditions. His enemies knew this through long experience, and they took every advantage of this knowledge. Many among them escaped the penalty of death in this manner, for treason and rebellion.

As noted before, Ali was consistently consistent in upholding principle. For this consistency, he had to pay a very high price. But was there an alternative? For him there was not. If he had, at any time in his career, compromised with principle, then he would have been no different from other rulers. The other

rules and leaders pay most eloquent tributes to their own ideals and principles but in practice they give their devotion only to realpolitik; to the philosophy of politics minus ethics; and they put their own self-interest ahead of everything else.

If Ali had ever sacrificed principle to policy, then his government would have ceased to be the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. This he could not allow. He had revived the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth which was first established by Muhammad.

Both of them knew that the “Kingdom” was a delicate and a frail structure, and that it was threatened on all sides by hostile forces – both overt and covert. They knew too that if they compromised with principle, then the “Kingdom” would collapse from within. Doing so, therefore, was unthinkable for them. They did not compromise with principle, and if they had to pay a price for upholding it, they cheerfully paid it.

Ali was grappling with the moral scourge that war represents. He believed that war and the preparation for war, were incompatible with the health and well-being of the human race. The conquest of war, therefore, was his grand preoccupation.

For Ali, all was not fair in war. He rigidly applied and enforced the commandments of Qur’an to politics and war. If he could win a victory through questionable means, he preferred to forgo victory but he did not take recourse to deceit. His own principles and his own humanity were, to him, far more important than victory in war.

As already noted in an earlier chapter, during the times of the Prophet, whenever Ali met an enemy in battle, he offered him three options. They were:

1. Accept Islam; or,
2. Do not fight against Muhammad who is the Apostle of God, and withdraw from the battle;
3. If the first two options are not acceptable to you, then you be the first one to strike at me.

During his own caliphate, Ali was compelled to fight against those Muslims who had risen in rebellion against the central government. He appealed to them to resolve disputes through negotiation instead of fighting.

Fighting, for him was the last option, and the most repugnant one. But if anyone challenged him, then he (the challenger) had to be the first to strike at him. He was never the first to strike at his foe. He insisted on fighting only a defensive action.

In the campaigns of the Prophet, before a general engagement of the forces, the champions of each side fought duels just like the Roman gladiators. In the battle of Uhud, a champion from the Makkan army rode out of his ranks and challenged the Muslims. Ali went out to meet him. Moments later, Ali had vanquished his opponent, and had planted his knee on his chest to deliver the coup de grace. In that

moment, as a last act of defiance, the fallen champion spat on Ali.

It would have been a perfectly normal and human reaction on the part of Ali to have plunged his sword into the heart of the offender, who, now prostrate, had violated a rule of pagan chivalry – an unpardonable offense in Arabia.

But Ali did just the opposite. He rose from the chest of his enemy, put his sword into the scabbard, and walked back to his own lines.

Both armies were watching this drama, and both were surprised but no one was more surprised than the enemy who had just been overcome, and could not believe that he was safe. What was the meaning of this strange act, he wondered; wasn't Ali going to kill him for his insolence?

The Makkan hero rose from the ground, overtook Ali, and asked him why he did not kill him. Ali said:

“Your foul act made me angry. Now if I were to kill you, I would find satisfaction against a personal injury. But I am not seeking satisfaction against any personal injury. I do not want to kill anyone for any personal reason.”

When the pagan warrior heard Ali's answer, his astonishment was even greater than before. But he understood that Ali was fighting for an ideal. Ali's answer accomplished what his sword had not; it destroyed the unbelief of his adversary, and he (the adversary) accepted Islam.

This one act epitomized Ali's philosophy of life. He demonstrated that his hatred, just like his love, was impersonal. He did not hate or love for himself; he hated or loved only for the sake of God. If he fought, it was only to win the pleasure of God; and if he made peace, it was also to win the pleasure of God. His whole *raison d'être* was to win the pleasure of God.

If Ali disdained to kill for reasons of his principle, he also disdained to kill for reasons of his humanity. It was to his humanity that a man as dangerous and treacherous as Amr bin Aas owed his life in the battle of Siffin. Abbas Mahmud Al-Akkad of Egypt writes in his book, *'Abqariyyet Imam Ali* (Cairo, 1970):

Ali's gallantry and chivalry did not allow him to take advantage of a situation in which he found his enemy cornered and helpless. (In the battle of Siffin) Amr bin Aas suddenly realized in an encounter that he was confronting Ali, and he fell to the ground on his face. Anyone else would have killed him, and thus got rid of a source of constant trouble but Ali turned his gaze away in disgust, and did not meddle with him.”

In the battle of Siffin, Ali often fought in disguise. He was thus disguised when Amr bin Aas challenged him but a moment later he recognized him. Upon recognition, he did not lose his presence of mind. He fell on his face and uncovered his derriere, knowing exactly how Ali would react to this stratagem. (Ali was predictable!)

Ali recoiled from the repulsive sight. A subaltern in his (Ali's) army shouted: “This is Amr bin Aas. Don't

let him escape. Kill him.” But Ali forbore from killing Amr bin Aasas the latter lay in that abject position.

The last battle that Ali had to fight, was the battle of Nehrwan, fought in 658. In that battle, a Kharji warrior found himself under the edge of Ali's sword. Expecting to be cleft into two halves, he was frozen with fear, and his sword and shield fell from his hands. But at that moment, he was surprised to see Ali stay his hand, turn the reins of his horse away from him, and engage someone else. Not believing his own eyes, he shouted: “Ali! Are you not going to kill me?” “No,” answered Ali. “Why not,” the Kharji asked, “it will mean one enemy less for you.”

Then the following exchange took place between them:

Ali: I cannot kill you now because you have lost your sword and shield, and you have nothing with which to defend yourself.

Kharji: I understand, and this is just what I had heard about you that you do not kill an unarmed enemy. But I have also heard something else, and would like to know if that is true.

Ali: What is it that you have heard and wish to verify now?

Kharji: I have heard that you do not turn down the request even of an enemy if it is not unreasonable. If this is true, then I would like you to give me your sword now that I have lost my own.

The request was not very reasonable, especially considering its time and place but Ali did not hesitate. He seized the blade of his sword, and held out the hilt to the enemy. The latter took it, reassured himself that Ali had no sword, and asked:

Kharji: You are now unarmed, Ali. Tell me who will save you from me now?

Ali: God. God will save me. My trust is in Him, and not in the sword or the shield.

Ali's answer surprised the die-hard Kharji once again, but it also conquered him, and he exclaimed:

“You have conquered me, O mysterious man! From this moment, I will be your slave. I shall fight on your side against your enemies, and I shall kill them.”

The Kharji's offer ought to have pleased Ali, and he ought to have welcomed him in his own ranks, but he said:

“Do not fight for me or against me. Fight only for Justice and Truth. If you believe that Justice and Truth are on my side, then by all means, fight on my side.”

The hand of Ali was the most powerful weapon in the arsenal of Islam. On every occasion, it opened the gate of victory while every other hand failed to do so. His hand was also the “key” to peace, and peace cannot find a protagonist greater than him anywhere. But as stated above, he was a protagonist of

peace from a position of strength, and not from one of weakness. His work was the texture of peace itself.

Ali was not building an empire. He, therefore, did not act like an empire-builder. An empire-builder has to be an aggressor, an invader. He has to overrun other countries and he has to pull down other empires on the ruins of which he can build his own empire. Ali did not have any such aims. He, therefore, did not invade any country. His aim was only to restore the momentum of work which his master, Muhammad, the Messenger of God, had begun. This he succeeded in doing during the few years of his caliphate.

Ali lived an austere life in the true sense of the term. His clothing was made of the coarsest material with many patches on it. His food was dry crusts of stale barley bread which he had to soak in water so they could become edible. Occasionally, he ate some dates. He was extremely abstemious, and often told the Arabs not to eat too much, and particularly, not to eat too much meat. ("O Arabs! Do not make your stomachs the graves of animals.")

In Medina, Ali made his living as a laborer. When he became the sovereign of the Muslims, his lifestyle didn't change. He still made his living as a laborer. He ruled the Muslims with the "collaboration" of labor. In a sense, his government was the first "labor government" of history, and also its last, since he was not an "arm-chair" laborer but actually worked in fields and gardens for a competence.

Ali often paid rich tributes in his speeches to the laborer, the worker and the craftsman. They were "the friends of God," and could anyone do better than to cultivate them – the friends of God? He cultivated them, and he was instinctively drawn toward them. Conversely, and it may appear strange, he could never, at any time in his life, cotton to the rich. From the beginning, there was an inexplicable estrangement between him and them. He was as distant from the "landlords," the "magnates," and the "tycoons" of those days as one pole is from the other. Ali felt very much ill-at-ease with them.

Ali gave dignity to manual labor by his personal example. He mended his own clothes and his own shoes, milked his own goats, drew water from the wells, and loaded and unloaded the camels of the caravans. When he was in Medina, he made his living as a gardener for a Jewish farmer. He irrigated his fields. He made labor honorable, and made laborers proud of their calling. His empire was a land of social benevolence and a real "labor paradise" such as the world has not seen before or since.

Though the four years of Ali's reign were convulsed with rebellions and civil war, no one in his dominions ever went hungry. Not only there was no hunger but also there was no inflation. Everyone had plenty to eat and to spend. In Kufa, the orphans, the widows, the old, and the sick persons did not have to worry about food and shelter; Ali took all their burdens away from them. In the provinces, his governors had to feed the poor and the hungry before they could feed themselves.

To the orphans, Ali showed so much affection and love that it was said that he pampered them. He collected all the bonbons, honey and other delicacies that he could, and fed them on these. Ali was one of the greatest humanitarians who ever lived. In Kufa, he had provided shelter to a leper in a place

outside the city. He visited him daily, dressed his wounds, fed him with his own hands as the latter had no hands, put him in his bed, and then returned to the city.

Ali was not only the greatest warrior–saint of Islam, and its apostle of peace; he was also the first patron of learning in the Muslim *umma*. Mahmood Saeed al–Tantawi of Egypt writes in his book on the *Ten Companions of Muhammad*, published in Cairo in 1976:

“Ali stood at the pinnacle of glory in all the branches of science. He was the most knowledgeable man in Islamic jurisprudence. He was the greatest authority in the sciences of Qur’an. He had a more thorough grasp of the aims, and a more perfect understanding of the meaning of Qur’an than anyone else. He maintained the purity of Arabic as a language, and he spelled the rules of its grammar. He was the most eloquent of all orators, and when he spoke, he touched every heart such as nothing else ever did. People who heard his speeches, often cried like children.

These accomplishments would be truly extraordinary if they were found in someone else. But they are not extraordinary in Ali because he ought to be like this. After all, it was the Apostle of God himself who brought him up, and educated him. Ali was unique in the sense that he drank deep of the Prophetic knowledge at its fountainhead itself. This is something that no one else has done except him.” (*Ten Companions of Muhammad*, pp. 150, 157, 162)

All the savants in the orders of *tassawuff* (Islamic mysticism) trace the fundamentals of their doctrines to Ali’s philosophy. He is the acknowledged monarch of the realm of sainthood. The purport of his philosophy is the dynamic love of God, and the love of His entire creation.

Ali’s speeches, sermons, letters, edicts, epigrams and aphorisms compendiously styled *Nahjul–Balagha* (the Course of Eloquent Wisdom), constitute a fountainhead of Islamic philosophy, and a treasure–house of the sciences of Qur’an.

They enlighten the reader on a vast variety of subjects such as the Oneness of God, the recognition and the love of God; life and death; heaven and earth; creation and final annihilation; private and public morality; freewill and predestination; government and its duties; the ethics, logic and the philosophy of Qur’an; exegesis of Qur’an; history and its logic; law and jurisprudence; man’s relationship with God and with society; the relationship between divine and practical laws; the good society; reason and rationality; the moral basis of the state; the nature of right rule and sovereignty; justice and responsibility; and Muhammad’s mission as God’s Last Messenger to mankind, his precedents and his traditions.

Ali spoke and wrote with consummate grace and wit, and he put special stress on precision. The ideological messages saturate *Nahjul–Balagha’s* text and imagery.

Tirmidhi and Tabrani, the collectors of the traditions, have quoted Muhammad, the Apostle of God, as saying: “I am the City of Knowledge, and Ali is its Gate.”

As the First Disciple of Muhammad, Ali made the most magnificent contributions to the realm of thought with the equally magnificent contributions to the domain of action.

Ali's military services to Islam tend to overshadow his intellectual achievements. They monopolize the attention of the student of history, and thus the overall picture tends to get "out of focus." Actually, he was the founder of the intellectual discipline and the intellectual ascendancy of the Muslims.

No caliph ever produced such a cascade of documents, commandments, letters, speeches and sermons; and no caliph ever addressed himself to such a vast range of topics, as he did. His writings, edicts and lectures on the exegesis of Qur'an are the intellectual underpinnings of Islam. He was the apotheosis of versatility.

Jurji Zaydan, the Lebanese–Egyptian historian, writes in his *Collected Works*, vol. I, (page 550) that when Amr bin Aas invaded Egypt, the governor of Egypt sent to him the letter which Muhammad Mustafa, the Apostle of God, had addressed to him (to the governor), a few years earlier, inviting him to Islam. Amr received the letter, and it bore the seal of the Prophet.

The historian further says:

"He (Amr) recognized the seal of the Prophet. He then looked at the writing, and it was the writing of Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib. *Ali was the first man who introduced the art of writing in (the propagation of) Islam.*

He was the secretary of the Prophet. There were some other secretaries also, and Amr bin Aas was one of them. When he was satisfied that it was the letter of the Prophet, he kissed it, placed it on his head, and then read it as follows..."

Ali was, therefore, the pioneer who "mobilized" the art of writing in the service of Islam. Abbas Mahmud Al-Akkad of Egypt, says in his book, *Abqariyyet Al-Imam Ali* (Cairo, 1970):

"It remained to him (to Ali) to give guidance in the doctrine of *Tauheed* (Monotheism), in Islamic justice, in jurisprudence, in Arabic grammar, and in the art of Arabic writing. We would be right if we call his work the foundation of true Islamic sciences of all ages. Or, better still, if we call him the Encyclopedia of all Islamic Knowledge in the first century of Islam."

During his own caliphate, Ali was forced to deal with a series of rebellions but whenever he found intermittent periods of peace, he took optimum advantage of them to put across the ethos of Islam to the *umma* of Muhammad Mustafa.

Multitudes of seekers of knowledge gathered in Kufa to hear Ali's speeches. After each speech, he invited questions from them. He often said to them:

"O Muslims! Ask me any questions on any subject that you may have in your minds, and do so now.

Remember that I will not be with you forever.”

Ali encouraged free inquiry and open debate on all religious, doctrinal, legal, political, philosophical and scientific subjects, and he encouraged Muslims to make the mosque a “forum” for the free expression of their ideas.

Ali had profound belief in the dignity and worth of the individual, and his right to freedom of choice in his religious persuasion, and in his political, economic and social institutions. He had faith in man's capacities and abilities to fulfill his destiny as God's vicegerent on this earth. Addressing man in one of his odes, he said:

“Thou thinkest that thou art a small body (microcosm); yet the greater world (macrocosm) is hidden within thee.”

Ali came nearest to being a “sovereign person.” He was a saint, a scholar, a worker, a poet, a soldier, a conqueror, a judge, a philosopher, a humanitarian, a jurist, an orator, an administrator and a statesman but above all things, he was the beau-ideal of all those men and women who love God. The hub of his character was the love of God. He was “intoxicated” with the love of God. His speeches and sermons are vibrant with this love. In one of them, he said:

“My greatest happiness comes to me when I am waiting upon my Creator. This happiness is so great that I cannot think of any other recompense that can surpass it. It is its own greatest reward.”

In another sermon he said:

“I do not worship God prompted by my eagerness to enter heaven because such is the worship of a man who is working for his wages. I do not worship God prompted by the fear of being thrown into hell because such is the worship of a slave. I worship God out of my love for Him, and the knowledge that He alone is worthy of that devotion and obedience which I give Him.”

In a letter which Ali wrote to a friend, he said:

“If all those veils which hide our Creator from our sight, were lifted from my eyes, and if I were to find myself in His presence without any of those veils, my faith in His existence would remain exactly the same as it is now.”

Ali was buoyantly conscious of God's infinite goodness and mercy. One of his favorite prayers was:

“I seek the refuge of the infinite might of the Almighty, and I seek the sphere of His limitless mercy and blessings, and I invite you to pray with me so that He may give us the willingness and the ability to surrender our will to His will, and enable us to acquit ourselves honorably before Him, and before His entire creation.”

The source of the passages quoted above, is not Ali's intellect or his imagination but his buoyant love of God!

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