

Introduction

In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Compassionate

This book is a compilation of a progressive lecture series delivered over a three-year span in London, England, from 2005 to 2007 (1426–1428 ah) during the Ashura season. The series given reflect a number of spiritual, social, and individual struggles that resonate within every person, and further seek to provide spiritual direction to those challenges.

Since the lectures were inspired by the character and sacrifice of the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, Imam Husayn b. Ali, peace be upon them, whose life was taken in the midst of his prime years, highlighting the years of youth, in particular Muslim youths living in the West, will predominate most of the themes throughout the book.

The raising of ethical character is the platform by which the brick and mortar of practice and faith sets the foundation for attaining human perfection. The combined elements of faith and practice are used to understand and resolve issues dealing with Muslim youth, in areas such as youth leadership, family, marriage, personal and spiritual refinement based on the Qur'an and the ways of Prophet Muhammad, and the imams (the Ahlul-Bayt) that followed him.

The age of discovery and reflection begins to surface in the formidable years and as maturity develops, proper Islamic guidance, nurturing and role models play crucial roles in the spiritual, intellectual, and self-development process. Without proper guidance, the young generation can easily detour.

Muslims and non-Muslims alike will be able to see a reflection of their own human struggle and experiences unfold throughout the book. Although the words spoken are directed towards a youth audience, other readers will also benefit by understanding the youth of our time. Their experiences, challenges, and direction requires a unique approach in defining and solving social and religious issues that pertain exclusively to them.

With the correct guidance, the potential and contribution of the Muslim youth living in the West in becoming influential Muslim leaders is something to be anticipated. Their abilities will not only affect the

Muslim communities in the West, but all around the world as well, including non-Muslims. The Muslim youth generation in the West has better opportunities and privileges at their disposal, than other young Muslims not living in the West. Prestigious institutes for higher learning, heightened thoughts, and economic advantage are some of the critical elements that give them a cornerstone advantage. Their sincere concern for public engagement and commitment to social issues provides an assurance of their dedication and capabilities.

Muslim youth in the West are facing immense challenges and are under tremendous pressure when it comes to issues of identity, conformity, and religiosity. They desire to be religiously educated and practicing; and they anticipate more from Muslim scholars to identify with their situations and provide rational and proper guidelines. This book hopes to shed light on some of these issues and bring forth modern solutions.

Citations from the Holy Qur'an and lessons drawn from Islamic history illuminate throughout the book, and form the central themes and guidance for our comprehension of the purpose of life. Understanding what the Divine expects from us is crucial to our spiritual success. How do we strengthen our relationship with Him? What is the significance of the prayer and why should we repent? How do we maintain ethical gender-relations? Refining spirituality through the ways of the Divine is the key source by which Muslim solutions are sought for issues, such as the direction of life, social and family structure, and leadership.

For hundreds of years, Muslims have traditionally held sacred the first ten days of Muharram (Muharram is the first month in the Islamic calendar). These hallowed days turn into ten nightly vigils known as the commemoration leading up to Ashura. In Arabic, Ashura means tenth, and many Muslims recognize the 10th of Muharram (61 ah) as being the date that the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Husayn, was brutally martyred. Ashura is a landmark event – on the surface, it marks the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, his family, and 72 companions in the year 61 ah in Karbala, Iraq, but there are many deeper lessons to learn from this great tragedy.

Although the events of Ashura seem tragic, the underlining outcome was that it became a timeless example for revolutionary change. Ashura is not just about one young and brave man who stood before an army and tyrant and refused to comply with oppression, but it is a guidance that forces people to reflect and question their own principles in life. The message of Ashura sets the stage for social and personal reform, and I hope that this book will inspire the reader for such changes.

The event of Ashura provides an outstanding opportunity for Muslims to better understand their religion. The commemoration of it every year not only provides an avenue for Muslims to discover the beauty of Islam and the sacrifice of notable Muslims, but more importantly, Ashura awakens and stirs the soul to recognize itself. This season is a catalyst for Islamic renaissance and self-reform in every age and place.

The love for Prophet Muhammad is the heart line of every Muslim; and the love that was expressed by the Prophet to his grandson, Imam Husayn represents a link to unify and strengthen the various schools of thought within Islam. Imam Husayn and the commemoration during the days of Ashura should initiate opportunities for open dialogue and sincere connection amongst Muslims.

In keeping with the message of Ashura alive, the followers of Ahlul-Bayt worldwide commemorate this occasion with a series of ceremonies, rituals, and lectures. Although some of these programs have been merely cultural in the past, today they have evolved and adapted to a more modernized intellectual remembrance and awakening. In some parts of the world, many have sanctified the traditional and cultural processions of Ashura, while others have disapproved them.

Traditionally, the commemoration nights of Ashura recapture the historical and heart-breaking events that led and occurred on that 10th day of Muharram, and in my lectures series I did present the storyline but chose not to include them in this written work. I preferred to keep the objective of Imam Husayn's message in a more contemporary and constructive production.

A very close friend and colleague, the late Sayed Mohammad Ridha Sharazi, who passed away in June 2008, was the inspiration behind this book. His words of encouragement initiated the spoken words to being written down and thus I dedicate this book in his honor and memory.

Of course, this book would not have seen the light without the assistance of many loyal friends and companions in the Muslim community in North America. Foremost, I am indebted to Sister Fatma Saleh whose markings and suggestions throughout the book played a crucial role in its development and deliverance. Much appreciation also extends to Shaykh Saleem Bhimji and Sister Arifa Hudda in the editing, design and printing; and Sister Amina Inloes in the initial compilation of the book. I would also like to express a deep gratitude to the financial contributor who preferred to remain anonymous. May Allah reward and grant them all success and honor in this life and in the Hereafter.

I humbly appeal to my Lord to accept my sincere efforts in presenting this work and to forgive me for any of the shortcomings within these pages. It is to Him that I am most thankful to and it is Him that I yearn to please.

I ask the readers to keep me in their prayers and thoughts. May God bless you all.

Please note: It is customary in Islam that when the name of Allah, Prophet Muhammad, the other prophets, or imams (descendants and successors of Prophet Muhammad) is enunciated, the following phrases are mentioned: Allah – “Glorified and Exalted is He (*Subhannah wa-tallah*)”; Prophet Muhammad – “Peace be upon him and his family”; after the names of prophets, imams from the family of Prophet Muhammad and his daughter – “Peace be upon him/her.” With great respect, admiration, recognition, and praise, I have omitted the mentioned phrases for the sake of continuity.

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