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Lecture 2: Muslim Ethos Through The Centuries

In my last lecture, I invited your attention to what Islamic thinkers and reformers had often pointed out in the recent centuries. I said that Muslims today have come to view Islam in a manner characteristic of diseased minds. They failed to perceive the intrinsic vitality of Islam, which continued to exist unaffected. The adverse change in the typical way of thinking, or ethos, of Muslims has deep-rooted causes.

The deterioration in Muslim ethos set in when Islam, or one's faith, and actual practice of the same came to be regarded as separable. This theoretical approach to Islam ignored the fact that it is a religion of action. For, no human happiness and wellbeing could be achieved on any unrealistic and theoretical bases. By virtually discarding action as the means of achieving human progress, the Muslim ethos became unrealistic.

Islamic teachings regard appropriate efforts as capable of shaping every human destiny. This approach is realistic, sensible and in harmony with Nature. That any human achievement depends on the propriety and effectiveness of the relevant efforts has been frequently stressed in the Qur'an:

"...man has only that for which he makes effort." (The Qur'an, 53:39)

"That day (when the earthquake will shake the earth) mankind (after resurrection) shall issue forth in scattered groups to be shown their (good/evil) deeds.

"Then, whoever had done an atomweight of good shall see it; And whoever had done an atom's weight of evil shall see it." (The Quran, 99:7-8)

The above verses emphasize the crucial significance of rectitude in human action for shaping individual and societal destinies. No doubt, these and similar other Qur'anic teachings are relevant to all individuals and nations alike. These principles had been deeply upheld by the early Muslims whose faith and action showed no contradiction. They never desisted from actively pursuing what they believed in.

Their positive and comprehensive efforts underlined their awareness of the futility of approaching manner. Their deep, thorough and active commitment to Islam, as reflected in their individual and

collective efforts, enabled them to achieve meaningful dynamism and self-reliance, as well as astounding success.

The positive élan achieved by the early Muslims lost its dynamism in the second century of the Hijra. This negative had begun to spurn action and take their faith for granted. This negative trend was encouraged by the corrupt, incompetent and worldly rulers. It began as early as the Ummayyad caliphates.

The Ummayyads aimed overcoming any effective criticism of their worldly and almost secular ways. Accordingly, they propagated the misleading notion that, given the basic faith (in Islam), one's action is of no importance. With their vast power and wealth, they could unduly influence the ethos of the people, even though their patronization of pseudo-intellectual groups like the Mujites.^{[1](#)}

Shi's Muslims, inspired and guided by their pious Imam (as), firmly believed in acting according to one's faith. The Imams always reiterated that faith is verified or confirmed by three things: verbal assertion, heart-felt conviction and physical action. They were averse to the theory that faith is independent of action. After all, when the Qur'an praises devout believers, it endorses not only one's belief but the conformity of his actions.

What the Murjites among the Sunni Muslims did in the past is noticeable today among the Shi'a Muslims. The latter have come to scorn action, while upholding their allegiance to the guidelines set by Hazrat Ali (as) and the other Imams. They participate in the mourning sessions for Imam Husain (as), as if – God forbid – the Imam believed in an attitude of partisanship. On the contrary, the philosophy underlying Imam Husain's martyrdom showed that he wanted to reorient Islam to action. In other words, he died to render Islam dynamic in actual practice. Yet many seem to think that he died in trying to establish Islamic order of a theoretical kind!

Reverting to the Ummayyad period, it will be interesting to recall what Abul Faraj Isfahani mentioned in his book: "Aghani" (Melodies). Though an Ummayyad himself, Abu Faraj has been considered by the Shi'ite clergy to be an impartial historian, especially for his authentic account of his martyrdoms of the descendants of Abi-Taleb.

In his book; "Aghani", Abul Faraj describes the pleasure-loving and decadent amusements of the caliphs in the words of the minstrels, musicians and artists of their courts. One of the anecdotes concerns a dispute between a Shi'a Muslims and a Mujite as to the pros and cons of faith and action. The former upheld both faith and action as inseparable, while the latter claimed that the basic thing is faith irrespective of action. Neither of them was able to convince the other. Then, they agreed to arbitration by whoever joined them first. The first person to join them was a musician, so that the Murjite was glad in the expectation that the arbitrator will endorse his view.

The musician gave his verdict by saying: "I'm a Shi'a from my head to my waist, and a Murjite from my waist downward". What he meant was that he thought like a Shi'a, but 'acted' like a Murjite! Today, we

find the Shi'a Muslims practically Murjite from head to foot! We often take recourse to pretexts even to make for paradise with them. Hazrat Ali (as), speaking about paradise emphasize that it is granted as a prize won by accomplishments, and not pretexts or excuses. Our negative attitude is tantamount to turning away from reality to wishful thinking. A nation that bases its pursuit of happiness on imagination is to be much pitied.

In the above context, the Qur'an has condemned the Jewish notion that a people could regard themselves as privileged and condemned the Jewish notion that a people could regard themselves as privileged and condonable before God, assuming that wicked deeds were ignored by Him and good deeds were recompensed all the more. The Jews had believed that their sins and evil deeds would not cause them to go hell, it was only a formality before their release after a few days, so that they could go to heaven to which they rightfully belonged!

In a tradition we are told that Jews, Christians and Muslims of Madina were all claiming moral superiority over one another. The Qur'an corrected them by saying: "It is not as you and others of the Book hoped and believed. God will punish whoever commits a wicked deed." A notion of superiority came to prevail among the Shi'a Muslims, too, even during the time of the Imams. However, the Imams rejected it and counteracted the same. Two instances can be cited in this regard.

Caliph Ma'moon offered his successorship to Imam al-Ridha (as). The latter declined it politely and took no part in the state affairs. Subsequently, the Imam was addressing a religious session in which his brother, Zaid bin Musa bin Ja'far, who had risen at Madina against the Caliphate and was suppressed and pardoned by Ma'moon, was present.

Imam al-Ridha (as) noticed his brother referring to himself and the Imam as "We of the Prophet's household ..." and giving an impression to the listeners that God will treat them as privileged persons. The Imam (as) interrupted his discourse to tell his brother: "What is this nonsense that you are uttering? Do you think that every wrong done by us will be forgiven by God because of some immunity granted by Him to the Prophet's family? If it were true, you would have been superior to your father, Musa bin Ja'far and heaven would be guaranteed to you, in spite of an idle life. Actually, your father deserved heaven as a result of a lifetime of effort, study and devotion to God."

Then, Imam al-Ridha (as) turned to Vesha, who was a learned narrator of Kufa, and asked him how the people of Kufa understood the verse of the Qur'an concerning Noah and his son. Vesha understood the Imam's purpose and replied: "Some people in Kufa understood it to the effect that when Noah (as) begged God to forgive his son and allow him to be taken on board the 'Ark', the divine response was in the negative as if Noah's son was not a member of the prophet's family." Then, Vesha continued: "Others in Kufa interpreted it wrongly to mean that God told Noah that the one he regarded as his son was not really his –as if it were that Noah's wife had begotten an illegitimate son!"

The Imam (as) agreed by saying: "Yes, the second group of people in Kufa misunderstood the true

meaning of the verse. The correct position is that Noah's son was corrupt, although he was the prophet's own child. No wonder then, God did not accept Noah's intercession for his wicked son. And it is said in the narrative that Noah regretted his mistake in this regard."

Then, the Imam (as) turned to his brother and asked: "Was Noah's son not a prophet's son?" If mere blood relationship was the consideration, 'why did God not accede to the Prophet's request? What better response than the divine aversion to the corruptness and impiety of Noah's son can be found?"

In another narration concerning Imam al-Sadiq (as), a tendency towards crooked thinking has been corrected in the past. A man came to the Imam and asked: "A saying has been attributed to you. I wish to know whether or not it is correct and authentic. Is it true that you have said that when one is properly enlightened by following the Imams one can act as one wishes?" The Imam indicated that he said to that effect. Then, the man enquired: "Does it mean that enlightenment allows a man to do just anything he wishes, even if it is theft or adultery?"

The Imam replied in astonishment: "How distressing it is to hear an absurd interpretation of my words! when I said that once you did understand the Imams' teachings, you would be free to act, I never meant it to be applied to immoral acts. Understanding the Imams can only be in the context of moral rectitude, so that you are able to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong." Obviously, when we refer to the Qur'an the Sunnat and the Imams' narrations, we learn about the need for righteous action, and understand that human happiness is dependent on it.

Today, when we reflect on our characteristic way of thinking, we are likely to discern that action is scorned in many ways. When we extend our analysis to our own society, we probably find that our people ignore the need for genuine and righteous action altogether. For example, it is a common tendency to think that if one could get himself space for one's burial within the premises of the shrine of Imam al-Ridha (as), then, it will compensate for one's deficiencies in life. What an idea and how remote from Islam! Do such people really find happiness when, after a life of wickedness, they think that burial at the feet of an Imam will absolve them of every sin? They seem to forget that even Harun al-Rashid is buried in the premises of the shrine of Imam al-Ridha (as) and pilgrims there curse him and his son Ma'mun. This contradiction typifies a degenerate or "dead" thinking among people.

When we speak of reviving the original Islamic ethos, we mean basically the popularization of the idea of a Muslim's working out his own salvation through righteous self-exertion—and not any wishful thinking or dependence on others. In this context, we may recall the former custom of an influential person granting private sanctuary to an ordinary member of the public. This custom, fortunately, is no longer allowed to continue. It had meant that when an offender wanted to evade arrest, he sought refuge of an influential clergyman and, if granted, no agent of the authorities could remove him from there. This was against both secular and religious laws. Yet, some ancient people had wrongly supposed that private sanctuary existed in the divine system; the Imam never accepted any idea of private sanctuary.

In the Nahjul Balagha, Hazrat Ali (as) is reported to have always emphasized two qualities of a Muslim: chastity and action; however, we seem to shut our eyes to these requirements, and then ask in our will to be buried in Najaf. –as if this final wish will put everything right!

According to the Prophet's Tradition, the Bani Hashem and Bani Mutalleb tribes were told by him: Let me not witness on Resurrection Day that other people come before God, the Just, relying on their well-accumulated good deeds, while you come depending on me, pleading that 'the Prophet is one of us'; for, this will be of no avail to you." This was on the occasion of the revelation of the Quranic verses mentioned below:

"So, invoke not with God another god, lest you be one of the doomed. And warn they tribe of near kindred." (The Qur'an, 26:213–214)

In another tradition the Prophet is reported to have told his dear and pious daughter, Hazrat Fatima (as), who he called "a portion of my heart", as follows: "My dear, act on your own, for your kinship with me will be of no avail; follow my teachings and never say that your father is Prophet. It is of no use to you."

Neither Hazrat Ali (as) nor Hazrat Fatima (as) ever took recourse to their kinship with the Prophet (S). They relied on their own will and power to act and act in the righteous way of God, as taught by the Prophet (S). They were deeply imbued with the fear of God, which was particularly evident in their regular and nightly prayers and constant devotion to Him, Didn't Imam Ali (as) sometimes faint in the middle of his nightly prayers? Was it on due to his deeply felt fear of God? Why couldn't he assure himself otherwise, even as the first believer in Islam, or as the Prophet's first cousin and his beloved son-in-law? The Prophet's daughter, Hazrat Fatima (as), too, was so devoted to God as to render her prayers a deeply moving experience for her, especially on Thursday nights spent in tearful concentration on Him. Indeed, they exemplified a deep assimilation of the Islamic teachings.

The early Muslims showed self-reliance, in that they depended on their own individual worth and power. This characteristic way of their thinking began to suffer damage at the hands of speculative thinkers, whose adverse social impact was insignificant at first, but in time spread like leprosy among the Shia's and most Sunnis. The vicious thinkers took undue advantage of the ill-trained, credulous and impressionable people, in that they could use even the seemingly innocuous dreams to achieve their ulterior motives of damaging the originally positive Islamic ethos. This is typified notably in one case after the death of the renowned Islamic thinker, Muhaqiq Ardebili, who had personified a thoroughly dynamic Muslim in his lifetime.

At that time, someone spread a story about his dream involving a deceased Mulla or Faqih (sometimes referred to as Muhaqiqi, implying, as Shaikh Ansari subsequently pointed out, the venerable Muhaqiq Ardebili). In that dream, the departed soul was asked as to how God had treated him, and the dreamer got the reply that He was Gracious indeed. When further asked as to what saved him, the reply was: "My realization that prospects for good deeds are dull!". It is strange that while the Qur'an tells us that the

prospects for good deeds are bright (in the hereafter), a dream suggests to the contrary. The story indicates the kind of damaging effect of a person's diseased thinking.

Imam al-Baqir (as) once told his followers: "Inform the Shi'as that a Shi'a is no longer one when he discards virtue, chastity and positive efforts." In Nahjul Balagha, Hazrat Ali's advice is recorded as: "Be not of those who are hopeful of salvation in the next world, but without good deeds." Further, one is advised not to 'repent' in a manner of postponing the same while continuing to nurture all kinds of desire, and not to pretend aversion to the materialistic things while actually demonstrating that one is captivated by the world.

¹. The Murjites advocated that when a believer is seen to be indulging in sinful behavior, one should be left to God's Last Judgment. Therefore, all those who profess to be Muslims should be—even tentatively—regarded as true Muslims. Thus, they implied that even the deviationist Umayyads were to be tolerated. (See John B. Noss: "Man's Religions", the Macmillan Company, New York, Third Ed., 7th printed. 1967, p, 748) –Ed.

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