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The Spiritual Significance of Jihad

And those who perform jihad for Us, We shall certainly guide them in Our ways, and God is surely with the doers of good. (***Quran 39:69***)

You have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad. (Hadith)

The Arabic term *jihad*, usually translated into European languages as holy war, more on the basis of its juridical usage in Islam rather than on its much more universal meaning in the Quran and *Hadith*, is derived from the root */jhd/* whose primary meaning is to strive or to exert oneself.

Its translation into holy war combined with the erroneous notion of Islam prevalent in the West as the 'religion of the sword' has helped to eclipse its inner and spiritual significance and to distort its connotation.

Nor has the appearance upon the stage of history during the past century and especially during the past few years of an array of movements within the Islamic world often contending or even imposing each other and using the word *jihad* or one of its derivative forms helped to make known the full import of its traditional meaning which alone is of concern to us here.

Instead recent distortions and even total reversal of the meaning of *jihad* as understood over the ages by Muslims have made it more difficult than ever before to gain insight into this key religious and spiritual concept.

To understand the spiritual significance of *jihad* and its wide application to nearly every aspect of human life as understood by Islam, it is necessary to remember that Islam bases itself upon the idea of establishing equilibrium within the being of man as well as in the human society where he functions and fulfills the goals of his earthly life.

This equilibrium, which is the terrestrial reflection of Divine Justice and the necessary condition for peace in the human domain, is the basis upon which the soul takes its flight towards that peace which, to use Christian terms, 'passeth understanding'.

If Christian morality sees the aim of the spiritual life and its own morality as based on the vertical flight towards that perfection and ideal which is embodied in Christ, Islam sees it in the establishment of an equilibrium both outward and inward as the necessary basis for the vertical ascent.

The very stability of Islamic society over the centuries, the immutability of Islamic norms embodied in the *Shari'ah*, and the timeless character of traditional Islamic civilization which is the consequence of its permanent and immutable prototype are all reflections of both the ideal of equilibrium and its realization as is so evident in the teachings of the *Shari'ah* (or Divine Law) as well as works of Islamic art, that equilibrium which is inseparable from the very name of *islam* as being related to *salam* or peace.

The preservation of equilibrium in this world, however, does not mean simply a static or inactive passivity since life by nature implies movement. In the face of the contingencies of the world of change, of the withering effects of time, of the vicissitudes of terrestrial existence, to remain in equilibrium requires continuous exertion.

It means carrying out *jihad* at every stage of life. Human nature being what it is, given to forgetfulness and the conquest of our immortal soul by the carnal soul or passions, the very process of life of both the individual and the human collectivity implies the ever-present danger of the loss of equilibrium and the fact of falling into the state of disequilibrium which if allowed to continue cannot but lead to disintegration on the individual level and chaos on the scale of community life.

To avoid this tragic end and to fulfill the entelechy of the human state which is the realization of unity (*al-tawhid*) or total integration, Muslims as both individuals and members of Islamic society must carry out *jihad*, that is they must exert themselves at all moments of life to fight a battle both inward and outward against those forces that if not combated will destroy that equilibrium which is the necessary condition for the spiritual life of the person and the functioning of human society.

This fact is especially true if society is seen as a collectivity which bears the imprint of the Divine Norm rather than an antheap of contending and opposing units and forces.

Man is at once a spiritual and corporeal being, a micro-cosmos complete unto himself; yet he is the member of a society within which alone are certain aspects of his being developed and certain of his needs fulfilled. He possesses at once an intelligence whose substance is ultimately of a divine character and sentiments which can either veil his intelligence or abet his quest for his own Origin.

In him are found both love and hatred, generosity and coveteousness, compassion and aggression. Moreover, there have existed until now not just one but several 'humanities' with their own religious and moral norms and national, ethnic and racial groups with their own bonds of affiliation.

As a result the practice of *jihad* as applied to the world of multiplicity and the vicissitudes of human existence in the external world has come to develop numerous ramifications in the fields of political and economic activity and in social life and come to partake on the external level of the complexity which

characterizes the human world.

In its most outward sense *jihad* came to mean the defence of *dar al-islam*, that is, the Islamic world, from invasion and intrusion by non-Islamic forces. The earliest wars of Islamic history which threatened the very existence of the young community came to be known as *jihad* par excellence in this outward sense of 'holy war'.

But it was upon returning from one of these early wars, which was of paramount importance in the survival of the newly established religious community and therefore of cosmic significance, that the Prophet nevertheless said to his companions that they had returned from the lesser holy war to the greater holy war, the greater *jihad* being the inner battle against all the forces which would prevent man from living according to the theomorphic norm which is his primordial and God given nature.

Throughout Islamic history, the lesser holy war has echoed in the Islamic world when parts or the whole of that world have been threatened by forces from without or within. This call has been especially persistent since the nineteenth century with the advent of colonialism and the threat to the very existence of the Islamic world.

It must be remembered, however, that even in such cases when the idea of *jihad* has been evoked in certain parts of the Islamic world, it has not usually been a question of religion simply sanctioning war but of the attempt of a society in which religion remains of central concern to protect itself from being conquered either by military and economic forces or by ideas of an alien nature.

This does not mean, however, that in some cases especially in recent times, religious sentiments have not been used or misused to intensify or legitimize a conflict. But to say the least, the Islamic world does not have a monopoly on this abuse as the history of other civilizations including even the secularized West demonstrates so amply.

Moreover, human nature being what it is, once religion ceases to be of central significance to a particular human collectivity, then men fight and kill each other for much less exalted issues than their heavenly faith.

By including the question of war in its sacred legislation, Islam did not condone but limited war and its consequences as the history of the traditional Islamic world bears out. In any case the idea of total war and the actual practice of the extermination of whole civilian populations did not grow out of a civilization whose dominant religion saw *jihad* in a positive light. On the more external level, the lesser *jihad* also includes the socio-economic domain.

It means the reassertion of justice in the external environment of human existence starting with man himself. To defend one's rights and reputation, to defend the honour of oneself and one's family is itself a *jihad* and a religious duty. So is the strengthening of all those social bonds from the family to the whole of the Muslim people (*al-ummah*) which the *Shari'ah* emphasizes.

To seek social justice in accordance with the tenets of the Quran and of course not in the modern secularist sense is a way of re-establishing equilibrium in human society, that is, of performing *jihad*, as are constructive economic enterprises provided the well-being of the whole person is kept in mind and material welfare does not become an end in itself; provided one does not lose sight of the Qur'anic verse:

'The other world is better for you than this one'. (***93:4***)

To forget the proper relation between the two worlds would itself be instrumental in bringing about disequilibrium and would be a kind of *jihad* in reverse.

All of those external forms of *jihad* would remain incomplete and in fact contribute to an excessive externalization of human being, if they were not complemented by the greater or inner *jihad* which man must carry out continuously within himself for the nobility of the human state resides in the constant tension between what we appear to be and what we really are and the need to transcend ourselves throughout this journey of earthly life in order to become what we 'are'.

From the spiritual point of view all the 'pillars' of Islam can be seen as being related to *jihad*. The fundamental witnesses, 'There is no divinity but Allah' and 'Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah', through the utterance of which a person becomes a Muslim are not only statements about the Truth as seen in the Islamic perspective but also weapons for the practice of inner *jihad*.

The very form of the first witness (*La ilaha illa' Lla-h* in Arabic) when written in Arabic calligraphy is like a bent sword with which all otherness is removed from the Supreme Reality while all that is positive in manifestation is returned to that Reality. The second witness is the blinding assertion of the powerful and majestic descent of all that constitutes in a positive manner the cosmos, man and revelation from that Supreme Reality.

To invoke the two witnesses in the form of the sacred language in which they were revealed is to practice the inner *jihad* and to bring about awareness of who we are, from whence we come and where is our ultimate abode.

The daily prayers (*salat* or *namaz*) which constitute the heart of the Islamic rites are again a never ending *jihad* which punctuate human existence in a continuous rhythm in conformity with the rhythm of the cosmos. To perform the prayers with regularity and concentration requires the constant exertion of our will and an unending battle and striving against forgetfulness, dissipation and laziness. It is itself a form of spiritual warfare.

Likewise, the fast of Ramadan in which one wears the armour of inner purity and detachment against the passions and temptations of the outside world requires an asceticism and inner discipline which cannot come about except through an inner holy war. Nor is the *hajj* to the centre of the Islamic world in Mecca possible without long preparation, effort, often suffering and endurance of hardship. It requires great

effort and exertion so that the Prophet could say, 'The *hajj* is the most excellent of all *jihads*".

Like the knight in quest of the Holy Grail, the pilgrim to the house of the Beloved must engage in a spiritual warfare whose end makes all sacrifice and all hardship pale into significance, for the *hajj* to the House of God implies for the person who practices the inner *jihad* encounter with the Master of the House who also resides at the centre of that other Ka'bah which is the heart.

Finally the giving of *zakat* or religious tax and *khums* is again a form of *jihad* not only in that in departing from one's wealth man must fight against the coveteousness and greed of his carnal soul, but also in that through the payment of *zakat* and *khums* in its many forms man contributes to the establishment of economic justice in human society.

Although *jihad* is not one of the 'pillars of Islam', it in a sense resides within all the other 'pillars'. From the spiritual point of view in fact all of the 'pillars' can be seen in the light of an inner *jihad* which is essential to the life of man from the Islamic point of view and which does not oppose but complements contemplativity and the peace which result from the contemplation of the One.

The great stations of perfection in the spiritual life can also be seen in the light of the inner *jihad*. To become detached from the impurities of the world in order to repose in the purity of the Divine Presence requires an intense *jihad* for our soul has its roots sunk deeply into the transient world which the soul of fallen man mistakes for reality.

To overcome the lethargy, passivity and indifference of the soul, qualities which have become second nature to man as a result of his forgetting who he is constitutes likewise a constant *jihad*. To pull the reigns of the soul from dissipating itself outwardly as a result of its centrifugal tendencies and to bring it back to the centre wherein resides Divine Peace and all the beauty which the soul seeks in vain in the domain of multiplicity is again an inner *jihad*.

To melt the hardened heart into a flowing stream of love which would embrace the whole of creation in virtue of the love for God is to perform the alchemical process of *solve et coagula* inwardly through a 'work' which is none other than an inner struggle and battle against what the soul has become in order to transform it into that which it 'is' and has never ceased to be if only it were to become aware of its own nature.

Finally, to realize that only the Absolute is absolute and that only the Self can ultimately utter 'I' is to perform the supreme *jihad* of awakening the soul from the dream of forgetfulness and enabling it to gain the supreme principal knowledge for the sake of which it was created.

The inner *jihad* or warfare seen spiritually and esoterically can be considered therefore as the key for the understanding of the whole spiritual process, and the path for the realization of the One which lies at the heart of the Islamic message seen in its totality.

The Islamic path towards perfection can be conceived in the light of the symbolism of the greater *jihad* to which the Prophet of Islam, who founded this path on earth, himself referred.

In the same way that with every breath the principle of life which functions in us irrespective of our will and as long as it is willed by Him who created us, exerts itself through *jihad* to instill life within our whole body, at every moment in our conscious life we should seek to perform *jihad* in not only establishing equilibrium in the world about us but also in awakening to that Divine Reality which is the very source of our consciousness.

For the spiritual man, every breath is a reminder that he should continue the inner *jihad* until he awakens from all dreaming and until the very rhythm of his heart echoes that primordial sacred Name by which all things were made and through which all things return to their Origin. The Prophet said, 'Man is asleep and when he dies he awakens'.

Through inner *jihad* the spiritual man dies in this life in order to cease all dreaming, in order to awaken to that Reality which is the origin of all realities, in order to behold that Beauty of which all earthly beauty is but a pale reflection, in order to attain that Peace which all men seek but which can in fact be found only through the inner *jihad*.

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