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Weeping

The Phenomenon of Weeping

The phenomenon of weeping gives rise to much criticism. Despite the fact that it is not a phenomenon which is separate from the rites of remembrance for al-Husayn, I was influenced to devote a special study to it in a section which would be separate from the studies of the rites of remembrance in terms of their methods and content. That was in order to make it easier to observe and understand this phenomenon.

Perhaps objectivity should require us to name this phenomenon 'the phenomenon of grief in the rites of remembrance for al-Husayn and in the memory of al-Husayn'. Grief is more general than weeping and those who grieve sometimes weep and sometimes do not.

We should note that grief and weeping are not matters of choice which a man can use when he wants and stop when he wants. They are matters which are external to the direct will of man. If he wants them, he must prepare the way for them by seeking to recall what will generate feelings of grief in his heart and motives for weeping.

In the same way we should note that this phenomenon of grief is not something incidental in the rites of remembrance for al-Husayn and in the memory of al-Husayn. It is a deep-rooted phenomenon which cannot be separated from them. The rites of remembrance for al-Husayn were set up and established in order that the Shi'ite might express, in them, his grief for what happened at Karbala'. Such grief, in many circumstances, may cause weeping.

One of the later writers of an account about the death of al-Husayn, Ibn Tawus (d. 664) observed that this memory ought to produce joy and happiness if there had not been a legal injunction for grief and weeping. He remarked: 'If it was not for the need to follow the Sunna and the Book of God in putting on the mark of sadness and tragedy because of the destruction of the signs of guidance and the foundation of the pillars of sin, out of sorrow for the happiness which we missed and out of regret for the submission of that martyrdom, . . . otherwise we have been clothed in the rewards of joy and glad tidings because of

that great blessing. Insofar as there is in grief consent to authority by men and a purpose for pious men, we have put on the garments of grief and accustomed ourselves to let our tears flow.'[1]

Is weeping required for itself? Or is what is required grief, which may lead to weeping and which may not express itself in weeping while agony still remains in the heart and anguish deep inside one? Or is what is required neither this nor that but something else which these two phenomena express, the psychological phenomenon of grief and the external phenomenon of weeping?

During the following study, we shall attempt to become acquainted with this in terms of its basis and its significance.

II. The Legal Texts

Very many texts have been reported from the Imams of the Holy Family from the time of Imam Zayn al-Abidin 'Ali ibn al-Husayn up to the awaited Imam, the Mahdi, which urge weeping for the fate of Imam al-Husayn. Whoever is unable to weep should pretend to weep.

Many of these texts contain an explanation of the great rewards which will come from God and the high places in the Hereafter for those who weep for Imam al-Husayn. The same is the case for those who cause men to weep for Imam al-Husayn, whether by reciting poetry or in some other way.

It is well-known that in Islamic law and the ethics of Islam, they do not encourage public demonstrations of grief for death and of distress and grief or the dead. Indeed that is considered reprehensible (*makruh*) and some of its manifestations are forbidden. However that does not apply to the weeping, sadness and distress which occurs for Imam al-Husayn.

Abu Hamza al-Thumah has reported from Imam al-Sadiq that he said: 'Weeping and grief are reprehensible for man in all occasions for grief except weeping and showing grief for al-Husayn ibn 'Ali. It is something which brings reward.'

It seems that the underlying reason for the legality of this weeping and this grief, despite the reprehensible nature of other grief and even the prohibition of some kinds of it, is that this weeping and grief is not of a personal nature connected with human emotions which break out in sorrow for what has been lost. It is, rather, grief for a universal religious matter which includes Imam al-Husayn and his revolution. This grief is not an emotional attitude. It is an attitude based on principles by which the believer expresses his adhesion and adoption of it through this emotional expression.

III. Analysis Of The Phenomenon Of Weeping

In order to understand the phenomenon itself, first of all, and in order to understand its historical significance, we maintain the following:

In remembering al-Husayn we come before a historical problem which we read about and listen to. In the light of this reality we face a definitive question: How do we write and tell of history?

How do we write and tell the history of man who loves and hates like us who are alive, who fails and succeeds like us, who fills his heart with grief and happiness like us, who faces the greatest challenges and does not flee from them and does not resort to deceitful tricks against them but stands firm in the face of them, who is inflicted with the greatest disasters but faces them with heroism that has become legendary in history?

How do we write and tell of the history of man? Should we write about it as if we were writing a report on the economic situation? Should we write about the history of man as if we were writing about the history of the layers of the earth or the history of fossils? Should we change history into numerical lists and the analysis of numbers and the evidence for them?

Or should we write and tell of history so that through it we may form a picture of the life of man who is made up of flesh and blood, aspirations and hopes, love and hatred, heroism and cowardice, high emotions and base desires, in one word, the history of man?

I do not imagine that any scholarly and trustworthy researcher would allow himself to say 'no' to this, even though he claims that we ought to write and tell history in the language of numbers.

When history is written and told as the history of man, we should ask: How will we read and listen to history? Should we stop ourselves feeling happiness when we feel happy? Should we stop ourselves feeling sad when we feel sad? Should we stop ourselves feeling disgust when we feel disgust? I do not think that any scholarly and trustworthy man would be pleased with himself to maintain that.

We are like all people at all times and in all places. They write and tell history, read and listen to history so that they may be affected by what they listen to and read, whether it be sadness or happiness, pleasure or disgust. It may make them feel proud so that they smile, or it may make tears of sadness, pride and wonder flow from their eyes.

Do we demand from history–or when we read or listen to a good story, or a fine poem, or a good play–that our hearts should not be affected by what we read and listen to?

From all this the stupidity of all the criticism which is made about the phenomena of grief at the rites of remembrance for al-Husayn should now be clear to us, as should the superficiality of the way in which this problem is dealt with.

In the rites of remembrance for al-Husayn, we listen to a historical portrayal of a tragedy whose like history has not witnessed, in which holy men were killed and raised to the highest ranks in dedication and self sacrifice as they made a pure gift of their lives and in which women and children were killed as they were parched with thirst, far from home and isolated. Their heads were carried away and their

womenfolk taken captive. All this happened not for the sake of their own persons but for the sake of their *umma* and their faith.

Their *umma* is something which we are part of. Their faith is the faith which we embrace. It is our right, as fellow human beings, to grieve, to be amazed, to complain while the grief grows greater within so that we shed tears of grief and wonder and gratitude.

There remains for us to show the historical significance of this phenomenon. It will become clear to us when we are aware that the Imams of the Holy Family were the leaders of the Islamic mission–a leadership which opposed any deviation in understanding and applying Islam. They were always on the watch for every deviation and transgression which came from the ruling authorities.

How many indeed were their deviations and transgressions! As a result their attitude constantly put them in the position of a resolute opponent. The reaction of the authorities was violence, prosecution and persecution against the Imams of the Holy Family and their followers. Sometimes the persecution became so extensive that it went beyond the persons of the Imams and their families and included all the 'Alids.

An example of that is the actions of al–Mutawakkil–as reported to us by Abu al–Faraj al–Isfahani in *Maqatil al Talibiyyin*: 'Al–Mutawakkil could not endure to learn that anyone should show any kindness to any of the Talibids, even the smallest, without ruining him with punishment and weighing him down with debt so that it came about that there was only one dress for a group of 'Alid women. They would perform the *salat* in it, one after the other. Then they would take it off and sit naked at their spinning–wheels.'

We are, then, in front of a belief in persecution which pursues the persons of leaders and followers in a barbaric way that compels them to hide their faith in order to preserve their lives. One of the things which is clear both socially and psychologically is that intellectual conviction, alone, in faith will not guarantee that one will stand firm and resolute in the face of great dangers and violent persecution which goes on century after century.

Such continuous destructive violence and persecution, which did not stop for anything, soon shattered the people's cohesion around their beliefs when these people did not have the freedom and security. It was not always possible for them to remain in complete contact with these beliefs and these attitudes. It was not possible for them to live their lives openly in accordance with their beliefs.

In addition to this we must introduce into our calculation the fact that there did not seem to be any hope of an early relaxation of his predicament to the ordinary Shi' ite individual. We must also take account of the fact that the persecution of the Shi'a did not completely stop in the course of history until the last few decades.

We should be aware of the fact that the noble revolution of Karbala' represented the apex of the attitude of opposition which the leaders of the Holy Family led against deviation in understanding and applying

Islam. It was the result of a chain of previous actions and the beginning of a chain of actions which were to come after it.

Through its distinguished personality it revealed with absolute clarity the nature of the struggle between the Holy Family and their opponents and the aims of this struggle. It was rich, to the highest degree, in elements of human nobility and emotional awakening.

For the sake of the Shi'a remaining in living contact with the fundamental ideas and principles of the struggle between the Holy Family and their opponents –

For the sake of them having continually an extraordinary high ideal of self-sacrifice for truth and justice –

For the sake of adding to the intellectual conviction in the faith an emotional bond, which would give that intellectual conviction an enthusiasm, a power and an illumination in the face of persecution and an ability to endure tribulations, which would preserve a cohesiveness in the face of violent attacks, and which would surround the rational attitude with an emotional fire which would raise that belief from the rational level to the emotional level –

For the sake of all that, the Holy Family called for poetry to be composed about al-Husayn and his revolution and they called for his memory to be kept alive.

This has been a discussion of the revolution of al-Husayn and its impact on Muslim consciousness. This memory will remain as a living ideal which, through its resounding magnificence, its exalted call, its noble self-sacrifice, will stir the hearts and consciences of men.

It will remain ringing in the heart of history with the words of the Lady Zaynab to Yazid ibn Mu'awiya while she was a captive and he was a Caliph: 'Conspire as much as you can and exhaust yourself with your efforts, for by God, you will never wipe out memory of us. You will not bring to an end our revelation. Disgrace will never leave you. Is your judgment anything except blunder? Are your days anything except a number? Is your grouping together anything but a scattering apart?'

1. Ibn Tawus, al-Luhuf fi Qatla al-Tufuf, 3.

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