

Courage and the Love of God

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An historian of the Reformation has written that martyrs never represent the vast majority of believers, but rather are the highest exemplars of religious observance. This rings true to Shi'i sensibilities just as much as it does for Christians in the Anabaptist tradition. Like the martyrs of the Radical Reformation, Imam Husayn offered his life as testimony of a religious vision contrary to the perversions of the teachings and practice of those who held power in religious institutions.

It is colder than it has been in many years here in Qom, and snow is on the roofs of the shrine and the madrasahs, on the pines that line the streets, and it blankets the surrounding prairies. I have been told that the blanket of snow extends all the way across the Zagros mountains to Karbala and beyond. So, even if I cannot be in Karbala for Ashura, I can touch the blanket of snow that touches the clay of Karbala into which Imam Husayn's blood was poured.

Imam Husayn feared God more than he feared death. He is reported to have said "None will be secure on the Day of Judgment but those who fear God in this world." Fear of God is prominent among Christian as well as Muslim martyrs. Accounts of the Christian martyrs of sixteenth century Europe also tell of their emphasis on fearing God rather than men.

Imam Husayn teaches us how to offer up our attachments to this world in order to attain the next world. He teaches how the spirit can triumph even when the body is defeated. For many who do not know the Shi'ah, the story of Karbala seems nothing but a horror. It seems rather deviant that the Shi'ah should be so preoccupied with such a story of blood and gore. For those who find it repugnant, the comparison with the Anabaptists might help.

For the Shi'ah, the story of Karbala is sublime because it shows how one can live beautifully (with ihsan) in the most horrific situation. It is as though Imam Husayn was able to use the blood he shed to write a most eloquent poem, or to paint a beautiful picture. It is horrible that he and members of his family and friends were so cruelly killed to prevent them from continuing on to Baghdad to issue their protest against the nominally Muslim government of oppressors; but Husayn's words and deeds under such circumstances were stunningly beautiful. When we weep for Husayn, we weep not only in sorrow for the atrocious treatment to which he was subjected, but we also weep in awe at the nobility he displayed, and we weep in shame that he was abandoned by other Muslims and was not defended.

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believers, but rather are the highest exemplars of religious observance. This rings true to Shi'i sensibilities just as much as it does for Christians in the Anabaptist tradition. Like the martyrs of the Radical Reformation, Imam Husayn offered his life as testimony of a religious vision contrary to the perversions of the teachings and practice of those who held power in religious institutions. Imam Husayn called the Muslim community to a radical break with the empire of Yazid, and a return to the principles of the religion of his grandfather, the Prophet Muhammad. Standing up against injustice was seen as a way of casting aside the world and moving toward an encounter with God. Imam Husayn is reported to have said "Do you not see that what is right is not put into practice, and that what is invalid is not avoided, so that the believer truly wishes to meet Allah."

The Mennonite scholar C. Arnold Snyder writes "Because of the widespread persecution, Anabaptist martyrs were not incidental to their spiritual tradition – as if they were unfortunate random members who happened to be arrested and killed – but rather martyrdom came to define the very essence of the Anabaptist spiritual tradition."

Like the Anabaptists, the Shi'ah also suffered widespread persecution, and following the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, one after the other, his descendants were assassinated according to our narrations, all of the subsequent Imams but the last were poisoned. Not only the Imams, but many of their closest followers were also martyred.

Persecution of the Shi'ah still continues in various parts of the Muslim world, and just as the line of the persecuted can be traced back to the stand of Imam Husayn, the line of persecutors continues from Yazid to those who today call the blood of the Shi'ah halal. Over the course of centuries of persecution, martyrdom has come to define the very essence of the Shi'i spiritual tradition, and the great teacher and paradigm of this tradition is Imam Husayn.

Islam is submission to the will of Allah and the inner peace this brings. Islam teaches giving up attachments to what is worldly in order to increase one's attachment to Allah. Imam Husayn's enemies reversed this by making a display of clinging to the outward manifestations of religion in order to satisfy their lusts for worldly riches and power. The persecution of the Shi'ah is precisely the result of their opposition to the exploitation of religious beliefs for worldly ends. If we are to call ourselves Shi'ah, we need to aspire to the fear of God and the courage of Imam Husayn in yielding to the will of God, standing up for justice, even if it costs us the world. It is reported that Imam Husayn said "Verily, I do not see death except as felicity, and [I do not see] life with the oppressors except as anguish."

So, we pray that we may learn from the teaching in word and deed of Imam Husayn to stand up for the weak and oppressed, to aid the unfortunate, and to cast aside our love for this world in

favor of the love of God. And in the cognizance of what was done to Imam Husayn, of his loneliness and sublimity, may our tears melt the blanket of snow from Qom to Karbala