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Towards Freedom And Dignity In The Paradigm Of Karbala And Damascus

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Message Of Thaqaalayn

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Since time immemorial human beings have sought freedom and dignity. In traditional terms one might even find some justification for saying that these two are among the defining characteristics of human beings. ¹ Admittedly, both these notions as used hitherto, are vague. In today's analytic academic climate, terms need to be clearly distinguished and defined and their various nuances and applications brought out as clearly as possible before they are used.

In the context of this essay then, we use the term freedom to mean both metaphysical freedom and personal freedom vis-a-vis social and environmental compulsions. Dignity is undoubtedly a value term, and ordinarily one would not have to make out the inner connexion between freedom and dignity given that any human being who had a reasonable degree of belief in his own freedom, to whatever extent,

would to that extent feel dignified at least in his own sight. The contemporary academic climate of all-pervasive scepticism, however, refuses to countenance the two notions as put forward in this essay or to see their inner connexion. Although we have no exclusive concern here with the way these two key notions are viewed by contemporary philosophy, we shall be concerned to show the meaning of these notions for the righteous personalities of the events of Karbala and Damascus and the difference that reliance on the paradigms of Karbala and Damascus would make to our lives vis-a-vis freedom and dignity. This will necessitate reference to contemporary thought, albeit tangentially.

Before proceeding further, we should like to explain the choice of Damascus in conjunction with Karbala. Karbala represents in the late Dr. 'Ali Shariati's words, 'Blood'. Damascus, also in Shariati's words is 'Message'.² What transpired on the plains of Karbala during the first ten days of Muharram, 61 AH, was conveyed across space and time by Imam Husayn's ('a) valiant sister and fearless campaigner Lady Zaynab ('a), daughter of Imam 'Ali ('a) and Sayyidah Fatimah ('a). It would be wrong, however, to separate the two stages as those of deeds and words. Karbala is word made flesh and Damascus is that same flesh, speaking out to preserve the immortal sacrifice made by Imam Husayn ('a) to celebrate the pre-eternal divine convenor between the Creator and the creatures.

We had mentioned above in passing the inner connexion between freedom and dignity. In itself, however, freedom is too vague a concept to be understood on its own. Living as we do at the start of the 21st century of the Christian calendar, our lives are in many ways affected and even circumscribed by political dimensions, hence the tendency to conceive of freedom mainly in political terms. This is not to say that freedom does not have an over-political connotation. On the contrary, the political dimension is a very important one, but it isn't the only one. Yet if one refuses to put the political dimension in the centre, then one is confronted with two more basic questions, namely, that of the dimensions in regard to which the concept of freedom is applicable, and the criteriological question of the relative importance which can and ought to be assigned to spheres in relation to which the notion of freedom is applicable.

The answers to these questions would traditionally lead to an inquiry into the nature of Being and of Man's place in it.³ Yet one is reminded promptly that we live in a post-modern age in which all such questions reek of anachronism. When undertaking such an inquiry however one must keep in mind the fact that the answer should be sought not on the basis of what is currently efficacious but what is universally true. A brief detour into the history of western thought should give us an idea of how western notions of freedom are inapplicable to our context, not because they belong to a foreign culture but because they are based in a current of thought that focuses arbitrarily on the transitory, evanescent and parochial and refuses to regard the abiding, the eternal and the universal. One must not fail to remark here that western thought has displayed both these contrasting characteristics at particular times but has been unable to effect a reconciliation of the two at any one time. The post-modern or quasi post-modern age we live in, is the offshoot of the modern age.

It will not fail the readers' notice that modernity is the special target of criticism in what follows, as

exemplifying a mode of thought based on Quantity rather than Quality. Lest this is construed as an unqualified endorsement of traditionalism we should hasten to add that in certain matters traditionalism is equally reprehensible. While modernity appears to be an attempt towards sociological metaphysics, traditionalism tries to make transcendental a particular mode of living as being universal and categorical. This has led most regrettably to a complete paralysis on its part, of independent critical evaluation of the milieu it idealizes. Hence the almost complete neglect by traditionalism of the event of Karbala as the source of inspiration and guidance.

Ideationally this age was inaugurated by Descartes' rejection of what was for him the received form of thought, or Scholasticism. Scholasticism shares with traditional thought many key themes including conceptions and visions of reality and of the cosmos. The human is a complex being created by God and standing at the summit of His Creation. This vision sees the entire cosmos as His creature and God Himself as transcending the cosmos so that He is both immanent in, but also transcendent, to the cosmos. The human entity is only potentially superior to the rest of the cosmos.

Insofar as he masters the base and vile elements of his being, viz., his instincts, emotions and narrow motivations, and orients them to the servitude of the Lord, he is able to climb the summit to perfection. What enables Man to scale the height is his faculty of discernment divinely imbued in him and called by the name of intellect. The intellect when informed by the higher spheres of the heart; when dealing with mundane matters, is reason, and when integrated into a whole, is Primordial Man, having all his faculties and elements in their proper place. In his ideational economy, freedom is the ability to shake off one's bondage to all the lower elements, namely instincts, emotions and human reason and to orient himself to the Divine. In the exercise of this freedom lies the key to the attainment of one's dignity.⁴

By inaugurating what has now come to be known as modernity, Descartes rejected all these elements.⁵ The ideational alternative he presented consisted of a very impoverished picture of the cosmos. For one thing this was a consequence of Descartes' method, which aimed not at discovering what being consisted of, or its contours so to say, but at trying to find out whether and how knowledge was possible. In the process he totally dispensed with the divine component of the process of acquisition of knowledge, namely revelation. He set forth the idea that reality was of a bi-level nature, matter or material on the one hand, and ideas on the other, the latter being a product of a self-contained human reason. Moreover, the two levels of reality had nary a thing to do with each other.

On closer inspection, it became clear that this conception of reality had been advanced to pave the way for a political conception of human freedom rather than an ontological one. For the western man in general and for Descartes' intellectual successors in particular, it was necessary to use one's putative rational capacities to achieve freedom. However, two hundred and fifty years down the line, the German thinker Schopenhauer (1788– 1860) and later Nietzsche saw in the Cartesian conception of reason an obstacle rather than an aid to the attainment of human freedom. Freud (1856–1939), the celebrated German psychoanalyst, completed this rout of the Cartesian notion of rationality by putting forward the

idea that instincts were the defining feature of Man and rationality as conceived in the western tradition was merely a ploy to deprive Man of his true (read instinctive) freedom.

This then in a nutshell is the denouncement of the modern conception of rationality. Conspicuous in this entire saga is the absence of any conception of Man's true ontological constitution in the larger scheme of things and therefore of his worth as such. To add to this sorry state of things is the fact that these ideas have so pervaded the intellectual atmosphere of Muslim societies that many a purblind thinker equates Imam Husayn's ('a) struggle as one aimed primarily at achieving political freedom for the contemporaneous Muslims.

That Imam Husayn's ('a) struggle also aimed at achieving freedom and dignity is beyond any pale of doubt; that is not the issue, in fact. What we ought to do, however, is to discover what these two terms meant for the Imam, for his august family and for his illustrious and worthy successors (upon all of whom be peace and blessings of the Lord). Every care must be taken not to read our own narrow and specific understanding of these two notions back into the actions of one who personifies and embodies in his very self, universality and eternity. This universality and eternity relate at once to two aspects, the linear historical aspect and the vertical metaphysical aspect.

As to the first aspect, need one remind oneself that Imam Husayn ('a) carried forward in his person the mission for the achievement of human dignity and freedom initiated by the first prophet, Adam ('a), and brought to finality by the Last of the Messengers, Prophet Muhammad (S)⁶. In fact, as we have argued elsewhere in another context, Imam Husayn's ('a) movement was simultaneously a successful attempt to safeguard the meaning of the finality of Prophet Muhammad's (S) messengerhood⁷. This is one of the meanings of the Prophet's cryptic but profound exclamations regarding the nature of his relationship with his grandson, when he says: "Husayn is from me and I am from Husayn."

The fact that the chain of revelation and messengerhood, which began with Adam ('a) and ended with Prophet Muhammad (S) constitutes a single thread, relates to the second aspect, the metaphysical one. It is this aspect which gives us a glimpse into the primordial and unchanging essence of Man, what the Holy Qur'an calls *Din-i Qayyim* and *Din-i Hanif*⁸. There is no gainsaying the fact that prophets have been sent unto mankind in many different places and times, each of those places and times being seemingly unlike the others. Yet the core of the messages brought by each of the prophets was identical because despite being revealed in different space-time frameworks, those messages address themselves to the inner core in Man which is eternal, unchanging and stable. The Holy Qur'an calls this *Fitrah*, which can be translated as God-given nature. The Holy Book explains the fact in the following way:

"Then set your face uprightly for the (right) religion in accordance with the natural disposition which God has instilled into Mankind; No change can there be in the creation of God. This (uprightness) is the stablished religion; but most people know not" (Surah al-Rum, 30:30).

The *ayah* points clearly to something of universal and eternal significance. Even as the Holy Book relates to us incidents and events of past communities from an eminently wholesome axiological perspective, it affords us some glimpse into pre-eternity. And the two, temporality and pre-eternity, are not two disjointed aspects of the Qur'anic narration.

The Holy Qur'an, and only the Holy Qur'an, weaves the two into a harmonious instructive whole for mankind. As for the Word of God, the Holy Book affords humanity a rare glimpse into the metaphysical dimension not available to us through merely anthropic means. As the personification of the Word, Prophet Muhammad (S), as also the Prophets before him, demonstrate the possibility par excellence, of weaving the two dimensions together and thereby demonstrate also the verity of the Prophet's saying that: Verily God created Adam in His own image.

All this is central to our presentation as we shall show presently. Connected very intimately with the import of Verse 30 of *Surah al-Rum* quoted above, is the verse from *Surah Yasin* where the Lord reminds Man of his pre-eternal covenant with Him. The verse is as much a reminiscence of an event, albeit a pre-eternal one, as of the exalted origins of mankind. There is something in Man which creates with it a remembrance and consciousness of its exalted station and origins within itself. As the Lord reminds us:

“Did I not enjoin on you, O you children of Adam, that you should not worship Satan since verily he is your open foe” (Surah Yasin, 36:60).

“And that you should worship Me (alone)? This is the right way” (Surah Yasin, 36:61).

These two verses must be read in conjunction with the many other verses of the Holy Book wherein the role and aims of the Prophet are adverted to. Characteristically, the Holy Qur'an relates them allegorically, but it never fails to point to the central aim of all the prophets whose exploits are adverted to the delivery of the message of *Tawhid*. With unfailing regularity, the Qur'an points to the steadfast adherence to and affirmation of the doctrine of Tawhid by each of the prophets, and with the same regularity it highlights not only those who opposed the message of Tawhid – Pharaoh, Korah, Haman, Nimrod, Abi Lahab to name only a few but also the causes and roots of the manifest paradigm. It points out deviation from the True Path and as such the forgetting of the preeternal divine covenant. In every case the roots and causes lie within the human self and take on diverse forms and shapes.

In *Surah 'Ankabut*, for instance, three vicious examples are pointed out: Pharaoh, Korah, and Haman. Each of them is obsessed with something external, not for its own sake but on account of a glaring defect within their own selves. Arrogance, greed and lust, for instance, are cardinal sins and so are the obsession with acquisition and exercise of worldly power. The Holy Qur'an as the Book of Mercy and Guidance does not fail to point out that these manifest deviations and aberrations result from preoccupation with and bondage to something external, created and finite. Most often, especially in the case of very primitive peoples, the roots lie in man's error in exalting a finite, material object to the status

of deity. In the Qur'anic drama of human history the prophets are shown to be divinely inspired and designated individuals who invariably remind mankind of their divine origins and show their present wretched condition to be a function, not so much of external compulsion, but the failure of men's intellects to distinguish between truth and falsehood, virtue and vice, right and wrong, principally because they attributed power, sovereignty and dominion to created things instead of to the One True Lord.

The Qur'anic presentation of the role of the prophets in mankind's eternal struggle for freedom shows them to be directing their efforts and energies basically at purifying the souls of human beings and ridding their intellectuals of false conceptions rather than drawing up a manifesto for redistributing the control of material resources. This last, of course, is included in their programme and duty, and follows as a corollary to the purification of selves and enlightening of intellects. The Commander of the Faithful, Imam 'Ali ('a) says in the very first sermon of *Nahj al Balaghah* regarding the mission of the prophets: "... and the (the prophets) bring to the surface the buried treasures of the (the people's) intellects".

The Qur'an does not deny the efficiency of material causes, these are held to be effective in their own way. But the Qur'an regards man to be responsible for his actions. Action in its sophisticated philosophical sense is a central category in the Qur'an's axiological conception. We do not wish to enter here into a discussion of whether the Holy Book prescribes to the notion of predetermination, soft determinism, compatibilism or indeterminism.⁹ Suffice it to say that the Shi'ite doctrine, as based on the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet and the Imams, propounds a view of indeterminism known as *al-amr bayn al amrayn* and we subscribe to the same view.

It was just such a view that led the prophets to rally people for reform. But the prophets' call was directed primarily at the inner self, the self which is patterned on God's image and the self that has stood witness to the Lordship of the One True Creator in pre-eternity. The prophets have striven to make men realize that their true freedom lies in recognizing their spiritual origins and in trying to transcend one's material confines. Not only have the prophets, each one of them, served as exemplars for seekers of freedom they have actively helped those enlightened human beings who were truly and sincerely interested in shaking off the diverse material and psychological shackles to achieve genuine spiritual liberation.

These material and psychological shackles can take on myriad forms. Even as the slave who is coerced into servitude is in physical fetters, the master who finds pleasure in enslaving him (the slave) is himself slave to his own passions, arrogance and covetousness. These latter are more oppressive forms of servitude than the ostensible one but there is none as devious and as deceptive as the conceit and vanity that snares one's ego. Only the recognition that there is no true self but the divine self, ensures that the first steps towards freedom are taken. To go on to demonstrate practically the negation of one's ego is the exordium to the languages stage in the interminable inner ascent of man to God. It is in this sense that the *Surah al-Fatihah* represents our feelings as:

"Thee only do we worship and from Thee only do we seek succour." (1:3).

The same thing when put in a negative, admonitory tone is expressed thus in *Surah al-Hashr*:

“And be not like those who are oblivious of God and whom He therefore causes to be oblivious of (what is good for) their own selves.” (59: 19).

From the vintage point of the prophetic mission, especially that of the last Prophet (S), the *Surah al-Jumu'ah* has this to say:

“It is He who has raised up among the unschooled (ummiyyin) a Messenger from among them to recite His signs to them (and) to purify them, and to teach them the Book and the Wisdom though before that they were in manifest error” (62:2).

And (unto) others from among them who have not yet joined them. And He is the Ever prevalent, the All - Wise” (62:3).

The upshot of the prophetic mission is the teaching of the Book and the Wisdom. The desiderata for this (one) the recitation of the signs to the people so as to, (two) purify them. Quite clearly the people must be freed from the dross of superficiality and imperfection, liberated, as it were, from the clutches of human faults and foibles and from the myopia of literalism to be able to learn the Book and the Wisdom. When such purification has been achieved and the self, liberated from its narrow prison of egoism, striving for the establishment of social justice is but a natural corollary. As God puts in *Surah al-Hadid*.

“Indeed, We sent Our Messengers with the clear signs, and sent down with them the Book and the Balance so that mankind might stablish justice” (57:25).

In the verse of *Surah al-Jumu'ah* there is reference to future generations too. Given the privileged nature of prophethood as a divine institution and also given the fact of the end of this institution with Prophet Muhammad (S), the function of conveying the message cannot be vested in the *Ummah* at large though the *Ummah* does have an ancillary role. The primary function can only be performed by individuals of great spiritual and moral rectitude, handpicked not by creatures but by the Creator Himself.

This is ensured through the institution of *wilayat*, which is, as it were, a natural adjunct of the function of prophethood. Revelation (*tanzil*) does come to an end but being by its very nature exalted and cryptic it finds its protectors and exegetes in the divinely invested guides of the Household of the Prophet. The Prophet's proclamation of Imam 'Ali ('a) as Maula on the 18th of *Dhi alHijjah* 10 A.H. and its corroboration with the revelation of these verses of *Surah al-Ma'idah* attests to this:

“Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam for you as religion” (5:3).

Equally important in this context is the following proclamation by the Prophet (S) whereby he sets up under divine guidance, two complementary models of conduct for humanity.

Verily, I am leaving behind two precious things (*thaqalayn*) among you: the Book of God and my kindred (*'itrah*) my household (Ahl al-Bayt); for indeed, the two never separate until they come back to me by the Pond (of *al-Kawthar*) on the Judgement Day. [10](#)

The Book and the Person, as it were. Once again, we can see in hindsight the Wisdom of the Lord at work here. The Book provides in crystalline and stable condition the verbal expression of what is quintessentially beyond, not below, language. Let this verbal expression itself be reduced to meaningless letters, the progeny of the Prophet stands as active expressions and embodiments of the Word of the Lord. Contra Post-Modernism" The essence of the Book gets preserved both intellectually (knowing) and ontologically (being). Contra Modernism: The essence is not an uprooted rational construct of the inhuman being. But this however is another discussion and not directly relevant to our present topic.

In the backdrop then of our sketch above, freedom is not some facile superficial notion relating to the shaking off of familial, social and political compulsions in order to attain personal desires. In fact, the personal is personal only insofar as it is aware of one's total and absolute dependence on the Divine self. Only by allying oneself with and putting oneself in servitude to the One True Lord can one break off the shackles that hold men in thrall to nature, society, history and ultimately to one's own chimerical self. In this also lie Man's dignity and worth. After all, if one came to realize as one must, that there is only One True Overpowering and Eternal Being, who not only creates but sustains the entire cosmos at each and every instant, then it seems entirely reasonable to pledge one's allegiance to that One Being and to strive to extricate oneself from all other bonds of dependence and servitude. Islam is just this realization and its central doctrine *Tawhid*, refers to this notion of the unity and concatenation of all existence as the manifestation of the attributes of the One True Lord. The enunciation of this doctrine with consciousness of its implications in this spatiotemporal frame of existence is merely a re-enactment of humanity's covenant entered into with divinity in pre-eternity. The entire chain of prophets beginning with Adam ('a) and ending with Prophet Muhammad (S), is an unbroken series of efforts to make Man realize his exalted origins and to liberate him from all false bonds of servitude. One might think that the mission becomes redundant with the end of prophethood but that is not true. We have had occasion above to refer to the liberalist streak in man in passing.

When this liberalist streak is combined with the cynical and the deviant, we have a potentially volatile mixture such as was witnessed among Muslims immediately following the passing away of the Prophet (S). More importantly Islam is a realistic code and it has a true conception of human capacity for good and evil. The Prophet (S) delivered with utmost honesty, truthfulness and sincerity the Message of the Lord. The delivery was both objective as expressed in the verbal form of the message and subjective as expressed most harmoniously and faithfully in his own conduct (*sirah*). The Prophet could not and did not compel people to conform to the message against their wishes. This was also a practical reflection of Islam's conception of freedom.

The early history of Islam shows the distribution of mankind into three categories depending upon their visceral acceptance of the Message. These were the Muslims, divided qualitatively into *Muslim* and *Mu'min*, the *Kuffar* (sing. *Kafir*) or the unbelievers and the *Munafiqin* (sing. *Munafiq*) or the hypocrites. The characteristics of each of these categories are described graphically by the Holy Book not only in material and psychological terms but also in soteriological and eschatological terms. One might easily transpose this distribution and categorization into any age.

The believers, the most praiseworthy and excellent group of people, were those who truly emulated to the best of their own ability the life and conduct of Prophet Muhammad (S). This lifestyle was freely chosen and reflected the conception and vision of human dignity that these believers shared with the Prophet. A sampling of their views should help to clarify the pristine ideals of those believers of the community.

Categorizing worship with reference to the intentions with which it is carried out, Imam 'Ali ('a) is reported to have said:

"A group of people worshipped God out of desire for reward: this is the worship of traders. Another group worshipped God out of fear; this is the worship of slaves. Yet another group worshipped God out of gratitude; this is the worship of freemen." [11](#)

He is also reported to have said:

"Even if God had not warned those disobedient to Him of chastisement, it was (still) obligatory by way of gratefulness for his favours that He should not be disobeyed." [12](#)

Here we find an inner connexion being made between worship of and obedience to the Lord, as the way to freedom. In Islam, worship is not merely ritualistic but is related to obedience of the commands of the Lord and that too at the deeper and more profound level of one's intention, and it is this which establishes in the eyes of the Leader of free men, Prophet Muhammad (S), man's self-respect. Consider the following aphorisms attributed to him:

Whoever desires to be the most honourable of men, let him be wary of God, the Almighty and the Glorious. [13](#)

The absence of need does not lie in abundance of wealth, but it lies in inner plenitude. [14](#)

The Commander of the Faithful, Imam 'Ali ('a), has this to say on this subject:

There is no honour greater than personal piety.

He also said:

Hold your own personal worth high by indifference to lowly thing and base goals. [15](#)

The fourth Imam, ‘Ali ibn al-Husayn Zayn al-‘Abidin (‘a), says:

I would not exchange my self-respect for the most precious thing in the world. [16](#)

That the immediate successors of the Holy Prophet, the Imams ‘Ali (‘a), Hasan (‘a) and Husayn (‘a), all worked to uphold this dignity in the eyes of the Lord by living and exemplifying the faith to the fullest without an iota of doubt. There are detractors who have cavilled at what they see as faults and peccadilloes of these saints. But when one scrutinizes closely the yardstick whereby these detractors evaluate historical personalities, we find them critically wanting in adherence to pristine Islamic criteria.

The question then naturally arises as to what went wrong with the Muslim society for Karbala to have taken place. The explanation that the Umayyads were a sybaritic and lecherous lot or that they had a long-standing enmity with the Hashimites is simply not plausible enough.

Not that the Umayyads were not sybaritic and lecherous; nor can it be gainsaid that they bore no enmity towards the Bani Hashim. They did not suddenly develop these traits forty years after the passing away of the Prophet (S). One need give no greater example of their wretchedness than the Battle of Uhud in which the wife of Abi Sufyan, Hind, had her slave tear out the liver of the Prince of Martyrs, the Prophet’s uncle, Hamzah. Yet as long as the community held to, at least ostensibly, the principles that the Prophet was preaching and practicing, no manifest schism and no patent departure from the prophetic ideal was countenanced. The Prophet’s death removed the last vestige of dissimulation, and it soon became clear that only a handful of companions along with the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) stood firm to the letter and the spirit of the revelation.

With the passage of time, past conquests, not present deeds, became the measure of dignity. The dignity was traded for the acquisition of fabulous comforts. [17](#) When the noble and exalted companion, Abi Dharr, rose to confront these dangerous deviations, he was exiled and met with what most saw was an ignominious death in exile. The community had very soon forgotten, where the real roots of ignominy lay. Literalism was riding a crest wave thereby restricting Islam to the time span of revelation, and jihad to the campaigns enforced on the Prophet, thus deliberately consigning to oblivion the Prophet’s remark on seeing the returning armies from the battlefield, say: “Blessed are those who have performed the minor jihad and have yet to perform the major one. When asked, what is the major jihad, the Prophet replied: “The jihad of the self” (struggle against self).

Only in an atmosphere pervaded by fear generated by a despotic authority which knew hedonism to be the jugular vein of the populace could the Umayyads have decided to stage the vicious, contumacious atrocity in Karbala that they did. Imam Husayn (‘a) and his companions were not the first ones to bear the brunt of Umayyad savagery, but they were certainly the most distinguished, principally in the eyes of God and secretly in the minds and memories of those who had seen the Prophet shower his grandsons with profuse love.

This was not just grandfatherly love but love motivated purely by God-consciousness under the

influence of which the Prophet had at divine behest crowned them Leaders of the Youth of Paradise. It was this august family, their friends and their posterity that lay slaughtered on the sands of Karbala on the 10th Muharram, 61 AH by the minions of Yazid and later dragged through the streets of Kufah and Damascus by this bands of infidels. By all standards of worldly conduct, the Prophet's Ahl al-Bayt ('a) had forfeited both freedom and dignity. It was this very understanding (sic) which made Yazid's governor at Medina mock the Prophet (S) at his blessed grave by exclaiming:

O Muhammad, no news came (from the unseen), nor did you receive revelation. Verily we have avenged our defeat at Badr and Uhud.

That he made these remarks were outrage enough, that he got away with it with nary a finger being raised by the docile and mute audience witness to the sacrilegious outburst is another. Karbala took place because of just such docility and muteness on the part of the Muslims, a docility and muteness which had roots in fear, and the fear itself was a result of their refusal to pay the price of freedom and dignity as visualized and practiced by the luminaries of Islam. The capacity and disgrace to which the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) and their supporters were subjected could scarcely do anything to take away the honour, dignity and privilege bestowed on them from on high. As to freedom it was vouched for them by the Lord Himself for their having sold their souls to Him in return for His Pleasure.

What most had then failed to realize, and we fail to do still, is that their captivity and disgrace is a slap on the face of a mere biological humanity which has lost all its sense of dignity, worth, discernment and purpose. Only the Satan in Man could let such indignity to the countenance of the Lord ever take place. A humanity which has lost its ability to recognize and revere the Manifestation of its Lord's Visage is a humanity not worth its name. Shariati was not just being poetic when he exclaimed in connexion with the martyrs of Karbala. "They (the dead) are living, we (the living) are dead."

The episodes of Karbala and Damascus serve to expose now as then, a patent contradiction in thoughts of Muslims be they common people, so called intellectuals or those claiming exclusive privilege over spirituality. On the one hand, Muslims actively sought and still seek worldly gain, pleasure and comfort; on the other, when it comes to implementing Islam's moral code in their lives, they display a most despicable inactivity, relegating everything to divine imitative. Imam 'Ali ('a) was referring to this very tendency when he said: ["You seek actively after that which the Lord has promised you (worldly provision) but display total heedlessness and inactivity for that thing for which you will be questioned on the Day of Judgement (i.e. good deeds)."]

The inactivity and unconcern for the truth it was which the Ummayyads tapped seemingly to their own advantage. When slowly but surely the heinous nature of their crime began to unravel before the eyes of the populace they tried to lay the responsibility for that at the divine doorstep. When the family and supporters of the Doyen of Martyrs (upon all of whom the peace) were brought before the notorious criminal, the governor of Kufah, 'Ubaydullah bin Ziyad, he addressed Lady Zaynab ('a) thus:

Praise be to God who has disgraced you, killed you and revealed the false nature of your claims.

To this, lady Zaynab ('a) retorted:

"Praise be to God who has favoured us with His Prophet, Muhammad, may God bless him and his family, and He has purified us completely from sin. He only disgraces the greater sinner and reveals the false nature of the profligate. Such men are not amongst us, praise be to God.

"How do you consider God treated your House?", asked Ibn Ziyad. "God decreed death for them, and they went forward (bravely) to their resting places," replied Zaynab ('a). "God will gather you and us together. You will plead your excuses to Him and we will be your adversaries before Him." [18](#)

Academically speaking, this represents a classic formulation of the Shi'ite doctrine of *al-amr bayn al-amrayn*, or neither absolute determinism nor absolute freedom. For those who claim that crystallization of Shi'ite doctrine was a later development this is proof of the remarkable continuity of thought from the Prophet to Imam 'Ali ('a) and to his illustrious sons and daughters.

However, what we wish to point out is of a more practical nature. Our point is that whatever difference there existed among the early community regarding the right to rule, the paramountcy of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) was beyond doubt. In the words of the Holy Qur'an, they were the *Ahl al-Dhikr* (16:43 & 21:7), the people who were incessant recipients of benedictions from the Lord and His Angels since pre-eternity, and they were those cleansed of all impurities by the Lord Himself as only He can (33:33). True, with the ascent of Mu'awiyah ibn Abu Sufyan to the throne of Damascus, an indefatigable campaign to discredit their worth by concocting spurious traditions in the name of the Prophet had begun. Yet there were many people like Zayd bin Arqam and Jabir ibn Abdullah al-Ansari who could still recall vividly what the Prophet had said in eulogy of His family.

Notwithstanding the incessant dissemination of lies about the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) on a grand scale, the truth was in vogue too albeit in the manner of a subterranean current. The blasphemous audacity of the Umayyads at Karbala reflects their design to discredit the theomorphic concept of Man elevated into a criterion by the Prophet himself and of which, he and his family were the paragons. The mute majority had been conniving with the rulers and would almost have let the Umayyads raze the edifice of Islam to the ground had not Imam Husayn ('a) revived Islam at Karbala and had not Lady Zaynab ('a) immortalized that sacrifice through her intrepid eloquence while still a seemingly helpless captive in Kufah and Damascus. It was Imam Husayn ('a) who drove home the meaning of dignity both with his actions and words. His immortal words speak to us across the sands of time: "Death with dignity" said he "is superior to life in dishonour."

This sacrifice then refutes conclusively the stand of the early predestinarians on the one hand, and on the other, shows the inefficacy of political compulsion for the morally cleansed and pure. Political compulsion, the Ahl al-Bayt show in Karbala and Damascus, only works when one's moral foundations are either weak or hollow. This leads to another all-important point: The superiority of *Imamah* over

Ummah. Karbala and Damascus demonstrate the inherent spiritual and moral superiority and vitality of the *Imamah*, therefore its centrality in terms of guidance, over the *Ummah*.

There is nothing intrinsically sound about the *Ummah*, it being as amendable to error as is conceivable, except that it aligns itself with the Pole of Right Guidance. After all, it was not the *Ummah* who stood between the Umayyads and their nefarious scheme of total distortion as well as of abrogation of pristine Islam. Rather, it was the divinely guided personality of Imam Husayn (‘a) and his band of die-hard supporters who made sure that this recidivist counter-revolution would not succeed. The *Ummah* of course had a very important role to play in this but only negatively. First by allowing itself to be lulled into forgetting the true ideals and practices of the faith. This, of course, was a direct consequence of their turning away from the Pole of Right Guidance (*Imamah*).

Secondly, by deceiving itself into believing that power was the guarantee and hallmark of possession of true faith thereby paving the way for all power-seekers and power-mongers to use the faith for their own ulterior motives. Karbala is an extreme example of the play by power-seekers to do just that. But Karbala was not the only occasion when such efforts have been made. The scale and magnitude of the atrocities perpetrated as well as the outstanding merit of the oppressed ensured that the oppressor did not get away with it. Time and again in this essay have we referred to the role played by Lady Zaynab (‘a) in exposing the crimes of Yazid and his minions. The *Ummah* cannot take credit for having prevented Yazid from perpetrating his evil design.

Our point then is, what if the oppressed is not, and of course cannot be of the same standing as Imam Husayn (‘a) and Lady Zaynab (‘a)? Without a Zaynab (‘a) to speak for them and given the perennial indifference of humanity to Yazid and his likes, how many a Karbala, how many a grand crime, have we connived at, been part of, abetted or condoned? By merely weeping for the martyrs of Karbala as a group of unfortunate victims we ignore the fact that they were deliberate victims of a grand scheme to wipe out the divine spark in humanity. The oppressors probably may not have had anything against Husayn (‘a) as Husayn (‘a). But they clearly saw just as we fail to do, that Husayn ibn ‘Ali (‘a) was the very embodiment of that human being created in the image of the Lord. With this image out of the way, extirpated if you like, they could fully enjoy the license to live an absolutely de-divinesed, therefore de-humanized life.

With nothing there to remind them of Man’s inherent link to Heaven they could very well revel in their self-created paradise of gore and lust. These are not counterfactual postulations. Cast a cursory but disinterested look at Umayyad history in particular and of human history in general and you will find such despots wallowing in precisely such sybaritism and Epicureanism. One inevitable fallout of such hedonism is invariably a forfeiture of Man’s freedom and dignity for in such cases Man is prevented from liberating himself from instinctual, physical and psychological prisons and denied the opportunity to attain the station of dignity rightfully reserved for theomorphic beings. Two, the worth of Man in such dispensations is not intrinsic but relative.

We have shown above that the worth of Man is intrinsically good insofar as he realizes the divine in him. Some of this he is but a compound of instincts and guidelines. In this backdrop the historical Karbala itself and every re-enactment of it is a grave threat to the entire history of human struggle from the bondage of the lowly and the base, for whereas the Holy Prophet's ministry consummates the entire positive history of theomorphic mankind, Karbala marks a reversal to prehistory and is therefore a despicable attempt to sabotage human evolution, the latter being meant not in a Darwinian but in a spiritual sense.

Taking the above as backdrop let us try to reflect on the relevance of that entire complex of events for our times.

From our vantage point we can, should we desire to, witness the many thought currents and political systems on offer today. It might, of course, be objected that there aren't many on offer today what with the triumph of capitalism and liberalism. Let us beware however the Marxism in its many varieties is also staging a comeback. It might also be objected that these are thought currents totally foreign to us. But then, this is not reason enough to reject outright something possibly of value. Here too, then we may refer to Karbala as the extension of Islamic Revolution.

For one thing, Karbala clearly lays down criteria for personal and collective conduct. God-orientation is the hallmark of Karbala not just in the abstract but in the sense of liberating Man from all the dark forces of nature, history, society and self, and setting him on the interminable journey towards the Exalted Creator. The pertinent question here is, does any of the systems of idea and scale of values even come close to these criteria gleaned from Karbala? The answer is bound to be a resounding no. After all, it should not take a genius to espy that all these systems conceive of Man almost exclusively in consumptive-economic terms.

Production for consumption, consumption for production and a possibly equitable distribution of produce are the highest goals conceivable in these systems. There is no way the Muslim mind and his spirit will find relief and comfort in such partial, limited, solutions though their utility within a vastly expanded framework cannot be ruled out. There is something else too that needs to be considered here: The question about freedom and dignity, which is central to this essay.

As we pointed out in the opening paragraphs, freedom is a metaphysical issue and dignity an axiological one. With metaphysics totally banished from the West's ideological horizon, one may no longer expect any fundamental and ultimate solution to this issue. Metaphysics is not only passing; it is anachronistic in the West's ideational matrix. It was no coincidence that the demolition of the West's notion of metaphysics took place at the hands of Nietzsche, the very man who was allowed to proclaim triumphantly like his own fictive character, the madman: "God is dead". This proclamation does away with one stroke not only academic metaphysics but the sources of all norms and values. If ever there was any attempt in human history at mimicking and reduplicating the Umayyads it was this. The only difference is that this movement succeeded in a clime and an age where no divinely designated

individual stood up to thwart it. Husayn ('a) after all is unique. He could not be ever reduplicated although, for sure, any attempt to counter this blasphemy can only find inspiration and sustenance from the Martyr of Karbala, for he it is for whom perennial Divine Sustenance has been vouched by the Qur'an itself. This does not mean however that we should let matters rest at that.

At the risk of appearing antinomic, one must state that the West has built a colossal information edifice "founded", it would appear, on these non-foundations. By giving them widespread currency the West would like us to buy into the notions they are bandying about as if these were the absolute truth. Of these notions, freedom and dignity are shown to be quasi-perennial human goals but attainable only under the canopy of Western civilization. Having allowed themselves to be disenfranchised, as it were, of such key concepts as human essence, human dignity and human freedom the West would like us to believe that the notion of human essence is a relic of a bygone era, that freedom pertains mainly, almost exclusively, to the social and political domain and that dignity lies in being able to exercise the only types of freedom on offer, viz. political and economic freedom. Here as in every other field of endeavour, Karbala beckons us. We now have a fourfold duty:

1. First to delve deep into the message of Karbala and Damascus to bring out the riches of ideas and exemplary actions that will bring light to a stymied age. This will entail quarrying from these rich mines the value and relevance of timeless and perennial concepts to the surface for an age steeped in scepticism.
2. Second, to find common grounds with traditional cultures of both the East and the West, in order, to acquaint them of the cosmic dimensions of the message of Karbala. Karbala is a source of hope for freedom lovers around the globe. So far, we seem to have monopolized it.
3. Third, to construct an ideational-intellectual edifice which should begin to serve as an alternative to the current dominant epistemic paradigm which is shot through with contradictions in the way it sets up an opposition between the positive and the normative and at best relegates the normative to the status of the non-real. A most egregious example of this is the U.S. psychologist. B.F. Skinner's work, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*¹⁹ in which he took for granted the supremacy of the epistemology of the physical sciences and on that basis went on to argue that one must dispense with the notion of freedom altogether, for only determinism makes scientific postulates viable.

Dignity being a value concept, therefore non-scientific, should also be done away with. Needless to say, within the behaviourist stream of Western psychology which by the way totally lacks of the notion of psyche Skinner holds an eminent place. All this notwithstanding, there has followed very little sustained critique of the various schools of philosophy and of physical and natural sciences from the Muslim world.²⁰ A future critique will hopefully base itself on the insights from Karbala and Damascus. Parallel to this critique is required constructive ideation, principally in the fields of philosophical anthropology, epistemology, logic and metaphysics. The great and worthy son of Islam, Mulla Sadra, provides both a foundation and a point of departure for constructive contemporary ideation, an ideation that ought.

4. Fourth, and primary, we must strive simultaneously with the rediscovery of the true meaning of the message of Karbala and Damascus to realize the criteria given to us by the Holy Prophet's family in our personal conduct as well as in the criteria which form the undercurrent of our societies. Failing this, we risk making ourselves egregious examples of contradictions. After all, how can we weep for and commemorate the martyrs of Karbala and the captives of Damascus and yet go on to evaluate individuals merely, according to their wealth, material possession and social standing? Although the worth of ideas is definitely not linked to whether they are practiced or not, it is definitely a measure of the wholesomeness and soundness of human intelligence that people practice what they preach.

This break of ideal and reality it was that brought about Karbala. By this we mean to say that the refusal not only of the ruling and the privileged class, but also of the common people to realize the ideals in their lives by following the ideal personalities among them, led them to the pits where they connived at and condoned the martyrdom of the Ideal Man among them. For long have we been putting up with such conditions in our midst. Not for nothing do we Muslims find ourselves among the wretched of the earth today. Commitment to Karbala is a prescription not only for lending support to our ideational edifice but also most importantly for ensuring the imminent reappearance of the Imam of the Age, Imam Mahdi (May Allah hasten his reappearance).

Let us make sure then that with God's Help we protect ourselves from becoming causes of another Karbala in our time.

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- [1.](#) We say in traditional terms because in this post-metaphysical age all mention of essence is philosophical proscribed. The traditional notion of definition is "per genus et differentia" or genus plus differentia. Both these terms, having fallen prey to Humean-Neitzschean-Darwinian scythes, are used only pragmatically. Because the term does not refer to anything tangible it is no longer admissible, in philosophy at least.
 - [2.](#) Shari'ati summed it up very nicely when he said: "Every Revolution has two visages, Blood and Message". Cf. Shari'ati, 'Ali-Martyrdom (Shahadat) p. 109. (Trans by Laleh Bakhtiyar and Husayn Salih), Tehran, Abu Dharr Foundation. n.d
 - [3.](#) The traditional concept of reality is exemplified as far as occidental philosophy is concerned in the works of thinkers as diverse as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, St. Augustine and Aquinas. For a synoptic view see Walsh, Martin J-A, History of Philosophy (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1985)
 - [4.](#) These notions are well expressed in the many works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr. See for instance (i) An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines (Boulder, 1978). (ii) Three Muslim Sages (rpt. Suhail Academy, Lahore 1988) and (iii) Knowledge and the Sacred (rpt. Suhail Academy, Lahore 1988).
 - [5.](#) For a nice rounded view of Cartesiam philosophy see Bernard Williams, Descartes (Brighton, Harvester, 1978).
 - [6.](#) See Ziyarat-i Warith (English translation) in Supplications Prayers & Ziyarats (Ansariyan, Qum, n.d.).
 - [7.](#) See my "Shahadat, Sa'adat Aur Shahadat-i Uzma" in Daily Jasarat (Karachi, Friday Special Magazine, May 8-14, 1998).
 - [8.](#) The full text of the holy verses are given below.
 - [9.](#) On this see the following lucid presentations (i) Mutahhari, Murtaza, An Introduction to 'Ilm al-Kalam translated by A.Q. Qara'i in Al-Tawhid Vol. II no. 2 (Tehran IPO); (ii) S. Mujtaba Mosawi Lari, God and His Attributes, p. 159-192, trans. Hamid Algar (Potomac MD. 1989), vol. I of this work on Foundations of Islamic Doctrine; (iii) Ha'iri, Shaykh Fazlullah, Decree & Destiny. The Freedom of No Choice (Element Books, Shaftesbury, 1991).

- [10.](#) For the text and authenticity of this Hadith see the excellent research articles by the editorial staff of Al-Tawhid (English) appearing in the following issues Vol. VIII Nos. 1– 4 (op. Cit).
- [11.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah Aphorism no. 237 Eng. Trans. Sayyid Muhammad Askari Jafery – (Chehel Sutoon Library, Tehran 1977).
- [12.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah Aphorism no. 290 Eng. Trans. Sayyid Muhammad Askari Jafery – (Chehel Sutoon Library, Tehran 1977).
- [13.](#) Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 17, p. 364.
- [14.](#) Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 17, p. 364.
- [15.](#) Nahj al-Fasahah, p. 504.
- [16.](#) Al-Nuri, Haj Mirza Husan, Mustadrak al-Wasa'il, Vol. 2, p. 364.
- [17.](#) This has been brought out very clearly by 'Ali Shari'ati in his Once Again Abu Dharr, trans. Husayn Salih (Abu Dharr Foundation, Tehran, n.d.)
- [18.](#) Al-Mufid, Kitab al-Irshad (The Book of Guidance), trans. I.K.A. Howard, Muhammadi Trust, London, 1980.
- [19.](#) See Skinner, B.F. Beyond Freedom and Dignity (Knopf, New York, 1971).
- [20.](#) Mere sustained critique is not enough. It must be backed up by original ideation, an ideation rooted in tradition, but also to meet the needs and challenges of the present in this society has a key role to play by encouraging free thought and original ideation.
- We already have contemporary examples in Muslim thinkers like Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Martyr Murtaza Mutahhari, Sayyid Mujtaba Musawi, Lari, as also S.M. Naqib al-Attas, S. Parvez Manzoor, Ziauddin Sardar, Munawwar-Ahmed Anees, Gulzar Haidar and Osman Bakar. Almost all of them have produced works of great merit not because of their Muslim background, since some of them have done so probably because they live in a non-Muslim milieu.

[1] [1]
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