

Reviving Islamic Ethos, A Compendium of Five Lectures

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Murtadha Mutahhari

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In this collection of five lectures delivered in 1970, Ayatullah Murtadha Mutahhari discusses the Persian version of a book by Dr. Muhammad Iqbal in English entitled 'The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam'. It emphasizes the need for proper assimilation and dissemination of Islamic ethos in the process of its revival. He makes the case that it is only in applying the Islamic values practiced by the Holy Prophet (S) and the Ahl al-Bayt (A) that we can really adhere to the original Islamic way of thinking based on subservience to the One and the Only God.

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Editor's Introduction

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

In the Name of Allah, The Beneficent, the Merciful

The College of Divinity and Islamic Studies of Tehran University published a booklet entitled "احياء تفکر" ("Revival of Islamic Thought") in 1982 to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the martyrdom of Ustad Allamah Ayatullah Murtadha Mutahhari, the author of the booklet's five lectures delivered in 1970 at the Husseiniyah Irshad Lecture Hall, Tehran. The lectures discussed mainly the Persian version of a book in English entitled: "The Reconstruction of Religious Thoughts in Islam" by Allamah Dr. Shaikh Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), published at Lahore in 1934.

The publishers of the booklet evidently refrained from editing the tapes or transcription of the lectures beyond insertion of numerous subtitles. Thus, it represented more or less an incoherent transcription of the lectures, in that not even the Quranic or other references were identified. These and other similar deficiencies were reflected in the draft English version given to this writer for editing. It did show the translator's effort to avoid repetitions. Nevertheless, the Editor found it necessary to redo himself the first two chapters completely and revise partly the others.

Despite rigorously sustained efforts, a few references could not be traced at all and the draft English version remained to be fully recast and improved. With the anticipated further co-operation of all concerned, it is to be hoped that the next edition of this booklet will be a fully revised one. In this context, it seems worthwhile to point out the broad nature and content of the difficulties encountered while editing the proposed English version. These do highlight the language and comprehension problems arising from two things.

Firstly, a translator's or an editor's task involves recognition of an author's or speaker's lack of familiarity with the original language of a book, which is indicated by latter's reliance on its translation – with all the incidental merits and demerits. This was the case with Murtadha Mutahhari's evolution of the above-mentioned book by Iqbal.

Secondly a mere linguistic approach is often insufficient, as when any painstaking editor find it necessary to revise an almost literal translation of an originally an unedited and, as such, virtually incoherent contents of a book. In the present case, the crucial points and the statements translated into English required a critical appraisal of their meaning and contextual significance in the light of both Mutahhari's and Iqbal's lectures in Persian and English respectively.

Clearly, one must demonstrate more than mere proficiency in languages, especially when dealing with abstract and abstruse ideas, such as encountered in religious books. It is more necessary when a pliable editor happens to be unavailable to make up for shortcomings on a translator's part.

With regard to the subject matter of the present work, it emphasizes the need for proper assimilation and dissemination of Islamic ethos in the process of its revival. This necessarily implies an adequate indication of the thinking that characterized the Muslims some five hundred years ago, as well as a broad identification of the deviations since then. The lecture of the Iqbal and Murtadha Mutahhari both are hardly enough in this regard.

Iqbal's "Reconstruction..." was found inadequate (for reasons different from the above) by two recent critics of diverse cultural backgrounds. The first critic, a Persian-speaking one, suggests that it was a "Condescending and apologetic study of Islamic Thoughts from the point of view of Western Philosophy"¹. He does not necessary imply that Iqbal was unaware of the "Still-living tradition of Islamic Philosophy" manifest in Arabic and Persian languages in particular. This may be due to the fact that Iqbal wrote in Persian, too.

The other critic affiliated to Western Europe suggests that Iqbal's "Reconstruction" could have been that of "Thought" rather than that of "Religious Thought in Islam". He opines that Iqbal's work boils down to no more than emphasizing that "Islam must be rethought in modern terms".² He did not evidently consider it worthwhile to assign any reasons for this verdict.

On the other hand, Murtadha Mutahhari's "Revival" "evidently presupposes the "Death" of Islamic Thought evolved by earlier generations of Muslims. He invites present-day Muslims to retrieve and adhere to the original Islamic way of thinking based on "Tawhid" or subservience to the One and the Only God. The Islamic values have been obscured centuries ago when the Caliphates began to symbolize monarchies rather than typify any sustained human qualitative excellence (conducive to the divine viceregency on the earth of man), such as exemplified and sought by the Holy Prophet (May God's peace and Benediction be upon him & His family) and the pious Imams (May God's peace be upon them).

Iqbal, too, realizes the paramount importance of the principle of "*Tawhid*". He considers it to be "the foundation of world-unity".³ For, he points out the principle "demands loyalty to God, not to thrones".⁴ He commends its retrieval from the long-accumulated heathenish entrustment of Islam due to the loss of the religion's "universal and impersonal character... through a process of localization", so as to "rediscover the original verities of freedom, equality and solidarity with a view to rebuild our moral, social and political ideals out of their original simplicity and universality".⁵

Iqbal considers that the eternal principles, such as "Tawhid" are necessary for regulating a society's collective life "for the eternal gives us a foothold in the world of perpetual change".⁶ He attributes the failure of Europe in political and social sciences to what appears to be their renunciation of eternal principles. Further, he points out that the Islamic principles should not be "understood to exclude all possibilities of change, which, according to Qur'an is one of the greatest 'signs' of God".⁷ He cites "the immobility of Islam during the last 500 years" as a case in point.⁸ Then, he proceeds to identify "the principle of movement" inherent in Islam as that of "Ijtihad".⁹

"*Ijtihad*" (اجتہاد) literally means a "painsstaking effort" of a positive kind, carried out to the utmost of one's capability. In the context of Islamic *Fiqh*, it refers to any extraordinary attempt at discerning the meaning and practical significance of Sharia's laws and commandments for the purpose of inferring their applicability to changing situations.

In the year 665 AH/ 1245 AD, it was formally announced in Egypt that no school of jurisprudence ('*Fiqh*') other than that of the Hanafi, Shafe'i, Maliki and Hanbali (Sunni Sub-Sects) could be officially recognized. This has had the effect of "closing the gate of Ijtihad" for Sunni Muslims. Thus, their contributions to the Islamic Fiqh over the subsequent centuries were practically confined to summarization and consolidation of the original materials of the four recognized schools.¹⁰ The centuries-long hiatus in the growth of Sunni Ijtihad continued until 1376 AH/ 1958-59 AD. Then, a Fatwa (a religious verdict) was issued at Cairo's thousand-year-old University of Al-Azhar by Mufti 'Azan

Shaikh Mahmood Shaloot. It formally recognized the possibility of Sunni *Ijtihad* vis-à-vis that of Shi'a Muslims that had continued through the centuries.¹¹

Iqbal explains "*Ijtihad*" as follows:

"The word literally means to exert. In the terminology of Islamic Law, it means to exert with a view to form an independent judgement on a legal question. The idea, I believe, has origin in a well-known verse of the Qur'an:

"And to those who exerts We show our path". (29:69).

We find it more definitely adumbrated in a tradition of the Holy Prophet. When Ma'ad was appointed ruler of Yemen, the Prophet has reported to have asked him as to how he will decide the matters coming up before him. 'I will judge the matters according to the Book of God', said Ma'ad. 'But if the Book of God contains nothing (Specific-Ed.) to guide you?' Then I will act on precedents of Prophet of God.' 'But if the precedents fail?' 'Then I will exert to form my own judgement';¹²

Although Iqbal does not specifically refer to any closure of "the gate of Ijtihad", he does not indicate a negative development to this effect, as follows:

"The theoretical possibility of (complete) Ijtihad is admitted by Sunnis, but in practice it has always been denied ever since the establishment of the schools, in as much as the idea of complete Ijtihad is hedged round by conditions which are well-nigh impossible of realization in a single individual. Such an attitude seems exceedingly strange in a system of law based mainly on the groundwork provided by the Qur'an which embodies an essentially dynamic outlook on life."¹³

According to Iqbal, the cause of this "intellectual attitude which has reduced the Law of Islam practically to state of immobility"¹⁴ can be related to:

The divisive impact on Muslims of the early Islamic controversies between 'Rationalist' and 'Conservatives' while the Abbasid Caliphs favored one or the other on a basis of political expediency;

The rise and growth of Ascetic Sufism that had involved an unrestrained (non-Islamic) speculation in thinking that led to rejection of all objective 'Appearance' (ظاهر/Zahir) and concentration on subjective 'Reality' (باطن/Batin), or other-worldliness, leaving the masses to be guided by mediocre intellectuals and leaders:

The destruction of mid-thirteenth century of the 'center of Muslims intellectual life', Baghdad, by invading Tartars, which brought about "a false reverence for past history and its artificial resurrection (which) constitute no remedy for a people's decay", especially in the absence of any realization that "the ultimate fate of a people does not depend so much on organization as on the worth and power of individual man."¹⁵

In the above context, it is notable that Iqbal only indicated what in his opinion were the factors contributing to the stagnation of the “Law of Islam”. Murtadha Mutahhari’s lectures elaborate on at least two of the above-mentioned factors:

1. the ‘rationalist–conservatives’ controversies, and
2. Ascetic Sufism.

Where Iqbal refers to the adverse impact of the controversies only in general terms, Murtadha Mutahhari specifies at least one of the controversial groups; the Murjites. What is more, he pinpoints the negative social impact of the controversies, such as created by the Murjites, in terms of popular scorn for acting upon what one believes in. At the same time, Murtadha Mutahhari fixes the responsibility for the negative ethos on the mostly adverse policies and conditions of the Caliphates since the Ummayads.

Furthermore, Murtadha Mutahhari, well-versed in traditional Shi'a Islamic Learning, views the negative development of the Muslim Ethos as something representing a people's spirit that is “dead”. He explains the abstract idea by citing illuminating references from the Qur'an and the Islamic traditions.

With regard to asceticism, Murtadha Mutahhari emphasizes its Islamic sense of moderation, sacrifice and disinclination to enjoy things in face of others' dire wants. He affirms that asceticism should not be misconstrued in any non-Islamic sense of renunciation of the world and points out that there is no monasticism in Islam.

Finally, one can hardly discern any basic difference in Dr. Iqbal's and Ayatullah Mutahhari's assessments concerning the need for reviving or promoting the original “vital élan” of Muslims. Any seeming difference, perhaps, lies in the things they have emphasized, which ultimately converge on the above-mentioned need. Murtadha Mutahhari stresses knowledgeable and emphatic action as a *sine qua non* of a Muslim's faith.

Iqbal underlines Ijtihad's legislative aspect in the context of a dynamic realization of the eternal principles of Islam in an ideological Islamic State that treats (in the words attributed to the Holy Prophet) the whole of the earth “as a mosque”.¹⁶

Even legislative innovation through Ijtihad ought to be sufficiently capable of enlivening the Islamic spirit of Muslims. As Iqbal has put it in his “Jawid Nama”, a poem named after his son, the question, after all, is: “Art thou in the stage of ‘life’ or ‘death’ or ‘death-in-life’?”

M. K. Ali
Tehran,
16, Jamadiul-Awal 1403.

¹⁶. Sayyed Hossein Nasr: “The Western World and Its Challenge to Islam”, an essay reproduced in the book: “Islam – Its Meaning and Message” Ed. Khurshid Ahmad, Centre of Islamic Studies, Qum, 1978, p. 238

- [2.](#) G. H. Jansen: "Militant Islam" Pan Books, London, 1979, p. 94
- [3.](#) Allamah Dr. Shaikh Mumammad Iqbal: "The reconstruction of Religious thought in Islam" Ashraf Printers, Lahore, Reprint 1982, p. 147.
- [4.](#) Allamah Dr. Shaikh Mumammad Iqbal: "The reconstruction of Religious thought in Islam" Ashraf Printers, Lahore, Reprint 1982, p. 147.
- [5.](#) Ibid. p. 156
- [6.](#) Ibid. p. 147.
- [7.](#) Ibid. p. 148.
- [8.](#) Ibid. p. 148.
- [9.](#) Ibid. p. 148.
- [10.](#) Dr. Subhi Muhamnsani: "Falsafatil Tashree'l fil Islam", Dar al-Kashaf, Beirut, 1952, as quoted in "Risalai-Noveen Imam Khomeinei" Vol. 1, compiled by A. K. Bazaar Shirazi, New Print (1982), p. 34.
- [11.](#) Dr. M. M. Madani, former Principal of the College of Islamic Laws, University of Al-Azhar, Cairo, in an article translated into Persian and published in "Islam A'in Hambastagi", intisharat Be'that, Tehran, pp- 73-91
- [12.](#) Ibid. pp. 148-151.
- [13.](#) Ibid. pp. 148-151.
- [14.](#) Ibid. pp. 148-151.
- [15.](#) Ibid. pp. 148-151
- [16.](#) Ibid. p. 154

Lecture 1: Reviving Islamic Ethos

مَلَّا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَحْلِّ بِيَهُ الْمَرْءُ وَقَلْبُهُ وَأَوْهُ الْيَهِسَادُكُمْ لَمَا يَحْيِكُمْ وَأَسْيَا إِيَّاهَا الَّذِي أَمْنَى إِسْتَجْبِيْنَا لَهُ وَلِرَسُولِ إِذَا دَّ تَحْشِرُونَ. "الْقُرْآنُ: سُ-٤٢/آيَةٌ ٤٢"

"O 'Believers! Obey God and His Messenger when He calls you to that which gives you life and know that God comes in between man and his 'heart' and that He it is to whom you will be gathered." (The Qur'an, 8:24)

Previously, I intended to talk about the philosophy of martyrdom on this day, commemorating the fortieth day of Imam Husain's martyrdom at Karbala, Historically, this is the occasion when those who cherish their empathy for the great martyr's journey to the shrine of Imam Husain (as)[1](#), in the manner of Jabar Bin Abdullah Ansari, the first pilgrim. This had to be postponed until a later date.

During the last three sessions here (at the Hussainiyeh Irshad Lecture Hall, Tehran), it has been suggested that I should give a one-half-hour talk on Allamah Iqbal, the great Islamic thinker, and his outline of 'The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam' a book published at Lahore (about fifty years ago). Considering that the topic merited careful preparation and not one but a series of Lectures, a separate program was arranged, resulting in this and the subsequent lectures.

Iqbal's book: "The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam" is a compendium of seven lectures:

- (1) Knowledge and Religious Experience
- (2) The Philosophical Test of the Revelations of Religious Experience
- (3) The Conception of God and the Meaning of Prayer
- (4) The Human Ego-Man's Freedom and immortality of the Soul
- (5) The Spirit of Muslim Culture
- (6) The Principle of Movement in the Structure of Islam and
- (7) Is Religion Possible?

All the lectures were apparently addressed to intellectual gatherings. Their intellectual content is rather of a high caliber. These are of not only religious, but scientific and sociological interest. The theme underlying these is the same as that of the title of his book. This lecture, too, concentrates on the same subject of reviving Islamic ethos.

Iqbal's close familiarity with Europe was derived also from his higher studies there. His modern education, including scientific orientation, is reflected in his clear thinking, acknowledged by Europeans, too. No doubt, this criticism of European civilization was not based on any vague imagination of the conditions there. Neither is his appreciation of the intellectual and scientific assimilation of modern sciences by Muslim youth.

At the same time, Iqbal emphasized the need to make a clear distinction between the intellectual (or scientific) and the materialistic manifestations of European culture and civilization. He frequently warned against any servile or blind acceptance of the materialistic values of the West with their dire consequences for mankind. He pointed out that intellect alone could not save mankind from the dangers posed by the materialistic west. It is vital for mankind to recognize the salutary impact of spirituality, conscience and faith. Nevertheless, he endorsed European scientific knowledge as analogous to the wholesome inductive and empirical growth of Islamic thought and sciences, inhibited centuries ago among Muslim.

I do not wish to claim that everything Iqbal said was beyond criticism and that his views Limited the subject-matter in any way. Nevertheless, he offered the best he could think of, which per se deserved every appreciation. Now, to quote from his book:

"The most remarkable phenomenon of modern history, however, is the enormous rapidity with which the world of Islam is spiritually moving towards the West. There is nothing wrong in this movement, for European culture, on its intellectual side, is only a further development of some of the most important

phases of the culture of Islam. Our only fear is that the dazzling exterior of European culture may arrest our movement and we may fail to reach the true inwardness of that culture. During all the centuries of our intellectual stupor Europe has been seriously thinking on the great problems in which the philosophers and scientists of Islam were so keenly interested."[2](#)

The import of the forgoing revolves on the distinction he makes between European Science and Civilization. It is predicated on our acceptance of the intellectual and scientific progress achieved in Europe and nothing more.

Elsewhere, Iqbal says:

"The idealism of Europe never became a living factor in her life and the result is a perverted ago seeking itself through mutually intolerant democracies whose sole function is to exploit the poor in the interest of the rich. Believe me, Europe today is the greatest hindrance in the way of man's ethical advancement.

"The Muslim, on the other hand, is in possession of these ultimate ideas on the basis of a revelation, which, speaking from the inmost depths of life, internalizes its own apparent externality. With him the spiritual basis of life is a matter of conviction for which even the least enlightened man among us can easily lay down his life; and in view of the basic idea of Islam that there can be no further revelation binding on man, we ought to be spiritually one of the most emancipated peoples on the earth."[3](#)

Briefly, what Iqbal says is to the effect that Islam offers mankind the spiritual content of religious belief based on revelation, which can deeply influence the human spirit. Accordingly, if Islam offers freedom justice and human rights, these are possibilities based on a guarantee of accomplishment through proper conditioning of the human spirit, whereas the "isms" evolved in or claimed by Europe lack such a guarantee.

He believes that the "isms" have failed to change European nature or make it truly human. In other words, Europeans' concern for human welfare is oriented to what they think, and nor what or how they feel in their inner spirit or conscience. An average European may advocate humanitarianism without necessarily practicing it. He may speak about human rights without the corollary of respect for man. Based on his favorite 'ism', he may uphold human liberty. However, this does not necessarily mean his intrinsic appreciation of or belief in it. He may endorse the need for equality and justice for all men, but not conscientiously.

According to Iqbal, the European perplexity is one of a spiritual kind, arising from the secular nature of democracies, which tend to exploit the poor and favor the rich. All the contradictory "isms" evolved in Europe about any lasting impact in this regard. No wonder, Iqbal calls upon Muslims, especially the impressionable young, to be wary of getting misled or lost by any 'isms'.

Furthermore, Iqbal points out that modern European culture and civilization carries deficiencies which do not occur in the true Islamic counterparts.

For one thing, Islam does not represent a culture based on intellectual and materialistic considerations or values only, as in the cases of Europe. Iqbal then proceeds to explain some basic merits of Islamic culture. To quote Iqbal again:

"...Humanity needs three things today – a spiritual interpretation of the universe, spiritual emancipation of the individual and basic principles of a universal import directing the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis. Modern Europe has, no doubt idealistic systems on these lines, but experience shows that truth revealed through pure reason is incapable of bringing that fire of living conviction which personal revelation alone can bring. This is the reason why pure thought has so little influenced man while religion has always elevated individuals and transformed whole societies..."⁴

True, what the world needs today is a spiritual interpretation, not a materialistic one. Materialism has perplexed mankind, so that no idea can be imbibed, as well as belief. An attitude devoid of spirituality considers everything in the world from a materialistic standpoint. It views the world from a materialistic standpoint. It views the world as if it were deaf, dumb, stupid, foolish, or lacking in purposefulness and even unable to distinguish between right and wrong. Its value judgements are irrespective of morality. It views human life in a goalless perspective, as if man was created in vain and there is no question of nurturing the human spirit.

In the above context, the Qur'an asks:

**"What?! Then, did you think that we had created you in vain and you shall not be returned to Us?
(23: 115)**

Indeed, there is justice in the purpose of creation in which the need for rectitude is not ignored. The world can see and hear. It manifests awareness and wisdom. (The Qur'an, 2:255). Imperative as it is that a spiritual interpretation of the universe is arrived at, this by itself can hardly be effective enough.

With regard to the spiritual emancipation of man, this concept is unlike that of Christianity, for it calls for a belief in the internal and external interactions for achieving comprehensive development of personality. This is necessary for developing or enhancing one's personal talents, as well.

As for fundamental principles, Iqbal refers to those of Islam in the context of achieving human excellence, in the fields of individual and collective endeavor both. After all, Islam's universal significance is widely acknowledged, especially with regard to its spiritual interpretation.

What Iqbal regards as his purpose and believes to be the mission of every enlightened Muslim is promotion of the basic Islamic principles of universal significance. Appropriate concern for the principles is considered basic to human excellence. This aspect is highlighted in his poem, too.

In his poems recited in these sessions here, here, you surely noticed how severely Iqbal deprecated any blind imitation of the West by Muslims. Secondly, he expressed in his poems all that he could and

should have about Islam. Thirdly, he posed the question whether or not a true Islamic spirit is alive among the Muslims today.

Iqbal thinks that a way Islam is "alive" and "dead" both. It is alive in its outward manifestation, such as the call to prayer, rushing to the mosques at prayer times, the funeral rites and the birth ceremony, including the names chosen, such as Muhammad, Hasan, Abdur Rahim and Abdur Rahman. However, the spirit of Islam is practically non-existent among Muslims, it is virtually dead in the Muslim society.

Nevertheless, Iqbal emphasizes that Islam itself is alive. Only the spirit of Muslims and their ethos is to be revived. Islamic revival is meant in this sense. Otherwise, the Qur'an is there, and the Prophet (S)⁵'s Sunnah (Traditions), as well. Both these continue to offer exemplary guidance, while the world had not been able to produce or evidence anything better.

The Qur'an is not something like Ptolemy's Astronomy that could be replaced by a better theory. It is not any rudimentary theory concerning Nature that can be superseded by modern science. This fact testifies to the lasting vitality of Islam.

Then, what is wrong with the Muslims? The trouble or malaise concerns the way Muslims? The trouble or malaise concerns the way Muslims have come to think about Islam and themselves. They treat Islam in an ineffective or dead manner. It is like burying a living seed deep in the soil, in a way wonder, the seed remains unproductive, bringing forth no root, or shoot, or plant, its potential for fruition remains ineffective.

Alternately, it is like a sapling transplanted upside down with its roots in the air and its stem below the soil, so that one may imagine it to be both alive and dead;

Hazrat Ali (as) was deeply concerned about any equivocal adherence to Islam on part of successive generations of Muslims. He considered it analogous to wearing a fur coat inside out. A fur coat is useful in winter, however, if it is worn inside out, the protective warmth that outside fur gives is lost; moreover, a garment worn inside out looks rather comical.

According to the above observation of Imam Ali (as), practicing Islam in an equivocal manner is not right. It is tantamount to following Islam and not professing it at the same time. Any lack of dynamic commitment to Islam would not serve the interests of Muslims. Without a well-motivated adherence to Islam, a Muslim's religious standing is comparable to a pest-ridden and withering tree, which looks almost dead.

Equivocal adherence to Islam comes about when a Muslim fails to assimilate it in full and in depth. When one's practice of the religion is deficient, merely praising Islamic culture and criticizing that of Europe will be meaningless. It will be native to expect the rest of the world to follow us. Even if we succeed in bringing others to our fold, they will only look like us -half dead!

Now let us examine the teachings of the Qur'an which give Islamic thought its intrinsic vitality. The Qur'an invites human beings to imbibe the truths enunciated in Islam, to enliven or revive their spirits (8:24), The Prophet of Islam (S) is like a precursor of the angel, Israfeel, who will blow the horn on the day of Resurrection. For, the Prophet(S)'s call has been aimed at spiritual revival, too.

The Qur'an makes a distinction between the living and the dead, when it says:

"Nor are the living equal with the dead. Lo! God makes who He wills (able) to hear, and you cannot reach those who are in the graves." (35:22)

No learned man or philosopher would claim a self-contained definition of the true nature and purpose of life. However, one can always try to define life based on its cognizable effects. Accordingly, we may consider life to be a reality with an unknown essence, which is characterized by awareness and movement. Thus, the more aware and dynamic a person is the more alive he is.

In other words, if one harbors ignorance and prefers inactivity, one is bound to remain more static. Let us examine whether or not we are more inclined towards vital exertion, or to death-like inactivity.

In the experience of one of my observant friends, our society would appear to treat inertness or inactivity with a sort of respectability, as if it prefers stagnation to any dynamic progress. He illustrated his opinion by referring to his childhood experience of a social phenomenon which he called: 'the logic of the smoky train'. He explained:

"As a child I lived in the town of Rey. In those days we did not have the same railway operations network as we have today. There existed only the steam locomotive haulages between Tehran and Rey. When a train stopped at Rey, urchins gathered around it. They looked at it with awe and wondered at its formidable strangeness. This spell lasted as long as the train stood there, but the moment it began to depart, the children ran behind it and threw stones at it!

I could not understand the children's peculiar behavior, especially as to why they disliked the train when it was moving and looked respectfully at it when it was standing. This was a puzzle for me until I grew up and entered the society at large. Then I realized that 'that smoky train logic' was true of us in general. As long as a person is silent and inactive, he is treated respectfully. However, as soon as he begins to walk away or exerts himself his observers turn hostile enough to maltreat him. This is a sign of a dead society. For, a live society respects its articulate and dynamic members."

So much about our society's alleged aversion to dynamic progress. Yet, the vital need for solidarity in our Muslim society cannot be overemphasized. No doubt, a society 'dies' when act in potentially hostile ways leading to disunity and disintegration. The Muslim society is practically dead today because of the internal differences, which situation is unduly exploited by the sly enemy.

Muslim solidarity is highlighted in the saying of the Prophet of Islam (S), as follows:

"...They are like devout people who are alive with their faith, and cherish their love and sympathy for each other, so that any pain suffered by one is others."

The concerted action arising from mutual understanding and sympathy among Muslims described above is analogous to that blood corpuscles against any infection of the human body. Their action results in fever, when the affected part of the body becomes swollen. Then abnormal temperature affects the entire body as the blood corpuscles intensify their activity against the infection. This is sign of life. All this happens before a physician can properly diagnose the infection, even with the help of his radiologist colleague.

Are we Muslims acting in our society in a concerted manner, so that if one part of the Islamic world community is affected, the others come to its aid and join in restoring its health?

Five centuries ago, Andalusia was an integral part of the Muslim world. It was seized from the Muslims who were taken unaware. The world community of Muslims had failed to realize that they were about to lose a vital and dynamic part of Islamic culture and civilization. Preoccupied as they were with Shi'a/Sunni-oriented internal conflicts, they could not anticipate the Andalusian calamity.

According to Iqbal, the dynamism of the original Islamic ethos lost its momentum about five hundred years ago, so that the successive generations of Muslims become increasingly apathetic towards their common purposes of advancement. The latest in this continuing negative trend has been the noticeable apathy in the case of the Palestine. The world Muslims remain unable to exert themselves in any effective manner of meeting the enemy's challenge.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the early Muslims did achieve world-wide solidarity in response to the Prophet's teaching to the effect that a Muslim who, on being implored by any his co-religionists for help, refused to assist in any way, can no longer be regarded as an adherent to Islam. After all, striving for integrity and wellbeing of the community of world Muslims (even by concerted action to ensure justice and humanity) is essentially a natural function, in the same way as man's body the whole of which "suffers sleeplessness and finds no rest while struggling against the disease."

No doubt, it is high time that we promote the revival of Islamic ethos so that we are able to project improved understanding of Islam. We should critically examine ourselves just in case we have been 'wearing the Islamic garment inside out'. Of course, a person is less likely to see himself or herself as others see him or her. Still, that person may well benefit from a friendly hint that others may offer.

With regard to the fine point raised by a friend here, as to whether or not all this appreciation of Iqbal is a sign of eulogizing the dead, the answer is in the negative, since the greatness of personalities is not affected by any consideration as to whether they are alive or dead. However, what our friend may have implied was the need to appreciate living personages, who are no less distinguished, if not more deserving, than Iqbal.

In the above context, let me mention Allamah Tabatabai, the great scholar, to whom we could not do full justice by way of appreciation in the short time at our disposal now. Suffice it to say that he is a man whose works have such analytical depth that may not be discovered until a hundred years from now. Actually, why should we not now begin to evaluate him? For, he had been a truly great servant of Islam and Muslims.

Allamah Tabatabai has been a symbol of moral courage and intellectual integrity. He attained the noblest levels of piety and refinement. He attained the noblest levels of piety and refinement. I have been in personal touch with him for many years and I have benefitted greatly from this rapport. He has produced one of the best interpretations of the Qur'an entitled: "Tafseer al-Mizan". It is, in many respects, the best of its kind produced by Shi'a and Sunni scholars since the early Islamic centuries. This is so notwithstanding the fact that the Qur'an is so full of meaning and significance that no interpreter can really do full justice to it, while dealing with its particular aspects and indications.

A septuagenarian with even one-hundredth of Allamah Tabatabai's contributions is normally honored and respected by people. Then, the much more esteem Allamah certainly deserves greater recognition knowledge and wisdom. We do not have to wait a hundred years so that we can benefit from his contributions in an analytical manner.

A major difference between the present and the former times is that individuals can be introduced to the public relatively more efficiently through the printed word and mass media. No wonder, Allamah Tabatabai became well-known not only in Iran but abroad, as well, His book "Tafseer al-Mizan" has been reprinted several times in Beirut without so much as an intimation to him. His works had been recognized by orientalists of the West, many of whom made it a point to visit the Allamah.

Allal al-Fassi, a noted scholar of the Islamic world came to Iran recently. From Tehran he proceeded to Qom for an hour's visit with the ailing Allamah Tabatabai, after the visit, Allal al-Fassi came out of the 'Allamah's house deeply impressed and visibly moved.

One of Allamah Tabatabai's last engagements concerned our Palestinian brothers whose rights cannot be denied even by the Americans. The Allamah together with two others (including the author), co-sponsored the opening of several accounts in three banks and their branches, to receive voluntary financial contributions for helping the Palestinian brothers. This was meant to invoke the sympathy and solidarity of all Muslims. In purely monetary terms, the contributions by Iranians could hardly match that of even a couple of American Jews with monopolistic access to usurious exploitation of the world.

Nevertheless, even a ten-Rial contribution is a token of one's faith in Islam. It was said of Prophet Ibrahim (as) that he was thrown into a pit of fire, when a bird was found filling its beak with water and dropping it on the fire! Of what use could be the few drops in extinguishing a fire? However, in this parable the bird (said to be a nightingale) could well be showing its faith and attachment to the Prophet (S).

1. (as): May Allah's Peace and Benediction be upon him/her/them.
2. Muhammad Iqbal: "The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam", Ashraf Printers, Lahore, Reprint 1982, 7
3. Ibid. p. 179-180
4. Ibid. p. 179.
5. (S): May Allah's Peace and Benediction be upon him and His Immaculate Family.

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 Umayyad caliphates.

The Umayyads 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'a 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 Umayyad period, it will be interesting to recall what Abul Faraj Isfahani mentioned in his book: "Aghani" (Melodies). Though an Umayyad himself, Abu Faraj has been considered by the Shi'a 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 Muslim 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 Ummayads were to be tolerated. (See John B. Noss: "Man's Religions", the Macmillan Company, New York, Third Ed., 7th printed. 1967, p. 748) —Ed.

Lecture 3: To Be "Alive" And To Be "Dead" In Thinking

One of the matters described in the Qur'an is the question of life and death, which is mentioned in all its phases for various reasons. It speaks of the life of plants, animals and human beings. But as our discussion is not about life in general but only a particular life, that is, human life, we will pay special attention to it.

Many of us think that as long as a man's heart beats, and the nerves are active and he walks about, he is alive. When can he be said to be dead? When the physician listens to his heart and declares that it has stopped functioning. This is to some extent true, but this kind of life is not a really human life; it is his biological life. In this respect he has a common bond with animals. A dog, too, has a heart, nerves, veins (in which blood flows), organs and limbs. But a human being has another kind of life, as well. It means, according to the Qur'an that a man's heart, nerves and limbs may be active, but he may be 'dead'.

The Qur'an refers to people as dead and alive, and then says it affects those who show a trace of life, while it has no effect on the dead ones. What is meant by being dead or alive? The Qur'an says elsewhere that whoever is born comes into the world with a divine-endowed nature, which seeks truth. But some people this light of inquiry is extinguished, and thus he "dies", though he is biologically alive.

The Qur'an gives another example and says that those who show a trace of life blossom forth in spirit when show a trace of life blossom forth in spirit when they assimilate the Qur'an, since they become susceptible to the same, like a land prepared for the growth of plants and trees.

The Qur'an says:

"Is he who was dead and we received him (through the Qur'an) and gave him a light by which he walks among people, like one who remains in utter darkness and without access to the world beyond him?..." (6: 122)

Another verse of the Qur'an in which the people are divided into two groups of "dead" and "alive", is the one with which I began my discourse...How explicitly and beautifully it (8:24) exhorts to the effect that God and the Prophet invite us to accept Islam for its life-giving quality, since it will receive us.

Islam speaks persistently of life and says the Prophet has brought "life" for you. You are dead now, but you do not know it. Come and submit to this spiritual physician to see how he offers you life.

What does life mean? It means clear-sightedness and ability. The difference between life and death lies in these two. The greater the measure of these two, the livelier is life. Why do we call God alive? Does it mean having a beating heart and blood flow? This meaning does not apply to God; in His case, heart and blood do not exist.

Does life mean breathing and letting breath in and out? No, this is not the meaning of life. These are conditions of life for us, not life itself. Life itself is awareness and ability, we call God alive because He represents Absolute Wisdom and Ability, and because an excellent human life reflects qualities of His Essence, including kindness, mercy, compassion and beneficence. Islam, too, promotes wisdom and ability in actual practice, as it did for many centuries. Therefore, when human thought does not reflect the divine-endowed wisdom and ability, and instead, leads only to aggravation of ignorance and inactivity, it no longer represents Islam.

Islam is the religion of life which is incompatible with ignorance and inability. You can accept this as a general criterion of understanding Islam. In the last session I mentioned action as an element of life in Islamic thought. Islam tries in its teachings to predicate human destiny on action, so as to make man rely on his own will. Islam says that your unhappiness is the result of your own misdeeds.

A human being must rely on his own conduct and personal initiative. What is more explicit than the phrase of the Qur'an which says: "**There is not for man save what he strives for.**" (53:39), No doubt, it involves human dynamism, alertness, insight and ability.

To-day, educators try hard to awaken the sense of self-reliance in man, and rightly do so. The kind of self-reliance that Islam awakens in man is that it puts an end to the hope of relying on everything outside himself, and if there is a hope it must be centered on oneself. Similarly, every connection with other things or persons is through action. You cannot be connected with the Prophet (S) or Imam Ali (as) or the latter's chaste Fatima (as) except through deeds.

I remember a narration from eighteen years ago which affected me deeply. It was an anecdote from the life of the Holy Prophet (S), so fine and meaningful, and peerless in the biography of all human beings. It is amazing how a man in a desert environment, such as that of the Prophet's could act in an

extraordinarily thoughtful manner.

The Prophet in one of his travels with his companions ordered the caravan to stop and dismount. Then he dismounted and started walking in a certain direction. Soon he returned, and his companions supposed that he was looking for a suitable place for camping before he could decide about moving to another spot.

They saw him approach his camel, take a knee-band from the sack, tie the camel's knees and walk on as before. They wondered why the Prophet (S) had walked so far and back for such a trifling task and asked him why he did not order them to do it. The Prophet said: "Never seek help from others even for a small piece of work. Try to do it yourself."

If the Prophet (S) had said this from the pulpit it would not have had such a deep effect, but he said it when it was combined with action. My purpose is to show that one of the principles of Islamic teachings which revive Islamic thought is action and reliance on action.

I want to explain two other points of Islamic morals and educational principles, which are very significant, like a double-edged sword. If they are taught properly the result would be excellent, but if diverted from their course, they will have opposite effects. In my experience many of the moral and educational ideas in Islam have become perverted in the minds of Muslims.

The dynamic concept of reliance on God has an ethical educational meaning in Islam. The Qur'an conveys an extraordinarily harmonious and heroic sense in endorsing absolute adherence to, and trust in, God. The Qur'an brings man into action and removes all fear from him. It teaches us not to fear, but rely on God and go ahead. It instructs us to tell the truth without fearing any might of an enemy.

When you seek to find this kind of reliance in the minds and hearts of people today, you see that it is absent or dead. When we want to be idle, and tend to neglect our duty, we resort to "reliance on God", and use it in a sense quite the reverse of what the Qur'an teaches.

Lecture 4: Islamic Position Concerning Asceticism And Renunciation Of The World

Another aspect that I wish to discuss concerns the word: "ذُحُود/Zuhud" (asceticism). In the Qur'an we do not come across the word in the sense used now. It has been mentioned in the Prophet's tradition and in the narrations attributed to the pious Imams. However, the meaning of the word as used in the Qur'an is not obscure, especially as explained in the sense in which it was used formerly in traditions and annals,

which is different from its current sense. We hear of people, we find that their asceticism is negative, meaning that they are content with a little. But this is not the right meaning.

One of the qualities of an ascetic is to be able in his personal life to be content with a little, which is of great philosophical importance. But not everyone who is content with a little may be called an ascetic. Let me explain it further.

Asceticism is related to worldly goods and riches and even to positions. If you ask whether worldly goods and whether worldly goods and wealth and position are good or bad, the answer depends on their use or purpose? These things are a form of power, but the question is What do you want them for? You may be a slave of your lust and intend to satisfy them by means of these powers. If you are such a person whatever you use to attention your carnal desires (whether it is position, wealth, knowledge, religion or even devoutness) will be bad.

However, if you purify yourself, and do not lust, avoid self-centeredness, and have a divinely worthy social objective, then the wealth, or position which you employ in this way, is used properly. This is worship and devotion, since you are using them for your spiritual goals. This is emphasized by Imam al-Sadiq (as). A number of ascetics of his time discussed ascetism with him. The Imam (as) said: "If what you say were true, then, how is it that after Prophet Yusuf (Joseph) was proved innocent and released from prison. He sought from the Egyptian ruler a position of crucial importance to the whole wealth of the country? Why does the Qur'an mention this without accusing Yusuf (as) of being worldly? Because Yusuf (as) was devoted to God. He wanted that position for divine and spiritual goals, and so his action is not worldly but spiritually motivated."

Islamic men of learning say that accepting position from a tyrannical government is illegitimate, but if his goal in doing so is service, or to help the oppressed, it is not only not a sin, but according to religious verdicts, it is sometimes recommended and sometimes even obligatory. This applies to wealth, too. Why do you gather wealth? If you do not, you are sinful.

Islam is a supporter of two kinds of power spiritual and economic. It believes in spiritual power in the sense that it says you should be morally so strong that you do not pay undue attention to the world and what is in it, so as not to be enslaved by it. Imam Ali (as) says that God has declared in the Qur'an that you are an ascetic when you attain a stage where power over the whole world does not please or enslave you, and even if the world is taken away from you, it does not defeat your spirit. As for economic power, we should try to gain legitimate wealth in order to use it in the right way. When we realize that Islam supports both spiritual and economic powers, then we find that we are "ascetics" in the sense of harboring weakness or remaining actually weak in both spiritual and economic matters.

If we are ascetics who have avoided wealth and economic power, we have chosen weakness. Those who lack riches obviously can do nothing economically and are obliged to stretch their hands before others. We are also spiritually weak when we are brought up to think ourselves ascetic by keeping away

from wealth.

Asceticism in Islam signifies spiritual strength, and having this spiritual strength enables one to make good use of wealth. Those who asked Imam al-Sadiq (as) about asceticism were ignorant of the philosophy of it. They had heard that Imam Ali (as) had been ascetic, and had supposed that an ascetic must, under all conditions, wear worn-out garments and eat barley bread. They were ignorant of the reason for eating barley bread. Imam al-Sadiq (as) explained it for them and told them that Ali (as) just wanted to be human. He was not an ascetic of a type who would choose seclusion.

Ali (as) was more sociable than anyone and was most active socially and economically, and, yet, he did not accumulate wealth. He was engaged in commerce, agriculture, gardening, planting trees, irrigation and in military expeditions. But he remained an ascetic with all these varied activities. Sometimes he went into the orchards of Madina which belonged to non-Muslims who belonged to the Book and worked there for a wage. Then he bought wheat or barley which his wife turned into dough and bread. And when they came across a poor or needy person or an orphan or a captive, they served him in preference to themselves. This was Ali's asceticism.

The asceticism of Ali (as) was based on sympathy, and sympathy is human. He did not even make full use of his legitimate earning. He gave himself only the wage of a soldier out of the public fund and he was not willing to sleep with a square meal. Why? Because his heart and conscience did not allow him. He said: "There are many hungry ones around me. How can I sleep with a full stomach?

He was not referring only to his neighbors. He was thinking of the Islamic lands as a whole in which someone might be in dire want of a loaf of bread. If you find such an example of asceticism, he deserves being honored by the whole humanity. But we seem to call our incapability, immobility and deadness asceticism. But Ali (as) said: "Should I be one of those about whom they say: 'it is enough pain for you to sleep in satiety while others are hungry around you?'"

The Prophet (S) in his old age was exerting himself with a self –sacrificing spirit so much that he was inspired in a Qur'an verse to observe moderation. Once the Prophet 's companions noticed that the Prophet (S) did not that an ill-clad man had come to his house at that hour, and the Prophet had nothing to offer him except his own clothes and this delayed his prayer. The Prophet had sent someone to buy the man a robe. The man bought a fine one for twelve Dirhams. The Prophet (S) on seeing the robe said: "I can do with a cheaper one." The Prophet (S) went out and obtained refund, and on the way back he met a slave girl who was weeping Asked why, she said that she had lost four Dirhams of her master. He gave her four Dirhams out of the twelve and bought two robes with the remainder, giving one of them to the ill-clad man.

Later the Prophet (S) came across the same girl who was again found crying. He asked her the reason, and she said: "If I go back, I will be beaten (because I took your money), " The Prophet (S) offered to accompany her. On reaching her house he shouted his customary greetings from outside. He repeated

his greetings three times as was his habit. The inmates were now sure that the Prophet (S) was there. So they invited him to come in. The Prophet asked why they did not answer his first greeting. They said: "We loved to hear your voice since it brings us blessings, and if we had acknowledged your first greeting, we would have been deprived of the second and the third." The Prophet silently entered and said: "I have come to intercede for this slave girl. If she is late, do not trouble her." They said: "In honor of your presence here, we will set her free." The Prophet (S) expressed his thanks to God that with twelve Dirhams he has clothed an ill-clad or under-clothed man and freed a slave. This indicates real asceticism, piety, sympathy and humanity.

This verse (8:24) shows that Islamic teachings can enliven every aspect of life, when they penetrate one's heart and produce a renewed spirit, insight and activity. Therefore, any other teaching which causes human stagnation or "deadness" is not of Islam. The history of Islam confirms the lively position indicated by the verse through several centuries.

Today we often see that the ideas that we have "derived" from Islam lack life-giving property. Therefore, it is necessary to revise them after finding out if we are possibly mistaken about them. This is the meaning of the revival of Islamic thought. The spectacles we are wearing are not right, so they must be changed for the better.

In the last session I discussed some ethical ideas of Islam, such as asceticism and trust in God. I realized that the discussion was incomplete. So, tonight is of fundamental importance.

The current idea of asceticism is related to worldly matters, love of the world and its renunciation, which sense is not conveyed in the Qur'an. As used in Islamic traditions, especially in the sayings of the Prophet (S) and Imam Ali (as) and other Imams (as). There is no doubt that it has a sublime significance. In Islamic literature, both in poetry and prose, and in Persian and Arabic literatures, asceticism is often mentioned. Now we must see, what our way of thinking about it should be in connection with the evidence and teachings offered by the Holy Qur'an.

The word 'asceticism' originally meant 'disinclination'. But it has assumed a different meaning in Islamic, Christian and other non-Islamic teaching. An ascetic is not a person who is naturally disinclined to things, such as patient who has no desire for food, or someone who dislikes sweetmeats, or an impotent man becoming disinclined to sexuality.

Lecture 5: The Spiritual Goal And Worldly

Aversions

If we admit that Islam favors asceticism, then what is the goal recommended for it? Some people suppose that the function of a religion is something apart from other activities, such as commerce, agriculture and industry, and that it belongs to a different world. They think the task of a religion is simply worship, and that of commerce, agriculture, industry and management are worldly, and for them asceticism is turning away from worldly matters to other-worldly tasks. This is, of course, wrong; for the affairs which are called worldly are recommended by Islam, and asceticism in the Islamic sense does not reject them.

There are two kinds of asceticism which explicit Islamic texts deny, but they exist in non-Islamic ways. One of them is that the tasks of both worlds are separate from each other. Every activity that is related to the worldly life belongs to this world and has no connection with the other world, and those tasks which are not connected with this world, irrespective of having a useful or harmful effect on the worldly life, are called worship, where worship means praying, fasting and self-denial, asceticism could mean abandoning worldly affairs so as to concentrate on other-worldly tasks.

The Arabic dictionary 'Al-Munjad' has defined 'asceticism' exactly in this way which corresponds with its Christian definition. It says: 'Leaving the affairs of the world to have time for worship'. It implies that the tasks of the two worlds are separate, without any connection between, or benefit for, one another. Thus, to be an ascetic meant retirement from society and choosing seclusion in a monastery, a convent or a cave, or to lead a monastic life.

Does Islam accept such a definition for asceticism? No, obviously not. In my book; "Mas'aleh Hijab" (The Question of Veil), I have said that according to some people the philosophy of veil is related to self-denial and monasticism, but Islam has rejected this idea and is wholly opposed to isolation from society.

The Prophet (S) himself said explicitly: "There is no monasticism in Islam." He said that the kind of asceticism his followers practiced was as good as Jihad, or purposeful endeavor. Moreover, Islam recommends as devotion what other religions regard as secular or worldly.

Asceticism as understood in the secular sense does not exist in the Qur'an... In any case what Christian asceticism considers worldly is accepted by Islam as a part of other-worldly things on one condition, that is to be abstemious in the way of God.

Islam does not differentiate between the two worlds in which Muslims believe. In Islam commerce or agriculture has both the worldly and other-worldly significance, depending on the objective, if your trading is legitimate, and not based on usury or unfairness, but intended to gain incomes to avoid beggary and to serve your society and augment its economic strength, Islam considers this as part of one's devoutness. So are agriculture and animal husbandry, if they have a similar goal. All these are

included in devotions to God on part of those who are aware of Islamic goals and pursue them.

In the same way whatever other schools of thought consider as worship are regarded by Islam as a part of worldly life, so that praying and fasting are not only beneficial for the next world, but also for this one.

Thus, we cannot consider asceticism as belonging to one world. Islam has described both legitimate and illegitimate things. It has said that drinking, gambling and usury are forbidden and harmful for both worlds. Islam does not agree with Christian asceticism, and it is unfortunate that many of us understand it in its Christian or secular sense.

There is another meaning attached to asceticism which must be explained. It is not a question of separating the two worlds and their tasks and forsaking the pleasures of one of them for the other, such people do not recommend leaving aside the tasks of life. They say it is a duty which must be fulfilled that we must try to avoid pleasures in this world to prevent to decrease of enjoyment in the next!

Abu Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna) says (in his book: *Namat Nahume Isharat*) that an ascetic is one whose aversion to the worldly enjoyments is geared to attainment of the other-worldly satisfactions. This does not mean however, that one can properly or legitimately exchange pleasures of this world for those of the next. Islam does not teach that if one enjoyed this world, he will be deprived of the next.

Man is not granted enjoyment in the Hereafter because of abandoning it here. Also, it does not mean that each being is allotted a certain amount of pleasure that must be secured here, while leaving other enjoyments for the hereafter. There is no apportionment of pleasures to make up there is no apportionment of pleasures to make up there for a deficit here. Other-worldly pleasures are not the result of deliberate deprivation in this world, but a consequence of other factors.

Imam Ali (as) says in *Nahjul-Balagha*: There are virtuous people who deserve the blessings of both worlds. They enjoy the best food and living here and receive blessing of the next world, too. Islam considers certain pleasures unlawful, and indulgence in them does not only deprive us of the next world's satisfactions, but, on the contrary, results in punishment there. Adultery is one of these. So are drinking, gambling, usury, slander, and lying.

But legitimate deeds are not so. The Qur'an has affirmed that enjoyments which are pure and bring no misfortune for man are lawful. The Qur'an forbids what is not a genuine pleasure. Drinking wine produces evil consequences for the mind, body and society. So does adultery.

The Qur'an says:

"Those who follow the Apostle, the Prophet, the Ummi, whom they find written down in the Tawrat and the Injeel, (Who) commands them (what is) good and prohibits impure things, and removes from them their burden and the yokes which upon them, ...?"(7:157)

"Say: (O' Our Apostle Muhammad!) who has prohibited the adornment (granted) of God which He

has brought forth for His servants...?" (7:32)

Accordingly, a pleasure which is not momentary and transient and has not undesirable results for the body, spirit and society is lawful, as God's Graces granted to human beings? Thus, we are encouraged to benefit from clean and pure livelihoods. Nevertheless, these provisions are not exchangeable as between the two worlds.

Asceticism in Islam is not obligatory, but an attainment towards perfection with a spiritual goal different from the two worldly goals mentioned earlier, It has been recommended to avoid worshipping pleasures and sinking in them, even in lawful ones, which are not forbidden, when abstention would be conducive to achievement of goal.

There are several goals which Islam accepts for asceticism in the sense of forsaking legitimate pleasures. A person may be placed in a situation where others are in greater need than him. What should he do? He shows generosity and self-sacrifice and offers his own lawful satisfaction to others. If he wastes it, he is foolish. But he offers food, clothing, and comfort in order to bring ease to the life of others. This is self-sacrifice and one of the noblest of human qualities. This is an exalted, correct, human asceticism, in the sense conveyed by Ali (as). That is, one abstains but does not waste, and, at the same time helps others.

Does Islam accept this kind of asceticism? Of course, it does. What intellect and sentiment can reject it if it is understood? A religion that does not recommend an asceticism as such is no religion. A school of thought which does not recommend it is not human.

The Qur'an speaking of a number of the Prophet's companions and followers in Madina, says: ***"And those who had made their abode in the city (Madina) and are (firm) in their faith (and) love those who have fled to them and do not find in their hearts a need of what has been given to them (the Muhajirs) and prefer them over their own selves, though their own lot be poverty and whoever is saved from the niggardliness of his self, these it is who are the successful ones." (59:9)***

Imam Zeynal-Abedin (as) observed fast, and ordered preparation of a dish, usually of meat for him. When it was time to break his fast, he came to the kitchen and served several bowls to be taken to the poor and needy, and at the end he kept a small share for himself, Of course in Islam the family has priority over others in partaking of meals, but sometimes when a poor man came to his door, he offered him his own share. This is what is meant by humane asceticism.

Sympathy is another goal of Islamic asceticism. One should be as generous as one can. But sometimes this is of no avail, as when there are so many without food and clothes that one does not have the means of satisfying them all. It used to be said about the people of Sistan that sometime in the past they left their children in the fields like animals for eating grass.

Again, Ali (as) as an ascetic of the first order considers it the duty of leaders to show fellow-feeling and

sympathy at least when they cannot provide material assistance. No wonder, he abstained from eating to be on the same footing as those who may have remained helpless.

Ali (as) says: "God has made me a leader with the special obligation of living like the weakest of my followers in matters of food, clothes and other aspects of life, so that poor encouraged, and the rich seeing me as leader are not deviated by wealth."

There is a story about a great Shi'a clergyman, the late Wahid Behbahani, whose religious class in Karbala was always crowded. He had two sons named Muhammad Ali and Muhammad Isma'il. One day, he saw the wife of the second son wearing a fine dress. He admonished his son as to why he bought such clothes for her. His son answered: "Are such things forbidden?" He said: "My son, I am not saying they are forbidden. I have a different reason for my question. I am a teacher and guide for people who are both poor and rich. Some of them can afford such fine clothes, but many of them cannot. We cannot provide them all with the kind of clothes your wife wore, but there is one thing we can do, and that is to sympathize with them so that a poor man can say to his wife she should follow our example. So, if we dress ourselves like a rich person, we are robbing the poor of their only consolation. Ours ought to be an ascetic life. Any day that others can afford fine garments, we, too, may give ourselves that luxury. "This duty of sympathy is recommended for all, but especially for leaders and guides of people.

The following story is from Nahjul-Balagha: When Ali (as) entered Basra after the victory at the Battle of Jamal, he alighted at the house of Ala-bin-Ziad who lived in a magnificent house. The Imam asked him rebukingly: "What do you want such a house for? You can live in a smaller dwelling. You need a large home in the next world, so you can use this house for that purpose by bringing in guests and serving people."

Later, Ala said: "I have a complaint to make about my brother, Assem." Ali (as) asked what it was. Ala said: "My brother has retired as an ascetic, eats bad food, dresses in coarse garments and has renounced the world." Ali (as) asked to summon him and when he came said seriously to him: "You, who oppress yourself, has the devil misled you? You are too insignificant to suppose that God will rebuke you for benefitting from His gifts. He has created them for His creatures." Assem answered: "O, Imam, you yourself are living like me. My garment is not less poor than yours." Ali (as) said: "You are mistaken. I am a leader, and have a special duty, God has made it incumbent upon us to place our living at the level of the lowest individuals, for, they look to us for sympathy and consolation, when we are unable to help them materially."

Asceticism does not involve separations of the affairs of this world, and the next, it is not because of an incompatibility between the satisfactions of the two worlds, but because of a general or particular necessity, one of which is self-sacrifice when others are in need. One offers help by depriving himself. This is one of the most desirable human qualities, i.e. to sacrifice one's own joy for the sake of others. The Qur'an has praised this quality most eloquently, showing it as a sign of the liveliness of the human

spirit. But the other two ideas of asceticism are devoid of life, since they are based on two wrong assumptions. The first is to consider that devoutness is beneficial for both this world and the next. An ascetic who abandons all activity in this world and retires to a cave or convent hoping to attain the next world, loses the blessings of this world, too. He virtually turns himself into a useless creature. This is dead idea. Another supposition is that God does not grant worldly enjoyment to him who deserves other-worldly joy, or vice versa. According to this belief it is not possible to have a happy life in both worlds, so we must forsake this world for the sake of the next one. This is another dead idea.

But he understands God's Grace and believes in kindness, benevolence and serving others, and thus deprives himself of something in order to give to another, becomes a living creature and attains a higher quality of life.

Sympathy is another basis of asceticism in order to attain a fair condition for human beings in the means of living. It is wrong to have one class of people having all blessings, and another class having all sufferings. I do not mean that all individuals must be at same level, or that a worker and an idle person should enjoy, the same benefits. Individuals vary in their aptitude, ability, work and ingenuity. Life is competition, and he who is more active, should naturally get more benefits. But the stagnation of wealth is through injustice and tyranny and not through effort, ingenuity and competence. And poverty which is not due to laziness, but caused by uncontrollable conditions, should not be allowed.

Imam Ali (as) speaking of why he accepted the caliphate late says that under the previous conditions he was by no means willing to undertake that responsibility. When they insisted on his acceptance, he asked them to leave him alone as they had done before, and offer it to someone else, for, he could foresee the mishaps which would occur. But he thought his duty compelled him to accept it. What duty? One of them was that God had made it incumbent upon the wise followers of Islam to accept the duty of checking excess in wealth and poverty. Was that the only reason? No, fellow-feeling and humane considerations were also involved.

In the time of Imam al-Sadiq (as) a famine occurred in Madina with great severity. At such a time people lose their wits and begin to hoard provisions twice as much as they need. The Imam asked his housekeeper if there was any reserve provisions in the house, and he said that there was enough reserve for one year. But the Imam told him to take all the wheat to the market and sell it. The housekeeper said: "You know that we can't buy back any." The Imam asked: "What do all the people do?" He answered: "They buy their bread, which is a mixture of barley and wheat daily from the market, or only barley bread." The Imam said: "Sell the whole wheat and buy us bread from the market as from tomorrow, for, other people cannot obtain wheat bread, so we can bring ourselves down to their level to show our sympathy and solidarity with our neighbours."

Another philosophical reason for asceticism lies in availing what one is free to do. The Qur'an has never forbidden legitimate satisfaction to man. At the same time, human beings who long to live freely always try to break their chains and fetters. It never says that whatever satisfaction is obtained in a legitimate

way should be deferred for the hereafter.

In this world we have certain needs which we cannot do without, according to the law of creation, we need food and we cannot free ourselves from it. We cannot do without air, and to some extent we cannot do without clothes. These are limitations imposed on us by nature. But there are certain other bonds adopted by man himself which impose limitations on him and deprive him of freedom of action. For example, some people have addictions to something, such as drinking tea, or smoking, without which they feel uncomfortable, and others are addicted to dangerous and forbidden things, such as opium or worse than that.

The more one gets into habit, the greater will be his attachment and enslavement, and the less free he will be. It is not only tea or cigarettes. One may always want a soft mattress or pillow, and he cannot sleep if he is compelled to lie down on a carpet or bare ground. Thus, he is handicapped.

On the other hand, there are people who live a simple life without abandoning the tasks of life. They wish to live simply, have simple food, simple clothes and a simple home. Why? Because they do not want to sell their freedom for anything; the more they are fettered, the more they cannot act freely and without encumbrance. The life of great prophets and social leaders has always been simple, for, if they sought luxury, they had to abandon leadership. A luxurious life is incompatible with an unencumbered activity, liberty and liberality. The first thing that attracts us in the character of the first thing that attracts us in the character of the Prophet (S) is simplicity in his way of living and interacting with others.

These fetters and luxuries that man creates for himself check his progress immensely and bend his back with a heavy burden. Let me choose myself as an example. Suppose I am a well-known clergyman. Should I go on a pilgrimage to Mashhad or not? It is not a simple matter. How should I receive people? What should be the other condition? Thus, the simplest and the most necessary travel becomes a complex problem and so full of limitations that I cannot undertake it readily and conveniently. The Prophet (S) had a simple life, for, otherwise, he could not lead his society. In breaking his fast, there was no difference with other ordinary days; and he came home an hour and a half later after completing his evening and night prayers. His servant, Anas Bin Malik, says that his supper consisted of a bowl of milk and a little bread. Then he began to work. As he ate little, a couple of hours of sleep rested him adequately. Then he spent two-thirds of the night in worship. The Qur'an was revealed to him on these occasions and these places. A Persian poet, Assiruddin, expresses this unencumbered state beautifully in the following couplet:

"Plunge suitably clad in the river of events;

for, an unencumbered state is a pre-requisite for swimming."

If a person wants to swim with his clothes on, he is likely to be drowned. One who does not want to enter social events and desires seclusion, can act as he pleases. But diving into the sea of society requires an unencumbered state. How did Imam Ali (as) live? He described the great Prophets as

follows: "They lived simply; even David and Solomon who were kings did so. David made chain-armor and sold it and lived on its proceeds." He said that Jesus Christ lived so simply that his legs were his means of travel and his hands were his tools and his light was the moon. In this way the Prophets were able to lead men. Such asceticism is still alive, since it is based on a proper philosophy.

For example, Mahatma Gandhi wished to lead India and liberate millions of Indians from the clutches of imperialism. He had no alternative but to adopt the way of prophets, live a simple life, throw a piece of cloth on his shoulder, and tie another one round his loins, and have a goat as his only belonging, and be content with it.

What was his philosophy? On the one hand he is member of a society and wants to save it from imperialism, and on the other hand, his belongings consist of two pieces of cloth and a goat. He tells the Indian people, if they wish to liberate themselves, they should live simply and free themselves from fetters and limitations.

Another notable point about asceticism has to do with exigencies of circumstances. Times vary. Sometimes it is a duty to live ascetically, and at other times it is not. For example, the lives of the Prophet (S) and Imam Ali (as) were different from those of their descendants: Imam al-Baqir (as), Imam al-Sadiq (as), Imam Ja'far (as), Imam al-Ridha (as), and even Imam al-Hassan (as). They all lived more simply and ascetically. The reason for this is explained by Imam al-Sadiq (as).

A Sufi came to Imam al-Sadiq in the first half of the second century of the Hijra and saw the latter dressed in a fine and beautiful garment. He asked why the descendant of a prophet should wear such fine clothes. The Imam asked him to sit down and listen, if he really wanted to know the reason and not to, be demagogical. The Imam gave some explanations which he could not refute. He went out and came back with some of his friends.

The Imam (as) said, "I suppose you wonder why the Prophet (S) and Ali (as) did not wear fine clothes, if wearing such clothes is good, and why I wear them if it is bad." They answered that was what they thought. The Imam said: "You disregard the exigencies of time. It is not a sin to wear fine clothes. God has granted his gifts to mankind to benefit from, and not to waste them. But sometimes conditions make it necessary to forsake them. One of them is that the conditions of life may be hard for all people. In such a society even if our private means allow us to live comfortably, we should not do so, because in doing so we are not showing sympathy to our brothers and other human beings. But when we live under good conditions, there is no reason to forsake fine clothes."

He then explained that the Prophet (S) and Imam Ali (as) lived in hard times. The Prophet lived in Madina which was full of poor people and in a state of war, which naturally created severe economic pressure. Some of his followers were strangers to that town and had no dwellings. The Prophet (S) let them stay in the mosque at first, and then outside of it. They were so poor that they had no clothes to take part in congregational prayers, and sometimes they joined prayers in borrowed clothes.

It is under adverse socioeconomic conditions that the Prophet, on entering his daughter's house and finding curtain, he objected to these. Fatima (as) who knew her father's character well, took off the bracelet and took down the curtain, and sent them to her father, asking him to do what he liked with them. The Prophet (S) at once ordered several shirts or trousers to be made for the poor. That is why Imam al-Sadiq (as) told the Sufis that if he lived under the conditions of his great grandfather, he would follow his example. Yet another reason for asceticism is that if one indulges in material pleasures, he will be deprived of spiritual ones.

There are some spiritual pleasures which increase and exalt our spirituality. For a person who loves wakefulness in night prayers, being awake and praying are enjoyable. A man who overindulges in carnal pleasures can never feel the depth of joy that a devout person secures. But if we stay awake and spend hours joking and laughing and eating heartily, we only tire ourselves and fall asleep like a dead man. Can we then rise at dawn and pray to God? Even if we wake up, we stagger like a drunken man.

Therefore, in order to secure spiritual joys, one should diminish material and physical pleasures. When like Imam Ali one wakes up and glances at God's starry sky and recites the verses of the Qur'an which are the voice of life and rise from the heart, one feels it to be the equivalent of a full life's enjoyment in this world. Such a man has no desire to eat like a glutton who becomes dead in spirit and cannot enjoy worship.

Devout people ignore material pleasures. Let me say a few words about my father, I remember he never went to bed late and he was always awake two hours before sunrise and each night he read one-thirtieth of the Qur'an and prayed in all tranquility. As a centenarian, he never spent an unquiet night. It is a spiritual joy that has kept him up like this. He always prayed for his parents. He had a step-mother who was very kind to him, and he always prayed for her and for all his kith and kin. Such a man must diminish material pleasures in order to secure deeper spiritual enjoyments.

Ibn Sina (Avicenna) says the asceticism of a gnostic is different from that of a non-gnostic. The former nurtures and trains his power of imagination and sensitivity anticipating that whenever his turn comes to stand before God, his spirit is not weighed down or encumbered in matching with that of the celestial ones. This, too, is another reason for asceticism. Thus, asceticism is to be cherished for the sake of self-sacrifice, or sympathy, or for bringing oneself down to the level of the less fortunate, or for remaining unencumbered and free in society, or to be free minded and candid in praying to God, or simply to be alive. Obviously, it enlivens man as it did in the case of Hazrat Ali (as) who consequently possessed moral courage and was a just leader of his society. So, the kind of ascetics who are sequestered, and have no contact with people and retire for worship are "dead" ascetics and Islam does not endorse such asceticism.

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