

By: Dr. M. Mutahhari

Why Lament Over Martyrs

There are people including some sections of Muslims who object to and criticize the custom of lamenting over martyrs, arguing that it is the result of the wrong conception of martyrdom. A comparison is also drawn by them between the Shia custom of weeping for Imam Husein a.s and the Christian practice of celebrating crucifixion (according to their belief) of Jesus Christ with festivities. It is alleged that the Shias weep because they regard martyrdom as something undesirable and regrettable whereas the Christians rejoice at the death of Jesus regarding martyrdom as a great achievement and a matter of pride.

In the first place, it is not known when and by whom the festive celebration of the martyrdom of Jesus was initiated. But it is known that weeping for martyrs has been recommended and initiated by Islam and it is an indisputable act of the Shiite school of Islam.

ISLAMIC TRADITION ON LAMENTING MARTYRS

In the early days of Islam, Hamza Ibn Abdul Muttalib, the uncle of the Holy Prophet was killed in the battle of Ohad. he was given the epithet of the Doyen of the Martyrs. When the Holy Prophet returned from Ohad, he found women weeping in the houses of all the martyrs except that of Hamzah, who was alone for nobody lived with him in his house. The Prophet uttered 'Hamzah has no one to weep for him!' People went and told this to their womenfolk. All the women who were weeping for their martyred sons, husbands and brothers immediately set out for the house of Hamzah and wept there, out of respect for the wish of the Prophet.

Though Islam does not encourage lamenting the death of an ordinary man, the above incident shows that it wants the people to weep for a martyr. A martyr creates the spirit of valour, and undaunted faith in Allah and His justice. It is in conformity with his longing for martyrdom.

The title of the Doyen of the Martyrs was first applied to Hamzah. After the tragedy of the 10th Muharram and the martyrdom of Imam Husein a.s. which overshadowed all other cases of martyrdom it was transferred to him. No doubt this epithet is still applied to Hamzah, but he was the Doyen of the martyrs of his own time, whereas Iman Husain a.s. is the Doyen of the martyrs of all the times, just as the Virgin Mary was the Doyen of the Virgins in her time, and the lady of light Fatima a.s. is the Doyen of wives of all times.

Prior to the martyrdom of Iman Husain a.s. it was Hamzah who was regarded as the symbol of lamentation over the martyrs. Weeping for him, meant participation in a martyr's valour, in conformity with his spirit and in harmony with his longing. Since his martyrdom, Imam Husain occupies this position.

MARTYDOM AN ACHIEVMENT

Islam recognizes the martyrdom as a great achievement as far as the martyr himself is concerned. From this angle, no doubt death is a happy event and that is why, a great scholar Ibn Tawus has said "Had we not been given instructions about mourning I would have preferred to celebrate the days of martyrdom of the Imams with festivity"

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But from the Islamic point of view, the other side of the picture is also to be seen. From the social point of view, martyrdom is a phenomenon which takes place in specific circumstances, and similarly it creates a reaction in society, not depending merely on the success or the defeat of the martyr, but is mainly based on the opinion held by the people, on the respective positions of the martyr and his opponents.

One more aspect of martyrdom is important. It is the martyr's two-fold relationship with the society: (a) his relationship with those who have been deprived of his presence among them; and (b) his relationship with those, who by their depravity, created an atmosphere in which he had to stand against them and lay down his life.

It is evident that from the view point of his followers, a martyr's death is a great loss. When they express their emotions, they really cry over their own bad luck.

MORAL FROM MARTYDOM

The moral which the people should draw from martyrdom is that they should not allow a similar situation to develop, in the future. The idea of mourning, is to project the tragedy as an event which should not have happened. Emotions are expressed, to condemn the villains of oppression and the killers of the martyr, with a view to restrain the members of society from following the example of such criminals. Accordingly, we find that none of those trained in the school of the mourning of Imam Husain a.s. would like to have the least resemblance of Yazid, Ibn Ziyad and the like.

Another moral which the society should draw, is that whenever a situation demanding sacrifice arises, the people should have the feelings of a martyr and willingly follow his heroic example. Weeping for the martyr means association with his fervour, harmony with his spirit and conformity with his longing. Now let us see whether festivity, rejoicing, dance and sometimes even mockery, drinking and revelry as witnessed during the religious feasts of the Christians, are more in keeping with the spirit of martyrdom or weeping and mourning are.

MISCONCEPTION ABOUT WEEPING

It is thought that weeping is caused by pain and distress, hence it is a bad thing. Weeping and laughter are two peculiar characteristics of human beings. Other animals feel pleasure and pain and get happy and sad, but they neither laugh nor weep. Laughter and weeping are the manifestations of intense emotions, peculiar only to human beings.

Laughter has many varieties, which we do not intend to discuss at present. Weeping also has varieties, but it is always concinnity with a sort of sensitivity and excitement. We are all aware of tears of love and longing. When one weeps because of the excitement of love, he feels closer to his beloved. Joy and laughter rather have an introvertive aspect. On the other hand, weeping has an extrovertive aspect, and means self-negation and unification with the object of love.

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Because of his noble personality and heroic death, Iman Husain a.s. evokes the deepest emotions of hundreds of millions of people. The whole world could be reformed, if our preachers could utilize this enormous fund of emotions to bring the spirit of the common man into harmony with the spirit of Iman Husain a.s. The secret of Iman Husain's immortality, lies in the fact that on one hand, his movement was logical and rational, and on the other hand it evoked deep emotions. It is weeping and mourning the Imam's martyrdom that has firmly rooted his movement in the hearts of the people.

(adapted from "The Martyrs")