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In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

Ahlul Bayt Essay Contest

Applicant Information

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Important Notes

- [1] The primary historical reference used in this essay was Mr. Baqir Sharif al-Qarashi's The Life of Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (1st ed) Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2000. All narrations about Imam as-Sajjad (as) and their respective citations were obtained through this publication.
- [2] The abbreviations (*s*) and (*as*) following certain names in this article stand for "*May the blessings and peace of God be upon him and his family*" and "*upon him be peace,*" respectively. Their omission in certain circumstances may be accidental or for fluency, but in any case may God, the Praised and Glorified, continue to shower his blessings and peace upon these personalities until the end of time.

A Look at the Model of Imam as-Sajjad (as) as a Guide for the Elimination of World Poverty

By: Youssef Majid Farhat – Ramadan 1428 A.H. – September 2007

Introduction

As the world turns, humankind's need for leaders and guides who are qualified and capable to solve major global problems is ever increasing. Undoubtedly, one of the world's most pressing social and international issues is widespread poverty as evidenced by the devastating toll it takes in terms of human loss and suffering every day. God Almighty, out of His all-embracing mercy, has sent guides to humanity for the very purpose of enabling mankind to improve its situation through referring to them. However, the models of these divinely inspired leaders will not be of any benefit to mankind until deep reflection upon their lives, recognition of their qualities, and widespread emulation of their positive characteristics is achieved.

The focus of the present discussion is the profound character of Imam as-Sajjad, best known as the "ornament of the worshippers," and the relevance of his character to the elimination of today's widespread poverty and the problems that result from it. Imam Ali as-Sajjad (as) was born in 38 A.H. (659 A.D.) and is given the special title of "Imam," because he was the fourth of twelve universal leaders of mankind sent by God after the Prophet Mohammad (s). Muslim historians report that none other than his grandfather, the Prophet Mohammad (s), named the Imam "Ali" in the form of a prophecy ten years prior to his birth. The Imam's title of as-Sajjad means, *the prostrating one*, and it refers to his intense worship and many prostrations in total submission to the Lord of the Worlds.

The questions naturally arise as to what can be learned from an Imam who lived approximately 1,350 years ago and whether his life is relevant to solving modern-day problems. Suffice it to say that this short work is only a starting point that does not even make up a single drop of the ocean of what can be said about the relevance of Imam Ali as-Sajjad's life to solving modern-day problems.

Discussion & Results

Poverty today

Poverty is a worldwide crisis and humanity is in great need of guidance to resolve it. Billions of human beings residing in often war-ravaged or economically bankrupt nations lack the necessities of life, leading to serious sicknesses and death. Some of the commonplace and preventable consequences of poverty that lead to the death of approximately *20 million people annually* are first and foremost starvation, followed by pneumonia, diarrhea, tuberculosis, malaria and measles [1]. Although concrete statistics on the status of global poverty are nearly impossible to obtain, the World Bank, an umbrella organization of institutions that provide technical and financial services to developing nations, estimates that in 2001, 2.7 billion people lived on less than \$2 a day, and over one billion of them lived on less than \$1 a day [2].

Unfortunately, developed nations cannot maintain the excuse that poverty exists solely because it is impossible to transport enough supplies from prosperous to desperate nations, because poverty is also rampant in the heart of some of the world's wealthiest nations. A walk in downtown Los Angeles or San Francisco would prove this point. Furthermore, developed countries possess the technology and means that make it easy to transport hosts of soldiers and bombs to wage war anywhere in the world, so why would it be impossible to use similar means to send aid workers or airlift supplies to save the lives of starving populations?

Further underlining the irony of world poverty is the little amount of money it would take in the form of charity to cure the world of its impoverishment. In 2002, the United Nations estimated that about \$200 billion a year would free the world of extreme poverty, and this amount of money could be obtained with only 0.7% of the income of the world's 22 most wealthy nations [3]. In other words, the inhabitants of those 22 nations would only need to donate seven-tenths of a percent of their income in order to free the world from its impoverishment.

Charity in the life of Imam as-Sajjad (as)

No contemporary to Imam as-Sajjad (as) paralleled him in generosity. His compassion and desire to help the needy were immense and his well-known deeds and sayings are a proof of his selflessness. Documentation of the Imam's dealings with the poor is extensive, but for the sake of brevity only a few relevant aspects of his personality can be mentioned here: namely, his intense love for secretly and openly aiding the needy and his reverent manners while helping the poor.

The Imam's charity to the poor was great in measure but virtually unknown until after he departed the world, because he loved giving alms in secret. Today, we have two proofs that the Imam would leave his house in the secrecy of the night carrying a bag of food on his back to distribute to the poor. The first proof is that a group of needy people who had customarily received food from an unidentified person at night were said to have stopped receiving their provisions upon the death of the Imam (as) [4]. The second proof is that the Muslims who performed the Islamic ritual bath of the dead on the Imam noticed calluses on his back similar to the rough calluses of a camel. Upon asking the Imam's family about them, his family was reported to have said "they were made by the bag which he carried on his back at night to divide food among the poor" [5]. While having fed but one person in the secrecy of night is an exceptional act that most human beings do not perform, some historians report that Imam as-Sajjad (as) secretly maintained as many as a hundred families in the city of Medina [6]. This claim further demonstrates the Imam's excellence in performing acts of charity.

Aside from his secret distribution of food to the poor, Imam as-Sajjad gave charity to countless people openly whenever he came to know of someone's need or simply for the love of giving charity. In an act of absolute selflessness, Imam as-Sajjad was reported to have given charity by dividing his properties in half, retaining one half for himself and his family, and giving the other half as alms to the poor [7]. In addition, there are countless stories of the Imam regularly giving his money to the indebted, his best clothes to the poor, and his own meals to the hungry right before breaking a daylong fast. Aside from these acts, the following account illustrates the intensity of the Imam's love for helping those in need:

I was with 'Ali ibn. Al-Husayn (Imam as-Sajjad) when a person came and said to him: "I owe four hundred dinars and am unable to pay them and I have a family." At that time, the Imam had no money on him to pay the person's debt, so he wept and said: "It is difficult for a free and believing person to be unable to satisfy the need of his believing brother" [8]

The Imam was so fond of giving money to the needy that when they approached him and he was unable to help them it would cause him to weep! Comparing Imam as-Sajjad to the average American who, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, does not designate more than 0.17% of his or her income as international aid [3] makes it abundantly clear that the Imam's perception of charity was totally different from the norm of today.

Perhaps more profound than the degree of Imam as-Sajjad's generosity was the distinct honor with which he treated the poor. The Imam (as) is reported to have greeted beggars who asked from him by saying, "Welcome to him who carries my provisions to the hereafter" [9]. It is also reported that upon giving a beggar alms, the Imam kissed him so that he wouldn't see the look of utter need on the beggar's face [10]. In his book about the Imam, the respected scholar, Baqir Sharif al-Qarashi, writes:

The Imam, peace be upon him, was very kind and affectionate to the poor and the needy. He asked the orphans, the blind, and the needy to eat with him. He gave them food with his hand [11]... he carried food on his back and took it to their houses [12]. He took great care of the poor and was so kind to them that he prevented the people from harvesting dates at night lest they should deprive the poor of them [13]

Not only did the Imam give charity selflessly, he did so while preserving the dignity and the honor of the recipients. Through acts of compassion, Imam as-Sajjad demonstrated that aid must be conveyed to the poor in a way that is not degrading or humiliating to them. Giving charity in this manner does not only preserve the dignity of the aid recipients, it bestows a sense of dignity to the donor that enriches life beyond material wealth. Thus, the Imam embodied all of the characteristics of kindness and compassion that humankind needs to personify today in order to uproot his inclination toward self-interest and reform the condition of the destitute.

Using Imam as-Sajjad's example to eliminate poverty

Implementing Imam as-Sajjad's model of charity today is highly feasible and would transform the face of the world. Adopting the Imam's model of charity has both practical and spiritual dimensions to it, but for the sake of universalizing the example of this Imam, the practical dimensions will be emphasized and some of the spiritual aspects just briefly mentioned. It is up to the kind reader to explore other works that detail the manifold personal benefits of giving charity *in submission to Almighty God alone*, but let it be mentioned here that serving God alone is one of the most important reasons that the Imam made continuous efforts to give charity in secret.

Following the Imam's example by giving charity on an individual level is the first step toward resolving world poverty. For those who are capable, Imam as-Sajjad's example should be implemented to care for the needy in local communities by physically visiting areas where the

poor are known to live and distributing food and other necessities to them on a daily, monthly, or even yearly basis. As well as caring for the poor in local communities, the Imam's selflessness should inspire every American man and woman to donate a small amount of money to trustworthy organizations that can provide relief to those in need in other parts of the world. To be more specific, as part of one of the world's 22 wealthiest nations, every American should resolve to contribute at least 0.7% of his or her income to foreign relief organizations in order to ensure that they are doing their share to relieve the world of extreme poverty.

As well as giving charity on a personal level, the Imam's model has a critical application on a governmental level that would both save millions of lives and open the door to world peace. No one denies that preserving national security and countering terrorism are significant issues with enormous implications for society today. Despite their importance, all of the efforts to preserve national security that the world has witnessed in the last several decades have illogically involved violating the national security of other nations. Furthermore, political academics agree that most of these same conflicts are motivated by one group attempting to grab resources from another, a process that is totally opposite to charity! By employing Imam as-Sajjad's model for charity as a basis for foreign policy, the dooming noose of war would be completely unraveled, and the major underlying cause of present day world conflicts would be totally stamped out.

Conclusions

Solving the problem of world poverty must be the moral priority of every human being with sufficient means. While other global issues, such as national security and countering terrorism, are important and deserve consideration, it helps keep things in perspective to note that the total number of deaths that have resulted from all modern day violence and warfare combined hardly matches the deaths occurring each year because of poverty. In seeking guidance to solve such a significant problem, the most logical course of action is to turn to Imam as-Sajjad's life and incorporate his illustrious characteristics into modern day civilization on both the individual and national levels.

The great devotion of Imam as-Sajjad to serving and caring for the poor illustrates that charity is the foundation upon which every lasting society must be built. Those who currently live in comfort and ease may initially question such an emphasis on charity, but there is no guarantee that anyone will remain among the ranks of the wealthy forever. Therefore it is in the interest of all people to establish a global culture of charity that would serve as a type of universal insurance for every member of the human race. The time is ripe for humanity to take a crucial step in the way of helping the desperate. The world must resolve to embrace the model of charity that was realized by the life of Imam as-Sajjad (as) – the same model of charity that is enjoined by God Almighty in His immaculate message to mankind:

(As for) those who spend their property by night and by day, secretly and openly, they shall have their reward from their Lord and they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve (Qur'an, 2:274)

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- [5] Al-Ya'qubi, Tarikh, vol. 3, p. 45. (qtd. in Al-Qarashi, 65-66).
- [6] Tahdhib al-Lughat wa al-Asma, 343. (qtd. in Al-Qarashi, 60).
- [7] Kulasat Tahdhib al-Kamal, p. 231. (qtd. in Al-Qarashi, 64).
- [8] Al-Saduq, al-Amali. (qtd. in Al-Qarashi, 59).
- [9] Safwat al-Safwa, vol. 2, p 53. (qtd. in Al-Qarashi, 60).
- [10] Hulyat al-Awliya, vol. 3, p 137. (qtd. in Al-Qarashi, 60).
- [11] Al Majjlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 46, p.62. (qtd. in Al-Qarashi, 61).
- [12] Ibid. A similar narration in Da'irat al-Ma'arif by al-Bustani, vol. 9, p. 355. (qtd. in Al-Qarashi, 61).
- [13] Al-Qarashi, Baqir S. The Life of Imam Zayn al-'Abidin. 1st ed. Trans. Jasim al-Rasheed. Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2000. 60-61.