

Frank Julian Gelli

Forever Karbala

Imam Husayn and the Enduring Conflict



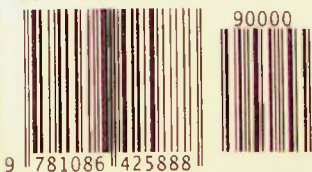
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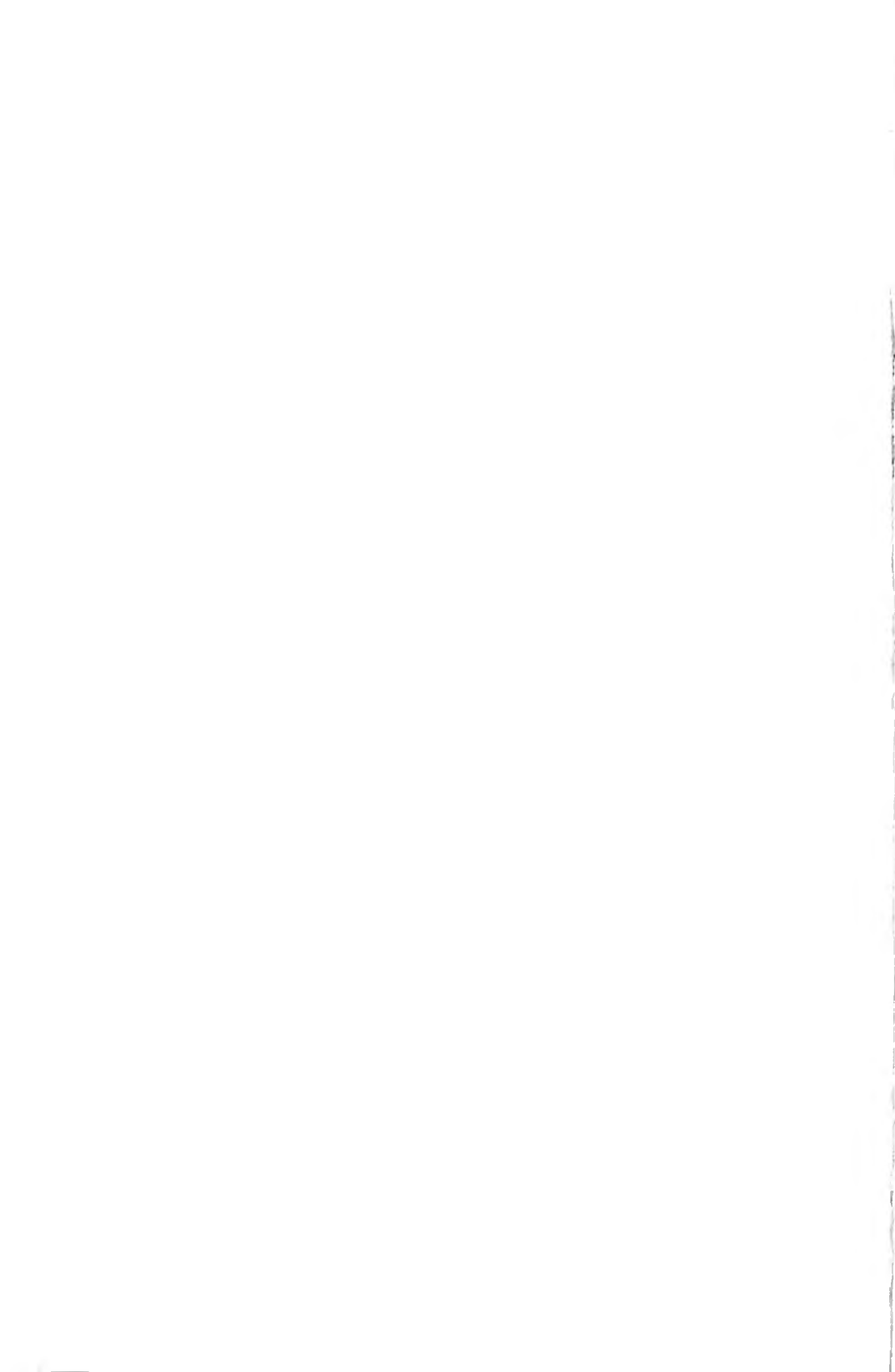
The Reverend Frank Gelli is an Anglican priest working on religious dialogue. A cultural critic, he is engaged in the battle of ideas on the side of transcendence.

This book is a summons to a spiritual alliance. It consists of meditations, illuminations and provocations. It is addressed to all lovers of the Divine.

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FOREVER KARBALA

IMAM HUSAYN: THE HERO OF
THE ENDURING STRUGGLE

By the Reverend FRANK JULIAN GELLI

Motto: '*God is He who knocks down tyrants*' Imam Husayn

PREFACE

I dedicate this book to the memory of a martyr. On 2 January 2016 Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr was barbarously executed by the ruling cabal in Saudi Arabia on trumped-up charges of terrorism. It was a lie. A learned, humble and ascetic-looking scholar from the Shia' minority in Saudi, Sheikh Nimr had shed no blood, nor incited anyone to do it. He was a non-violent campaigner for the civil rights of his downtrodden people, especially since the Arab Spring of 2011. For his pro-democracy activities he was first shot then jailed and tortured over a period of four years, prior to his judicial murder. The royal tyrants have killed his body but they cannot extinguish his immortal soul and spirit. The innocent martyr's sacrifice will not be in vain. Eventually Nimr's righteous cause will bring down the whole rotten edifice of oppression.

Through space and time, I see the example of Sheikh Nimr as linked to that of Imam Husayn. Prophet Muhammad's grandson who fell at Karbala fighting Yazid, the emblematic tyrant and usurper. Husayn was the champion of the wretched of the earth. The maltreated, the persecuted and the exploited of the Islamic *umma*. All the enslaved, the victims of injustice, tyranny and violence. The people inspired by Imam Ali and Fatima Zahra and for whose sake Imam

Husayn fought at the battle of Karbala. An unended, enduring struggle. A battle not exhausted yet. One that will only conclude with the return of Jesus and Imam al-Mahdi. In the Almighty's own good time.

HUSAYN AT KARBALA: THE MOMENTOUS SACRIFICE

What was the battle of Karbala? A mundane struggle for earthly power or a cosmic conflict between Good and Evil?

'Father, the angels cried when Imam Husayn was killed!' a cherubic-looking youth named Hasan told me in Beirut. 'It was the fulfilment of a message. Jibril, the bringer of revelations, had announced it to the Prophet Muhammad at his grandson's birth', he continued. 'In a dream the Prophet visited the Imam the night before Karbala. His grandfather told him of his impending martyrdom. It was ordained...' Hasan was visibly moved. Tears streamed down his smooth and proud face.

Husayn's death in an arid, treeless desert at Karbala is no pious legend but fact. A tragic end that seemed inevitable, given the massive disproportion between his followers – a handful of men, plus women and children - and his foes, an army of many thousands. The outcome was a slaughter and, from a merely human point of view, a crushing defeat. The details are harrowing: the Imam's lifeless body was outraged, stripped, trampled on by horses. His head was cut off, stuck on the point of a spear and taken to the tyrant Yazid at Damascus. Yet...who really won in the year 61 of the Hijra (AD 680) at Karbala?

THE CHRISTIAN WHO FOUGHT WITH HUSAYN AT KARBALA

I owe my joyful discovery of Wahab al-Kalbi to a play. One of a special kind, called Tazieh. A theatrical genre characteristic of Persian culture. To see it, I had no need to fly to Tehran or Isfahan. Only to travel by Virgin Train to Leicester. An English city in the East Midlands, 101 miles North of London. The local community of Khoja Shia' Muslims had invited me to attend their Ashura service. The final culmination of the first ten days of the month of Muharram to Muslims is known as Ashura. For the Shia' faithful, a time of remembrance, mourning and lamentations in condolence for the martyrdom of Karbala. *Ad hoc* passion plays are performed, re-enacting the bitter sufferings of the Imam and of his followers.

Although to Western eyes somewhat simple and amateurish, Tazieh plays were and still are the people's theatre. The actions they enact powerfully affect the spectator. I found myself mesmerised in watching them. It was my first, unforgettable encounter with the sacred drama of Islam. Music, trumpets and drums accompanied the performance. An emotion-stirring feature, also giving the lie to the canard that the Qur'an forbids the use of musical instruments. Battle scenes and sword-play were intensely realistic. So fast and furious at times that 'Do the actors ever get injured?' I wondered. The plot and the characters – the heroes and the villains - of Tazieh are generally fixed but mine had a novel character. A Christian hero called Wahab al-Kalbi. The man who embraced the noble cause of Husayn at Karbala, who fought and was martyred with the Imam.

A moving scene from the play has haunted my imagination ever since. Al-Kalbi after his capture is tied with heavy iron chains to a kind of wooden yoke shaped like an X, like a rudimentary St Andrew's cross. The executioner stands by, ready to strike the victim with a huge axe. The young, innocent-looking Al-Kalbi wears a bizarre body armour, a bloodied collar, while a spiked, Prussian-style helmet lies discarded on the ground. A weeping woman kneels at his feet, her hands covering her face. Nearby is the hero's shield, with a cross engraved on it.

That bold detail struck me. A cliché assumption is that Muslims are deadly enemies of the Cross, that they cannot stand even the sight of it. But there before me was one of the chief heroes of this artful Islamic play, portrayed with the emblem of his faith in full evidence. Further, whether the stagers of the play were aware of it or not, to me as a Christian the scene, with its bloodied clothes, paraphernalia and symbolism, was reminiscent of a crusader's death. The difference is that this brave Christian fought and fell for the cause of Islam - for Imam Husayn's righteous jihad. A daring visual deconstruction of age-old prejudices and platitudes.

As I watched, it seemed to me the action unfolded not on that crude stage but on another, grander plane. It was supernal struggle between good and evil. The actors were like angels and demons. The costumes, the long robes, the words and music transported me to another world. Heavenly voices sang of the impending defeat that was also a victory. Husayn, beautiful and pure despite the blood bespattering his face and cloak, held in his hand a flaming sword. '*Zhulfikar, my father's sword*', he proclaimed, in a voice like a peal of thunder. I then saw the halo surrounded his head, like a saint's nimbus, the circle of light in a medieval portrait. A majestic angelic shape, like a giant, accompanied him. I heard

a summons, an invitation to worship and adore the glory of Him on whose behalf the Imam fought. Next I noticed that near the angel was the much smaller figure of Wahab al-Kalbi, the warrior of the cross. Shapely and fair, like a Swede, he sang of the mighty deeds of Jesus, the conqueror of hell and then intimated to me, in a whisper: 'It was the Messiah's will that I should fight this fight. The Imam's cause is also his cause. Yazid and his henchmen serve Satan and his minions. Their victory will be hollow. Behold, eternal fire is their destination...'

In this vision the forces of darkness, Husayn's foes, were less well-drawn. An army of shadows. Like unfinished, grotesque join-the-dots pictures. Ghosts that reality refused to give substance to. Only one face stood out as distinct. Yet, indescribable. How can you portray emptiness? Sheer...what? 'I am Shimr', a rattle-like sound came out of him. I shuddered...Husayn's assassin! He who shed the Imam's immaculate blood. A sight hurting any decent person's eyes. Horrible.

Was it really a vision or a fantasy, *'un sogno ad occhi aperti*, as the Italian expression goes? I shall never know.

Shimr, the foul arch-villain, he who slew the already badly wounded Husayn, was clad in a weird, lurid armour, clinging unto him like a reptile's scales. In fact, he *was* a snake. Hissing and delighting to bite, tear and murder...

Husayn was on his way to Kufa in Iraq, invited by people who wanted him as their leader. But others, more cautious, had warned him against going. 'The people of Kufa are a fickle and unreliable lot...Even if their hearts may be with you, their swords are not', al-Farazdak, a poet, had told him. His own cousin, the prudent Ibn Abbas, had advised him: 'At least

don't take the women and children with you'. They all had failed to dissuade the son of Fatima. Why? Total trust in a righteous God who is on the side of justice – that must be the answer. Thus Husayn and his followers had no fear of laying down their lives for a holy cause.

How to live happily, justly, in an unhappy, ungood society? Under a corrupt and corrupting ruler? That is the question Husayn had to confront. Not an abstract, philosophical subject, to be parsed in an academic seminar, but a practical, life-or-death matter. He had refused to give allegiance to the usurper Yazid. The challenge now was what practical action to undertake. I imagine he long deliberated it within himself. What should the Imam do?

Some options:

- 1) To wait, hoping the problem went away. Perhaps Yazid would suddenly die and a better ruler would succeed him? But that was no genuine possibility. Yazid, bad and decadent as he was, only instantiated the misrule, the false Islam of the Umayyad dynasty. His successor might have been marginally better but, equally, he might have been much worse. Moreover, what was at stake was the essential matter of the Khilafa. Who had the religious right and duty to look after the well-being of the community? Husayn knew the Caliphate was his birth right. It belonged to him and his family, as his grandfather, the Prophet Muhammad, had many times and in many ways signified.

2) To follow the strategy of his brother Hasan. To go in for a truce and remain neutral. Pay homage to the Umayyad usurper and wait in relatively safety in Medina. Why? Hasan had his reasons. He might have felt the conditions for opposing the Damascus usurper were not propitious. Perhaps the people were unwilling to fight – or so Hasan thought. Further, his temperament was peace-loving, some claim. (Not that it benefited him in the long run, as Shia tradition maintains he died a martyr, poisoned by order of Muawiya.) Peace is a desirable aim but the question is: peace at what price? Can tyranny be bargained with? Anyway, the circumstances had changed, Husayn believed. His supporters had invited him to Kufa and proclaimed their willingness to challenge Yazid.

3) To flee. To migrate. To travel to another land to establish his authentic Khilafa there. A strategy followed many years later by Abd al-Rahman, the last surviving Umayyad. Escaping from Damascus, he made his way to Cordoba, al-Andalus, in Islamic Spain, where he set up his own version of the caliphate. That might have appeared to Husayn a tempting choice. Migration would not have solved the problem, however. Creating a virtuous community while allowing the vicious one to continue perpetrating its crimes was beneath the Imam's dignity. Suitable for a man like Abd al-Rahman, not right for someone in whose veins flowed the blood of the Prophet of Islam.

- 4) To go forward and fight, against all the odds. Husayn's character was not foolhardy. He was aware of the dangers of an armed revolt to himself and to his followers. He had shown patience for nearly eleven years after his brother's death. '*God is with the patient*', he well knew, from the text of the Qur'an (*Al Baqarah*, 2:153). And patience is what he had long practiced. Had a time for action finally come?

The Imam must have examined these courses of action – perhaps others – until, I like to think, resolution came. Not from men but from on High. Words from the Qur'an resonated within him, clear and distinct: '*And fight them on until persecution is no more*'. (*Al Baqarah*, 2: 193) That decided him. The die was cast. Come what may, he had to stand up to Yazid.

The Damascus Caliph – a usurper of that title - was Yazid. The son of Mu'awiya, the ruler of Syria. The man who had become Caliph after Husayn's father, Imam Ali, had been assassinated. Immensely astute and cunning, Mu'awiya came from the influential mercantile aristocracy of Mecca. His father, Abu Sufyan, was the Prophet Muhammad's implacable enemy. His mother's name, Hind, is notorious. She deeply loathed the Prophet and had Hamza, Muhammad's uncle, killed with a javelin. She then cannibalised his corpse. On entering Mecca Muhammad had sentenced Hind to be executed but eventually, desiring reconciliation, he pardoned her. Notably, after the Prophet's triumph both Abu Sufyan and his wife, for opportunistic reasons, embraced Islam. The phenomenal success of the Arab conquests had brought them and their followers much power and rich pickings – a huge Empire. That is why the Meccan privileged clans were determined to cling on to their loot.

The initial Caliphate had not been hereditary but Muawiya contrived to establish his family as a dynasty. Was this Islamically lawful? Many argue that to have kings in Islam is a contradiction in terms. Like having another Pharaoh or a Shah. Emblems of arrogance and deceit. There is an Arabic word in the Qur'an which bears on this. The word '*mulk*'. It means royal power or perhaps just political power. Yes, it applies to Almighty God – the point being that the only real '*mulk*', the only supreme political power belongs to God. Kings in the plural, '*muluk*', exist (though on the whole the word '*mulk*' seems to refer to pre-Islamic ideas of power) but the only '*muluk*', the only kings who may be acceptable are those who submit to God's power. That rules out tyrants like Muawiya and Yazid. Because they don't govern in accordance with God's mandates. They may exercise plenty of brute force but not lawful authority. Still, crafty Muawiya persuaded many to recognise his son Yazid as his successor. Only Husayn and a few others declined, keeping a lofty, disdainful silence. The megalomaniac ruler was not a man to forget that.

YAZID: ANOTHER KING HEROD

Did Wahab al-Kalbi, on his way towards Karbala, feel he was going to fight another King Herod? Did he believe the Umayyad Caliph Yazid to be as vile and wicked as the bastard Edomite adventurer the Romans had made King of the Jews? Herod, the monstrous tyrant who sought to murder the child Jesus? King Herod – was he a type, a hint given beforehand, of vile oppressors to come? Like Emperor Nero? Or Yazid's Ummayads? Or Stalin?

The gruesome tale is set out in St Matthew's Gospel. After baby Jesus was born, Persian wise men, the Magi, came to Palestine to worship him, guided by a star. Aware of ancient prophecies, the Magi wished to render homage to the infant Messiah. The news alarmed Herod. Like all tyrants, he had a bad conscience and feared divine justice. Faking friendship, he asked them to go and let him know where the holy child was. The Magi were no fools, thank God. They did indeed find and adored the Messiah in the town of Bethlehem but did not inform the tyrant. Then the enraged Herod committed a monstrous crime. Hoping to murder Jesus, he ordered the killing of all the male children of Bethlehem who were two years old. A genocide termed 'the massacre of the holy innocents', often chillingly portrayed in Christian art. Painters have shown the assassins stabbing the children, the piles of tiny, pathetic bodies, wounds gorily depicted, lay lifeless on the ground. Mothers, maddened with grief and fury, trying to stop the murderers by scratching their eyes out. All to no avail. Mercifully, it was not God's will that the Messiah should die there and then. Warned by an angel, Joseph and Mary had taken their holy baby and escaped to safety into Egypt.

In persecuting Jesus, King Herod was the agent of Satan. The murder of the innocent is a crime that cries to Heaven for vengeance. Little children are vulnerable beings, harmless and guiltless by any definition. How many died at the hands of Herod's butchers in Bethlehem? The Ethiopian and Greek Churches say fourteen thousand. Probably an exaggeration but the numbers count less than the atrocious crime itself. The holy innocents are the first fruits and flowers of Christian martyrdom. Also, a foreshadowing of Jesus's own sufferings and of many other witnesses in future centuries.

Wahab al-Kalbi knew his Scriptures. He knew the story. He knew what manner of inhuman ruler King Herod was and how he had the Bethlehem babes murdered. He realised through the figure of Herod and his barbarities how sanguinary, cruel and murderous tyranny is. He joined the dots: King Yazid, the debauched Damascus tyrant, was another avatar of King Herod.

The theatre is not part of indigenous Islamic culture and tradition, some claim. That resistible idea led Jorge Louis Borges, the celebrated Argentinian fabulist, to compose a beguiling story, '*Averroes' Search*'. He imagines the philosopher Ibn Rushd in the Arab city of Cordoba, al-Andalus, labouring to translate Aristotle's treatise, *The Poetics*. Two obscure words in the text baffle him: tragedy and comedy. He cannot make heads or tails out of them, because they correspond to nothing in his experience. According to Borges no one in the whole world of Islam could have explained to Ibn Rushd the meaning of those key terms, without which exact translation of the *Poetics* was impossible. Because 'Islam knows not the theatre', Borges mistakenly adds. Frustrated, the philosopher eventually completely mistranslates the two elusive terms. Tragedy he renders as panegyrics and comedy as satires and anathemas. To

compound the blunder, Ibn Rushd declares that the Qur'an is filled with tragedies and comedies! A pathetic faux pas. Replicated by Borges' own error a thousand years later. Had the great writer known of the existence of the Persian form of drama called Tazieh, the native, sacred theatre of Islam, he would not have got it so wrong.

Pundits like to compare Tazieh drama to the Passion Plays of the middle ages. Dramatic representations of the sufferings of Christ during his trial, passion, crucifixion and death. Modern versions are performed during Lent, as a prelude to Easter. One was staged in St Nicholas Church, a parish where I ministered. Sadly, I saw little emotional participation by the audience. No one seemed moved by the drama. Two girls yawned many yawns. A far cry from when, as a boy growing up in Rome, I watched dramas performed by the Italian theatrical outfit D'Origlia-Palmi. They came into Catholic parishes and staged plays about Christ's Passion or the lives of Saints like of St Catherine of Siena. Snobbish critics damned the plays as crude and primitive in style and dialogue but to me they were not. The playwrights knew their audience and went for the jugular. Satan's flashing dark eyes and his ghastly gnashing of teeth as he tempted St Catherine – you couldn't forget them. The actor who played him conveyed a true embodiment of evil. Naturally, I reacted by identifying myself with the saints and cursing, even stoning inwardly the devil, like the pilgrims on the Haj do at Mecca. I wept at the suffering of Jesus on the Cross and I exulted at the miracle of the resurrection. That's why I can understand and sympathise with Tazieh drama.

The theatre is indeed part of Western culture, going back to the ancient Greeks. But is theatre at bottom a form of voyeurism? The audience and the stage are sharply separated. They sit in the different part of the building – even

the word *auditorium*, suggests a place when the audience merely listen, watch and look on. Spectators sit in more or less comfortable chairs, gaze at the stage and laugh or cry or yawn, according to what happens onstage, well removed from them. At the end they melt away, amused or moved, more or less satisfied. Is that it? What about the theatre making a radical impact? Effecting change in the real world. Like starting a rebellion against tyranny. Is that possible?

Greek drama aimed at catharsis, a purgation of the emotions of the viewers, but that could only obtain in the context of the ancient *Polis*, the city, a cohesive form of urban life that has no analogue in the modern West. Some playwrights and drama theorists have been painfully aware of theatre's impotence to transform reality. Breaking down the barriers between stage, actors and audience was the buzzword of a certain avant-garde. Bertold Brecht, George Grotowski, Peter Brook, Dario Fo, Jean Genet, Peter Weiss and others tried to shake spectators out of their armchair slumbers. Quirky plays like Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and Weiss' *Marat/Sade* provided a kind of template for political, subversive theatre. But only that section of theatregoers that sympathised with progressive causes would have been affected and stirred to revolutionary action. Moreover, audience participation was still at the level of voyeurism. No real change in the minds and hearts of spectators was achieved.

Muslim drama, Tazieh, is different. It is emotional, gutsy and involving. It affects the spectators to the point that some have attacked the actors playing the bad guy afterwards. Tazieh theatre, unlike Western forms, is intrinsically revolutionary. Because it is about the blazing revolutionary fire that begun at Karbala and which is not extinguished yet.

A WORD GRAVELY MISUNDERSTOOD: JIHAD

In his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Czech writer Milan Kundera discourses of words misunderstood. He might have given 'jihad' as an example. Google it and you'll see pictures of sinister hooded men waving submachine guns. As if jihad was *ipso facto* a synonym for terror, suicide bombers, Wahhabism, hostages, beheading and so on. Actually, a misunderstanding.

Jihad does not primarily mean violence, military aggression or bloodshed. The word comes from an Arabic verb, *jahada*, that means striving or struggling. It is based on the three-letter verbal root J-H-D. So a friend spoke of his pregnant wife engaged in the jihad of childbirth. And I have heard Arab Christians from Lebanon talking of their jihad or efforts in daily life. A Muslim can do jihad', can strive with his wealth and property in many ways, having nothing to do with war. Further, in Islam jihad also refers to an inner battle against one's own lower drives and desires. A form of inner self-discipline. Notably, the great mystic al-Ghazali never alludes to jihad in the sense of an armed struggle. He only uses it in its spiritual meaning.

Can you have a Christian jihad? I don't know what the *ulama*, the scholars of Islam, would reply but I believe you can. Because I have done it. As a priest, it has long been my quixotic ambition to summon Muslims to a jihad. On Sunday 11 November 17, by John Nash's ornate Marble Arch, based on Rome's Arch of Constantine, I addressed a vast crowd of Muslim faithful, intent in the observance of Arbaeen. That's 40 days after Ashura, marking the martyrdom of Imam Husayn at Karbala. The world's largest religious gathering,

larger even than the Mecca haj, the Arbaeen pilgrimage is snubbed by the Western media. Pity, because it is kind of an interfaith affair. Not only Shia people participate in it but also Sunnis, some Christians and even Hindus. It gets remembered all over the world. As it did by Hyde Park.

From the podium I told my hearers the story of Wahab al-Kalbi, the Christian who achieved the crown of martyrdom by fighting jihad alongside Husayn at Karbala. They liked it and cheered. However, later I got a message by a puzzled Egyptian Copt - I'll call him Boutros - who had been in the crowd. He said:

'Father, you should know that often jihad means war. In the past Turks and Arabs fought many wars, many jihads, against Christians, In Europe and elsewhere. You can't approve of that kind of jihad against your fellow Christians, can you?'

I could have told Boutros that in history there have been occasions when Christians and Muslims have fought jihad together against common enemies. Moroccan troops served under General Franco against communists and atheists in the Spanish Civil War – maybe a less than ideal example... I contented myself with answering this way:

'Dear Boutros, of course Muslim empires like the Arabs and the Turks struggled against Christian empires like that of the Spaniards and the Austrian Habsburgs. And Prince Eugene of Savoy, an ancestor of mine, led the Austrian armies in some of those battles. But bear this in mind: the key word here is not jihad but empire. Empires is primarily what the parties involved were. Religious faith was the ideology that fuelled and sustained their bloody endeavours. Yet, like for all empires, greed, robbery and plunder were the essential drives. That is the opinion of an eminent Christian theologian,

St Augustine. 'What are great empires but bands of robbers?' he questioned. Likewise, democracy, human rights and 'civilising mission' have been invoked by the British and French empires to justify colonial aggressions, exploitation of 'lesser people' and races of a darker skin. I suspect someone like Mahatma Gandhi would say the real problem is not jihad but imperialism. Which is not to say an ugly tyranny should not be opposed, when justice demands it. Like Imam Husayn did at Karbala in combating the usurper Yazid. And that is what my speech was all about.'

Wahab al-Kalbi was engaging in jihad. A jihad of opposing evil and of promoting good. Imam Husayn stood for a good cause, while Yazid embodied tyranny. Wahab had made the right choice. As many a good Christian should.

Christian jihad. No, not a contradiction in terms. Especially if the weapons used to fight it are similar to the weapons Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the World, used when he walked the earth. Preaching, teaching, healing and admonishing. Sometimes wielding the whip and driving the wicked merchants out of God's temple: the world.

I am convinced good Muslims and good Christians can fight jihad together. Here and now. In Britain and in any other country on earth. No need to imagine anything violent or bellicose. Together we can run programmes to house the homeless, help refugees, feed the starving, shield the vulnerable from persecution and demonstrate for the rights of Palestinians. A few years ago, in a region of England hit by flooding, local mosques and parishes banded together to bring relief to old people stuck in their homes. Members of the two religions strove, made combined efforts together in doing good works. An exemplary episode. That is part of the meaning of doing jihad. A humble, unspectacular one but one

ever so important, to give the lie to the toxic clichés that the two universal faiths are fated to clash.

Since my time as a chaplain at the British Embassy in Turkey, I have been fighting my own jihad. By promoting and participating in religious dialogue. Between Muslims and Christians. It is a jihad of intellectual exchange, of debates, conferences, lectures and above all of learning from one another. Sounds harmless, costless but it isn't. Not always. They disliked me at the Embassy, partly dominated by a Masonic clique: 'This Padre likes Muslims too much...' they whispered behind my back. After I got back to England I received hate mail from Christians who have accused me of being not an Anglican priest but - would you believe it? - a Muslim in disguise. A kind of mole intent in undermining the Church!

Way back I revealed how my Kensington parishioner, Diana Princess of Wales, told me she wanted to marry a Muslim, Dodi al-Fayed. Because of that I have suffered verbal attacks and even burglaries. On the plus side, my non-violent jihad has brought me the sympathy and friendship of many Muslims. Something for which I am immensely grateful. One of the greatest privileges I have been blessed with has been when Muslims have asked me to pray for them and their relatives. In Islam there are the statutory '*Salat*' prayers ordained in the Qur'an but other prayers exist, called *Dua*. Meaning invocation or supplication. 'Will say *Dua* for my sick daughter, Father?' Muslims have asked me. It always moves me when that happens. I confess, I am less than good at prayer, especially prayers that consists in asking God for something. To me, it is more spiritually congenial to pray prayers of adoration, without pestering God to grant me things. Whenever someone asks me to pray for them, however, I never fail to do so. Because it is awesome

obligation. So, here is my proposal: a jihad of praying for one another. Muslims pray for Christians and vice versa. For that purpose I set up a tiny prayer fellowship, the Arkadash Network (Arkadash means 'friend' in Turkish). The aim? To get Christians and Muslims to pray for one another. Some of us pair up with a partner of the other faith. Mine is a lady of Turkish origins who lives in Germany. Fatima is her name. She is my spiritual sister. Not an intellectual but a practical person. Fatima taught me what a beautiful word jihad is. Nietzsche, I think, said that:

'The tragedy of life can only be justified as an aesthetic experience'.

Well, if Nietzsche is right...jihad for me is like that aesthetic experience.

How could anyone object to a jihad like that? A jihad of helping others, a jihad of friendship, a jihad of mutual prayer? It is imperative to rescue the word from the aberrant uses fanatics have made of it. Jihad is not violence. Jihad is striving to do good things. To pray for one another. To wish the other well. This is not just an abstract, intellectual perception. It is inspired by the example of Wahab al-Kalbi. That remote Arab follower of the Cross helped me to understand that jihad can be a way to love.

WAHAB AL-KALBI RIDES ALONG ON HIS WAY

Was the solitary knight perhaps tempted to shun his impending martyrdom? Wahab al-Kalbi was only human. Though the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak. Did then Christ's voice speak to Wahab, as he deliberated, and told him: 'Go and fight. Fight for righteousness and truth against lies and tyranny'? Well, why not? The historian Hugh Kenney does not pull any punches in describing Husayn's enemies, the Umayyad Caliphate at Damascus, in strong words. 'Forces of godless oppression'. Hence Husayn, the righteous opponent of Umayyad rule, the professor says, 'became the symbol for the sufferings of all the weak and the defenceless'. The cause of freedom and justice, in other words. That is a worthy banner a good Christian would naturally have rallied to. Once he had recognised what Husayn stood for, there is nothing intrinsically implausible in Wahab deciding to fight for the Imam at Karbala. So, I imagine a scene like this taking place:

The desert air must have been very clear when Wahab first saw Husayn and his little band of followers approaching Karbala, the place of their martyrdom. What thoughts passed through his mind?

'What are these people doing? Don't they know Yazid is powerful and ruthless? They will be no match for Caliph's armies. Certain death awaits them. They have women and children...I must warn them.'

And so Wahab spurs on his camel. He rides up towards the strangers. They look friendly. He is about to ask: 'Who is your Amir?' when he realises the question is superfluous. A handsome olive-skinned man amongst them stands out. His high forehead is domed, his beard black, luxuriant and his eyes flash like flames. He speaks. His voice is authoritative yet melodious. He is Husayn.

'What do you seek from us, o stranger?' he asks.

'How singularly sweet is this Prince's voice!' Wahab wonders.

'I...I am here to warn you'.

'Warn me? About what?'

'Well...the danger you are incurring...Don't you know thousands of armed men have been dispatched from Kufa to fight you? They will crush you. You and your followers. Women and children, too. Expect no pity. That is what I wanted to tell you.'

The Imam is unruffled. Calmly, he responds: 'My brother, do you know who I am?'

'I do not know your name but...clearly you are a noble lord. Your figure, your demeanour, your voice...you are no ordinary person, no. Maybe you are a great prince? Or...a king?'

Husayn shakes his head: 'There are no kings or princes in Islam. All Muslims are brothers. All equal. My name is Husayn ibn Ali. My father was the rightful Khalifa, the Prophet's successor. My mother was Fatima bint Muhammad, peace

and blessing be upon him. Of whom the Prophet said: "Fatima is a piece of my flesh". On that flesh, on the Prophet's lap my brother Hasan and I played when we were little. He loved us very much and did my brother and I loved him back. These my followers belong to *ahl al-Bayt*, the Household of the Prophet. I am going to reclaim what is mine from that vile corrupter, Yazid. And to put an end to his wickedness. It is God's will.'

Wahab trembles. Because of the dignity, the nobility of the man speaking to him. But also because mention of Yazid tells him that the little party is doomed to a momentous sacrifice. Tears well up in his eyes.

'You are not a Muslim' Husayn observes. Equably, without hint of hostility or menace. Simply stating a fact.

Wahab is startled: 'You are right...I am a Nazarene. A follower of Jesus. How did you know?'

The Imam smiles: 'Never mind how. I do know. Your people are a people of the Book. You love Prophet Jesus. I love him too. I have no enmity for Christians, be aware of that. And you look like a good, righteous man. You should join us. My fight is your fight, too.'

Wahab lowers his eyes. The figure before him fills him with awe. To join a Prophet's grandson! Sounds fine but...a foreboding assails him: 'They are going to perish. Like lambs to the slaughter. Not many will survive. Yazid's ruthless army will make mincemeat of them. I don't want to die...What will

be of my wife, my children, my mother...all my family. Don't want to shun his call but...'

Yes, al-Kalbi knows in his bones what Imam Husayn's earthly destiny is going to be. It is then he hears an inner voice, as if out of a luminous darkness, enjoining: 'Do not shun this call. Go and fight for this pure Amir, o soldier of Christ. His cause is God's cause. People yet unborn will learn of your sacrifice at Karbala. The name of Wahab al-Kalbi will presage a future league, an alliance between Cross and Crescent. Don't hesitate. Go!'

This intimation al-Kalbi cannot withstand. He realises he is predestined to fight and fall with Husayn at Karbala. Cheerfully, he spurs his camel into the little band of the Imam's followers, looking forward to his impending suffering and martyrdom.

GOD IS HE WHO KNOCKS DOWN TYRANTS

There are many types of mosquitos. As many as 3500. Also. There are several kinds of tyrants. From outwardly enlightened ones, like Catherine the Great, to grim mass murderers like Mao, Pol Pot and Saddam Husayn. Yazid was a despot but of a particular type. He was a hedonist. A pleasure-seeker. One who drank intoxicating drink in public, kept a pet monkey, enjoyed lascivious singing girls and the company of dubious characters - things like that. The kind of wealthy fellow who is glimpsed lounging around Mayfair. In the exclusive gambling clubs frequented by Russian oligarchs, Chinese billionaires and Gulf sheikhs. Yazid was like a mega-rich play boy. Objectionable, flawed, imperfect, yes, but a tyrant? Really?

Perhaps worse than a tyrant. Yazid, as Husayn saw, was a corruptor. A serious one. And corruption – *Fasad* in Arabic – is one of the gravest crimes in Islam. That the *khalifa*, the representative on earth of the Prophet Muhammad, a righteous and austere hero, should be someone like Yazid was an insult, a grave offence to the faithful. Further, the corruption he embodied appealed to hedonists, those inclined to a life of softness and ease, the very opposite of the virile virtues requited for jihad, for struggling in the way of God. Yazid's character complemented and aggravated the injustice that was the *raison d'être* of his regime. Think of him as someone Western media would fancy. A fashionable, snazzy, agreeable leader. A liberal, modern Muslim. One the BBC and the Financial Times would approve of.

In a letter still preserved Husayn describes the principles of the Imamate. God had bestowed on the household of the

Prophet a special status. The descendants of Ali and Fatima were entrusted with the leadership of the *Umma*. The Prophet's family was a channel through which grace, ethics and love were imparted to all the people of Islam.

In the *Summa Theologica*, a vast compendium of wisdom, St Thomas Aquinas debates what to do with a tyrant. His definition is terse and simple. A tyrant is the enemy of the common good. One who attacks the fundamental well-being of society. St Thomas assumes a ruler who sought to undermine the faith, or the rights and prerogatives of religion, is a tyrant, because religion is the spiritual bond that bounds together a human community. A leader who threatens that bond constitutes a lethal threat to the common good. The tyrant must first be excommunicated – cut off from the Sacraments and the life and rites of the Church. Thus Pope Innocent III deposed England's King John for acting contrary to the interests of the Church. Excommunication also released the ruler's subjects from any oath of allegiance. It was a feared and very effective weapon against the abuses of a tyrant. The only way the outcast ruler could get his power back was to repent, beg forgiveness and do penance. Which is what King John did.

After Karbala, many faithful Muslims felt that the forces of ungodliness had contrived to destroy the much-loved grandson of Islam's Prophet'. The humiliated, the oppressed and the insulted of the *Umma*, the grassroots people of Islam, henceforth regarded Husayn as emblematic of their sufferings, as well as of their hopes of redemption. Contrariwise, his antagonists, the Umayyad dynasty of Damascus, are unlamented.

TWO ENCOUNTERS

Standing on Acton Town Tube platform one Friday afternoon, I was waiting for a Piccadilly Line train. Clutching a Teach Yourself Arabic book, I was muttering a few phrases to myself when a man spoke to me: 'Are you learning Arabic? I can teach you.' I looked at him. A tall, bearded, friendly-looking elderly man. The broad, smiling face showed a set of flawless white teeth. He wore a long white cloak and a green turban. 'Oh, kind of you', I replied, genuinely pleased. And 'Where are you from?' I asked. He hailed from Yemen. Worked in London as a mechanic. We chatted about this and that. His mosque was in Hounslow. Told me he found that the people who knew most about Islam in his mosque were English converts. 'Are you a Muslim?' he inquired. 'No. A Christian, but I have lots of Muslim friends'. And I added that many of the Muslims I knew were Shia'. A shadow came over his face. He twisted his lips. His friendly countenance was replaced by a kind of snarl, then he said: 'My English isn't good enough to explain how bad those people are but this I can tell you: whatever you do, keep away from the Shia'! As a train pulled unto our platform, the man, without another word, stepped into a carriage and vanished from sight, looking distinctly disgruntled. 'He looked like a nice person', I said to myself: 'Shame he should be so narrow-minded towards member of his own faith. But then what right have I to judge him? How many Christians look down, despise or even hate members of other denominations? Protestants vociferously condemning Catholics and vice-versa? Have I not

done that myself in the past? Those who live in a glass house should not throw stones...'

Weeks later I was shopping for groceries at Marks & Spencer's Food Hall in Ealing Broadway. At the checkout, I was about to pay but I couldn't find my credit cards or cash. I searched my pockets until the realisation dawned that before going out that morning I had changed my jacket, forgetting to take my wallet. 'Sorry, can't find my cards. I have no cash on me' I explained to the cashier. She looked sceptical. Thought I could read her mind...a likely story! So, there I was, people behind me in the queue getting impatient. I was about to give up and abandon my groceries when the man just behind me stepped in: 'Wait! Don't leave your shopping. I'll lend you the money.' I was stunned: 'I couldn't really...' I stammered. 'No. Don't mention it. Say nothing about it. Return to me the money whenever you like.' I looked at him. A short, middle-aged, Asian-looking man, sporting a grey goatee beard. Quite an ordinary cove.

After he paid, I asked his address so I could reimburse him. He scribbled details on a piece of paper torn from a notebook. His name was Husayn. '*Barak Allah fik!*' – God bless you, I told him in Arabic. 'You speak the language?' he asked, beaming. 'Only a bit. It's a beautiful language but difficult for me'. He agreed, smiling, and added that he wasn't an Arab but a Muslim from Pakistan. Hailed originally from Lahore. That gave me the opportunity to mention Kipling's glittering novel, *Kim*, which I love so much and whose opening scene is set in Lahore. Husayn told me he too liked Kipling, his imperialism notwithstanding. That took the conversation on to another

Kipling's tale I am fond of, *On the City Wall*, with its description of the ceremonies of Muharram and Ashura. That pleased him a lot: 'I am Shia'. Do you know about Imam Husayn? What he means to us?' I assured him that I did and that indeed his very name had led me to speculate whether he might be a Shia'. He said he was delighted I was well-informed about Islam and about *Ahl al-Bayt*, the Prophet's family and descendants. Before we parted he related to me a hadith concerning Imam Husayn. 'There was an old beggar, a Christian, who had no food. Husayn gave him generous alms. Someone in the Imam's entourage then remarked on the beggar's religion: 'It would have been better to feed a Muslim, rather than that *kafir*. So many Muslims go hungry. Why give alms to a Christian?' Husayn replied: 'It is because that old beggar is a Christian that I gave him money. His Prophet, Prophet Jesus, peace and blessing me upon him, is also our Prophet. And Jesus once said that whenever you feed a hungry person it is as if you fed him, Jesus himself. See? It is as if I was feeding Prophet Jesus in feeding that man.'

A lovely story. Is it a true hadith? *Sahih, hasan or da'if*? I have tried to find out but without success. Does it matter? Even a narrative with poor credentials can convey a fine spiritual meaning. That one made me ponder on whether I would have been as selfless with a stranger in need, whatever his religion, as Husayn had been with me. I am not so sure...certainly that Husayn had implicitly taught me, a Christian and a priest, a lesson. Generosity is an important virtue in Islam, the hadith made sense. And one of Allah's names or titles is '*al-Kerim*' – the Generous One. A Christian can only approve.

Husayn from Lahore and Frank from Rome parted by Ealing Broadway Tube station. Next day, I sent him the sum I owed. He thanked me with a very effusive message. Told me he was soon going back to Pakistan on business. I have never heard from him again but I often remember that kind Husayn in my prayers.

YUNUS' MESSAGE

A pious Shia lady emailed me after I addressed the faithful on Arbaeen procession. She said that on the battlefield of Karbala Husayn, before being martyred, recited a verse from the Qur'an. From the tenth sura, ayat 71. Noah speaks. Although mentioned elsewhere in the Book, in that passage the Prophet Noah tells his people: *'Give me no respite'*. Puzzling words. The idea, the woman explained, is that Noah's person and message constituted a stumbling block and an offence to the sinners to whom God had sent him, in order to exhort them repent. That infuriated them and, in their hatred, they plotted against him. The holy man however remained fearless. 'Sentence me to death if you wish. Give me no respite, do your worst, he challenged the wicked bunch. God will protect me.' I grasped immediately why the Imam, as the bloodthirsty enemies sought his life, felt this verse applied to him.

In the Bible the story of Noah is told in the book of Genesis. The earth was so corrupted and full of violence that God decided it was time for a reckoning. That is why he sent the Flood. I told the lady I was impressed that the passage Husayn recited is from the Sura Yunus. An envoy of God whom the Bible calls Jonah. You learn about him in the short book which bears his name – only four chapters. God had sent him to

preach repentance to Niniveh, a city notorious for its vices. At first Jonah was reluctant to risk his life, so he fled. On a sea voyage he clashed with the sailors. As the ship was tossed about in a storm, they took him for a jinx and threw him overboard. Then a big fish, probably a whale, swallowed Jonah up. He lived three days and three nights in the whale's dark belly. From that darkness the man of God prayed a moving prayer to his Creator. The prayer was answered – the fish vomited Jonah out unharmed.

Later, the reference to Sura Yunus haunted me. Then I recalled how Jesus once had referred to the Old Testament prophet. St Matthew's Gospel shows Jesus preaching to the people. Hypocrites in the crowd fake friendship and ask him for 'a sign from Heaven'. The Messiah sees through them and rebuffs their insincerity: 'This evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.' A prophetic hint. Alluding to what the wicked were plotting – the Crucifixion! Like Jonah, Jesus would 'perish' inside the whale's belly but, after three days, he would arise again as the victor, in a glorious resurrection.

A tortured and convoluted analogy? How does the Jonah image relate to Husayn? The Imam would have known what the Qur'an says about Yunus. After death comes the resurrection. He who glorifies God, even in the darkest situation, cannot be defeated. Likewise, Husayn's vicious foes have not overcome. The Imam has.

Dearest to my heart is another reference to Jonah. I came across it in the pages of the famous Muslim historian al-Tabari. In downtown Rome I was browsing inside the smart Feltrinelli Bookshop, by Piazza Colonna. By chance my eyes fell on thick, pale-grey paperback cover. Bearing the title '*Vita di Maometto*', a Life of Muhammad. A translation from

Tabari's massive historical works. I bought it and devoured it avidly. One passage I shall never, never forget, as long as God grants me life.

It concerns an episode happened to the Prophet, Husayn's grandfather, before the Hijra. As the Quraysh clique plotted against him, Muhammad went – on foot, Tabari points out - to the nearby town of Taif, South of Mecca, in order to seek allies and help. Three brothers were the town's chief rulers, Habib, Masud and Abd Yalil. The Prophet addressed them kindly, from the heart, but they answered rudely. 'If you are God's Prophet, what need do you have of our help?' one rebuffed him. Another mocked: 'If God had entrusted someone with a prophetic mission, why wouldn't he give it to one of the top men of Mecca, instead of a beggar like you?' And they told the Prophet to get out of the city. Tabari adds that the three hard-hearted characters are alluded to in the Qur'an, Sura 43, ayat 31. 'Why hasn't this Qur'an being sent down to an important man of the two cities?' Muhammad then asked: 'If you refuse to help me, at least be discrete about this journey, so that I may return to Mecca without danger.' But the brothers grew more obnoxious. Summoning the local riff-raff, they incited them: 'Throw this Meccan fool out of our town. He mustn't spend the night here.' The Prophet, already tired because of his long march to Taif, despite the rabble hounding him, could not walk fast enough. The scoundrels became even more violent, struck Husayn's grandfather with their fists and hurled stones at him, hitting his thigh and causing him to bleed profusely. At last, exhausted, wounded, his clothes bloodied, Muhammad managed to elude the howling mob. Outside Taif, under the burning sun, hungry and thirsty, the Prophet rested a while and cried. Then, Tabari relates, Muhammad, fearing for the fate of the people of Taif, prayed this stupendous prayer:

'Lord, do not punish them, because they do not know I am your Prophet'.

Near the spot where Muhammad had stopped there was a vineyard, belong to some of his relations. It was the time of the grape harvest and his relatives were there but they, afraid of trouble, did not wish to approach him so they told a Christian slave, Addas, to give the Prophet some grapes. 'Where are you from?' the grateful Muhammad, asked him. 'From Niniveh' Addas replied. 'The city of my brother Jonah, son of Amittai', the Prophet observed. 'Who are you and how do you know of Jonah?' Muhammad answered him: 'I am a Prophet, Jonah too was a prophet. All the prophets are brothers.'

Tabari's narrative continues but this will suffice. Significant not only for the moving episode of the hurt Muhammad who prays for his persecutors – reminiscent of Christ's similar prayer in St Luke's Gospel – but also for the mention of Jonah. By a Christian slave who relieved the hunger of Husayn's grandfather. Yes, the same Imam Husayn who recited the verse of Sura Yunus. Correspondences, spiritual analogies, sacred clues, intimations and signs from on high. Our life is full of them but sometimes we are blind, we cannot see them, even if they are before our noses. In this case I did. I knew the Almighty had made me read that passage for a purpose...

A friend had invited me to share in an *Iftar*, a breaking of the Ramadan fast, at his mosque. Prior to that, the faithful listened as if mesmerised to a *khotba* about Karbala. The sheikh's speech was interrupted by many *salawat*. My only reservation was in sensing about me, I felt, a certain atmosphere, an almost palpable desire for revenge. The warning of St Paul then arose before my mind: 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God'.

Later, over a cup of tea, I put my doubts to the sheikh. He listened thoughtfully then gently replied: 'Yes, you are right. Revenge is not good. However, you must not mistake justice with revenge. People here are hankering after justice, righteousness, not revenge. They have no desire to avenge themselves on Yazid. It would make no sense. He and his henchmen are long dead and gone. It is present wrongs, present oppression and injustice that they resent.' That made a lot of sense.

What went on at Karbala? What is its significance? On one level it was the culmination of a struggle for power. Who was to rule the Muslims? Husayn or Yazid? The descendants of the Prophet, of Ali and Fatima, or those of Abu Sufyan and Hind? (Can't think of that nasty couple without visualising Hollywood actors Michael Ansara and Irene Papas in the riveting 1977 movie 'The Message', depicting the rise of Islam.) The Shia' faithful perceive the battle as something more than unfolding on a human, mundane plane. It was a heavenly pre-ordained event, a spiritual combat, the earthly manifestation of a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Under the opaque veil of mere contingent history, Karbala was as supernaturally crucial for human destiny as Waterloo and Stalingrad in the secular realm.

Are these remote and exotic events of no or little significance for the materialist West? Maybe once but no longer. Muslim communities, now a firm and permanent reality in Europe, are understandably stirred and excited by the old emotions. The civil war raging in Syria – fought almost at the doors of Europe - is partly between factions whose banners are those of the antagonists at Karbala. Shia' people

now suffer from endless terrorist attacks throughout Islam. Passions will run high during the days of the next Ashura.

AL-WAHAB'S VISIONARY RECITAL

Was al-Wahab making amends for Christian warriors to come? As he travels with Husayn's little band towards Karbala, I imagine him undergoing temptation. A desert spirit, a demon or evil jinn tries to divert him from his mission.

'What are you doing?' The silky, reasonable voice whispers: 'Are you mad? You are young and want to die? Look at this pathetic lot you have joined. They stand no chance against Ibn Ziyad's troops. Your sacrifice will be pointless. Even a hero senses when the situation demands retreat. It is the sensible, reasonable option, no? Just turn quietly back and melt away into the desert. Go back to your wife, your children, you mother and your sisters. You have your all life to look forward to. The taste of freshly baked bread, the warmth of your spouse' flesh, her soft lips, your children's laughter, your church, the fellowship with other Christians at Holy Communion, your friends, your home. Come on, leave this doomed expedition. Return home. You will watch with pride your children growing up, getting married, giving you the joy of grandchildren. You'll be playing with them, delighting in becoming a father once again. You'll grow old peacefully and happily and when the Lord calls, you'll depart serenely for the world to come, towards Christ's loving embrace. Do you

really want to forsake all that for the sake of...what? A desperate, doomed undertaking? A revolt of embittered hotheads? Fighting for a stranger, a man whose faith you don't even share? Doesn't make any sense. Save yourself. Leave!'

The voice sounds so sensible, so persuasive that Wahab's resolve is a bit shaken. 'There is a lot to what he says...' he finds himself pondering. Until he seems to be hearing another voice. A good jinn, his guardian angel, his conscience?

'Another one was tempted in the wilderness before you, Wahab. Satan came to him three times. Very very attractive suggestions. Miracles, worldly power, all the kingdoms of the earth were dangled before his eyes. Yet, he turned them down. He scorned the lures of the evil one. Jesus told Satan to get off his back. Are you, who claim to be a Christian, going to fall short? To allow this wretched second-rate devil to lead you astray? To win?'

Wahab gets the message. He stops his ears, brushes the tempter off and rides on. But the mischievous jinn isn't one to give up easily. He tries another tack. Transports the Christian on the magic carpet of the mind through time and space. To a place where Muslims and Christians are engaged in bloody struggles. Palestine. The Holy Land, The age of the Crusades. Where they slaughter each other in the name of God. Amongst the Crusaders the most dedicated, devoted and fanatical are knights wearing a large red cross on their breast. The Templar Knights. Warrior monks. Holy killers. Exempted from the usual church penalties on men who those who shed blood. When they kill a Saracen, a Muslim, the Templars do

not feel themselves to be killing another human being. Instead, they are slayers of evil. And they are formidable fighters. Ruthless. When, after a long siege, they take Jerusalem by storm from the Muslims, they slaughter everybody, indiscriminately, so that they waded up to their knees through blood.

'All right. You really want to fight. To be a martyr. Fine. A commendable aspiration. I wholeheartedly approve of it but look! Those men still to come, with the large red cross. They are Christians too. They will fight against your faith's deadly enemies. Those who hate Christ. Muslims deny he is divine. They are infidels. Unbelievers. They lack the faith that saves. At best, they are heretics. Their Qur'an denigrates the crucifixion. How can you delude yourself you are going to gain the crown of martyrdom by fighting in their ranks? For this odd character, this Husayn's suicidal cause? You'll be better placed, more in line with your good intentions if you turn away from them. You can't be a crusader, yet. You'd have to wait five centuries. But you can join the Byzantines. Enlist in the armies of the Caesar of Byzantium. His name is Constantine. The fourth of that name. Your Muslim chums made war on him. They wanted to conquer Byzantium – four times they tried - but Constantine fought them back. He bravely repelled the Saracens. A saintly Emperor, now sponsoring a great church council engaged in condemning the false teaching of those who say there was only one Will in the Incarnate Word. You see? The Emperor of the Romans is a better, more successful and holier leader than this ill-starred Husayn. Should you fall in battle while serving Constantine

you will go straight to Heaven – that makes sense, does it not?’

A tempting proposal. And a dangerous one. But Wahab’s good jinn isn’t nodding. He is quick to counter it, with another narrative: ‘Well, not the whole story. You have omitted crucial details. Constantine’s enemy was the ruler of Damascus, the usurper Muawiya. The man who had schemed all the way, undermined and denied Imam Ali’s title to the Caliphate. Muawiya was his foe. That wicked character is the unlawful ruler the Caesar of Byzantium is combating. And Muawiya’s soldiers were led by his son, Yazid – despite the latter being too weak and effete to achieve anything. That’s why the Muslims had to give up. God willed that the city of Constantine should not fall into the hands of so unworthy a brood. Now Imam Husayn, this brave and rightful Prince, the true leader of his people, is on his way to Kufa. Invited to be their true and legitimate *khalifa*. You should better keep this in mind as you deliberate as to what to do...’

Wahab is not like a chrome-plated, flawless movie hero. He is human. He can be prone to self-doubt. He has his insecurities and his weaknesses, like any normal human being. He does not seek to immolate himself, does not want to lay down his life for no reason. Or a bad one. Yet, he does not have to spend much time in deciding what to do. Husayn’s cause is just, righteous. That he knows. How can justice contradict his own Christian faith? *‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied’*. He remembers Christ’s words from the Sermon on the Mount. What’s more, Wahab perceives the purity, the

chivalry, the sanctity emanating from Prophet's grandson. He and his family have long been persecuted by the Damascus pseudo-Caliphate. He feels Christ's words apply: *'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'*

The Christian hesitates no longer. The mischievous Jinn is dismissed. The good one has made his case and won. Wahab spurs his horse and rides on with Husayn towards Karbala. Towards suffering, martyrdom and heavenly glory.

WARRIORS OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD

The image of angels crying at the death of Husayn haunts me. I can't get it out of my mind...What are the tears of the angel like? Not like normal, human tears. More like a flood. Streaming down from Heaven, washing over the whole human race, another Noah's flood. Purifying the righteous and drowning out the impious and the wicked...

I was musing on this while staying with friends in the seaside town of Bournemouth when I noticed their young son watching a computer game.

'Jamie, what are watching?' I asked the boy, visibly absorbed before his laptop.

'Angel Wars' he replied.

An animated series on DVD. Armoured beings of light fighting demons in a remote universe. Good versus Evil. With biblical undertones. A bit of a cult game, Jamie said. I let him go on enjoying himself. Does he know about real angels? The real McCoy? Their real battles? In this world of ours? He should. Education, education, education, an earthly demon once said. The existence of angels should be part of the school curriculum!

From balmy Bournemouth to Oxford, city of the golden spires. My mentor Dr Khadijah Safwat hails from Sudan. She is scholar who taught at the University. Quite old and ailing but still as bright as a button. Over a cuppa in the Ashmolean Museum Café I tell her about Jamie's fascination with angel wars. She smiles warmly, nods assent and plunges straight in the subject:

'Angels fought at Badr. One of the most epic events of nascent Islam. During a pause in the fighting, when the enemies of the Muslims were resting, angels descended from Heaven. A sight that filled the pagans' hearts with terror. So they raised the camp and left.' After taking a sip of her mint tea, Khadijah continues: 'The angels' role was not restricted to fighting. A brave Muslim who was killed at Badr was called Hanzalah. It distressed the holy Prophet very much. He cried over his death and said: "The angels have come to wash Hanzalah's body – the only one amongst the fallen". A rare privilege, I assure you.'

The study of angels is one of Dr Khadijah's interests. She goes on: 'Another battle in which angels helped was that of Hunain. A valley near Mecca. After the Prophet's conquest of

the Holy City, eight years after he had migrated to Medina, the disgruntled idolaters were thirsting after revenge. They mounted a large expedition to attack the Prophet. The Muslims came out to meet them. Overconfident because of their number, the battle took a turn for the worse and many of the Muslim began to run away. The Qur'an itself bears witness to that.' She recites, gravely:

'Truly God has given you victory on many battles and on the day of Hunain when you rejoiced at your great number, but it served you nothing; the land, vast as it is, did constrain you, and you turned back in retreat.' Surah al-Tauba, 25.

After a pause, she resumes: 'Then the Prophet asked his uncle Abbas to do as he had done with success at the battle of Uhud: cry out in a big voice and appeal to the retreating Muslims to come back and rally around Muhammad. That worked. It wonderfully strengthened the Muslims' courage. They charged the pagans, smashing through the centre of the opposing army - it crumbled and fled. Note that, according to historian Tabari, Hunain was the only battle during which the Prophet personally took part in the fighting. He dismounted from his camel, drew out Zulfiqar, his favourite sword, and threw himself into the thick of the fray. He electrified the Muslims so much that they fought chanting verses in his honour...At the same time, for good measure, God sent down angels to aid the Muslims in the battle. This too the Qur'an alludes to:

'And God poured down his reassurance on the Messenger and on the Believers and sent down forces which you saw not...' Surah al-Tauba, 26.

I tell Khadijah of the belief that the angels cried when Husayn was killed at Karbala. She agrees: 'Yes, I know. It is a Shia' hadith. It must be true. Husayn was a great hero and his death, and what his enemies did to his body, were an absolute outrage. The angels would indeed have mourned him.'

'Do you think it is possible that angelic language sometimes should not be taken literally? That it may be a powerful rhetorical device to convey the way people feel about certain events?' I asked my friend. An academic, she had been trained in the exacting sciences of textual criticism.

Khadijah smiled: 'Yes, Father. That is possible. You must know the story the British tell about angels fighting on their side against the Germans at the battle of Mons, at the outset of the First World War. Initially spread by Arthur Machen, a writer. An early example of fake news, perhaps! No reasons why angels should root for the Brits and against the Germans, is there? They were both Christian nations. The story came handy as wartime propaganda to encourage British troops to fight. You get that, don't you? It is completely different when the appearance of angels is reported in a true religious revelation, like the Qur'an. Both Badr and Hunain were battles the Muslims were conducting against pagan polytheists. It is right and proper that angels at God's behest should have intervened to aid the cause of Islam, don't you think?'

'Yes, you must be right, dear Doctor Khadijah. The New Testament confirms what you are saying. The birth of St John the Baptist – Yahya in the Qur'an – is announced to his father

Zachariah by an angel. Above all, the angel Gabriel tells the Virgin Mary that she will give birth to the Messiah. Her husband Joseph is visited by angels three times. They appear to shepherds near Bethlehem about Jesus' birth. And God sent an angel to strengthen him before his Passion...'

'Peaceful angels. Good. What about military ones? Do you Christians have them?'

'In the Book of Revelation a cosmic war breaks out. Michael and his angels fight against the Dragon and his demons in the heavens...

'Oh, yes. Michael. The Qur'an speaks of him together with Jibreel, Gabriel.' Again she recites:

'Whoever is an enemy of God and his angels and prophets, of Gabriel and Michael. Behold, God is an enemy of the unbelievers.' Surah al-Baqara: 98.

I could tell Dr Khadijah about St Thomas Aquinas. He who wrote so extensively about angels that it got him the sobriquet of '*Doctor Angelicus*', the Angelic Doctor. Or of the Swedish visionary Swedenborg, who conversed with angels in his room daily. Instead, I opt to come back to Husayn. I ask her whether she knows that a Christian called Wahab al-Kalbi had joined his forces and fought with him at Karbala. Her answer fills me with pleasure:

'I have! There was a lecture in Oxford at a local mosque. An interfaith events. Someone, can't recall her name, spoke about that extraordinary Christian at Karbala. She also mentioned another one, a physician. Quite possible. There

were so many Christians around at the time in that part of the world. And Arab Christian tribes existed. They would have felt attracted to Husayn. His charismatic personality. His heroism. As well as disliking the Umayyads. Didn't Muawiya try to conquer Byzantium?'

'Agreed. Nothing to be shocked about. In the present climate of suspicion and paranoia about Islam. However, what Wahab did strikes me as...' I take time, wanting to find the right word. 'Angelic', I utter at last.

Khadijah laughs: 'A suitable adjective. Yes, human beings can be angels, too!'

'Or demons' I hazard.

'A bit of both inside us, Father Frank, isn't that true? But, by the grace of God, the angelic side will prevail.'

'Inshallah!' I assent. And we make our way together out of the Ashmolean, into a pelting rain. 'Cripes! What a nuisance!' I let out. Unflustered, serene, angelic Dr Khadijah quotes aloud from the Book:

'And He sends down rain from the sky in due measure...'
Sura al-Zukhruf, 43: 11.

What can I possibly reply? Only 'Amen!'

How did Wahab al-Kalbi fight at Karbala? With what weapons? Physical ones? Wielding a sword or spear? It ill-becomes a Christian, a follower of Him who had his blood shed for the sake of others, to spill other people's blood. I imagine him devising another way to help Husayn. I see

Wahab standing on his camel, in the thick of the fray, as arrows fly all around him, fearless, eyes raised towards Heaven and praying in a loud voice for the people he had chosen to join. Fighting with the weapons of righteousness and what can be most righteous, most pleasing to God than a good man's prayer?

Why weren't al-Kalbi's prayers not answered? Imam Husayn, the rightful Khalifa, was killed in the battle and his head cut off. The same fate fell on many of his followers. It is logical to assume that al-Kalbi suffered in the same way. Unanswered prayers. A spiritual puzzle? Not really. God always answers genuine prayers, issuing from a faithful and contrite heart. What prayers could have been more pleasing to Heaven than Husayn's? The noblest of men. Fatima's child. The Prophet's beloved grandson. Yet, God allowed Yazid's army to triumph. Why weren't those heartfelt, beautiful prayers apparently heeded?

No, they were! God always answers fine prayers. But not necessarily in the way you would expect. It was written - *maktoub* in Arabic – the Imam should arise and bear witness, by paying the ultimate price with his life, his martyrdom. That was *Irada ilahi*. Part of God's inscrutable, merciful will. Being a martyr is the highest rank, the highest grade, the supreme honour a believer could achieve in this mortal life. Only in the eyes of a dull, unbelieving world can martyrdom be dismissed as a defeat. In Christianity the martyrs belong to the Church Triumphant and to them belongs a crown of imperishable glory. So was Imam Husayn victorious even in the apparent

catastrophe of Karbala. Because he triumphed on the only plane that really counts: the heavenly one.

THE CHRISTIAN PHYSICIAN AT KARBALA

Wahab al-Kalbi, as Dr Khadijah intimated, is not the only Christian whom pious Muslim tradition has enlisted in the ranks of Imam Husayn at Karbala. A story tells of a certain Christian physician who had been hired to treat the wounds of soldiers fighting the Imam. Until, glancing into the thick of the fray, the doctor saw a striking face. It was bespattered with blood but shining with a celestial radiance. He thought he recognised the beautiful face of Jesus. A countenance he had seen painted on many sacred icons and pictures, suffering at the hands of wicked men. Tears welled in his eyes. *'My Lord! You are here? What have they done to you?'* Then the physician realised the face was that of Imam Husayn, whose enemies he had been assisting. A righteous anger assailed him: 'How dare they? In hurting Husayn they are also hurting Christ. The scoundrels! I can't be working for them!' The story goes on how the good man seized Husayn's fallen sword, rushed at the villains and was killed while defending the body of the Imam.

A simple but fascinating hagiography. Historically true or not, that is beside the point. The meaning is clear. First, the assimilation of Husayn's suffering and death to the passion of Jesus. Although the Qur'an seems to deny that the Messiah's

enemy succeeded in killing him, the harrowing account of the Passion would not have failed to touch the heart of sensitive believers. Indeed, Shia' historian S.H.M. Jafri has invoked a distinct comparison between the example of Husayn at Karbala and the 'great sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the redemption of mankind'. Daring words, given that Islam is supposed to reject the reality of the Crucifixion. Lebanese Professor Mahmoud Ayoub has written of Shia doctrine as 'Islamic Christology'. Likewise, Louis Massignon's attempt to discover an 'Islamic Christ' in the mystic al-Hallaj foundered on the reality of mainstream Muslim thought and experience. Trying to 'Christianise' the Muslim Other, however well-meaning the intention, is theologically sterile and offensive to the faith of the Crescent.

Still, doctrinal differences apart, the emotional effect on the heart and the mind of a devotee would be profound. I myself cannot think of the scourging, beating and mocking of Jesus on his way to the Cross without crying. It is not simply a temporal but an eternal scene, engraved forever within me as a key spiritual paradigm. A sacred event re-played again and again in the inner theatre of the mind when I meditate on it. I am aware that Jesus' sufferings, his eventual, slow martyrdom by cruel crucifixion were willed for the sake of mankind's redemption but that does not lessen my sorrow. Further, the Lord's sufferings are mystically repeated in the worshipper's consciousness every time he partakes of the Sacrament of the altar. Similarly, the collective memory of Shia' Muslims elevates the Imam's atrocious death to the status of the supreme paradigm of martyrdom, necessitated in the face of satanic unrighteousness. The powerful rites of

Ashura are the main occasions for the agonies of Karbala to occur again on the psychic plane. In the light of such analogies, the Christian physician's story packs a remarkable spiritual message. Jesus of Nazareth and Imam Husayn can be seen as supreme martyrs who died fighting in the cause of good versus evil.

Second, there is the manner in which the anonymous medic fought. According to the narrative he picked up a spear and went on the attack against the Imam's enemies. The healer turned physical warrior, shedding blood in the process. From the Christian point of view that raises a difficulty. You can understand how revulsion at the sight of innocent suffering may so overwhelm a righteous person that he may respond to violence with violence. Nonetheless, the Church does not teach that the sufferings of Jesus' and the shedding of his precious blood should be avenged by violent action. St Thomas Aquinas specifically forbade priests and bishops to engage in warfare. His reason was that, as clergy are ordained for the ministry of the altar, in which Christ's sacrifice is mystically repeated, it would not be fitting that they should shed other people's blood, even during a just war. Note however that the nameless Christian physician was no priest, so the rule against military fighting does not apply to him. Nor are Army doctors forbidden to bear arms and fight when it is incumbent on them to do so. The point is that the combat in question was justified. One might argue that the Christian should have opted for a different kind of fighting, such as praying, doing intercession for the Imam's cause and the like. However, he did not. Judged by the principles of St Thomas Aquinas' Just War, he did not sin. Because he was a just

warrior. In the words of a celebrated Christian hymn, he fought the good fight, with all his might.

FATIMA'S TEARS

"There is a woman at the beginning of all great things".

Alphonse de Lamartine

'O my mother! Dear mother!' Husayn cries out. As he approaches Karbala, a beloved face rises before his eyes. He sees the tears streaming down her cheeks. Tears of sorrows, tears of joy. Because in Fatima's heart both emotions dwell. Sorrow and joy. Bliss and hurt. Sorrow because she foresees the future sufferings, the tragedy, the martyrdom of her children, of Hasan and Husayn and all the other Imams. Joy because she knows that at the Last Hour Imam al-Mahdi will avenge them all. Fatima comprehends that to her child, to her beloved boy belongs ultimate victory, the final triumph, the supreme conquest. To him and to the Household of the Prophet paradise belongs. She sings of the unending bliss of the Hereafter. As Husayn prepares to undergo the ultimate sacrifice, that is his absolute, rock-like faith. Fatima has not suffered in vain.

'Mother, dearest mother!' Husayn calls out. Her tears cause him to cry too. He is aware that Fatima, the Radiant One, does not cry for himself only but for all the faithful. Present and future ones. The innocent Muslims, the humiliated and the downtrodden, the multitudes who suffer and will suffer at

the hands of tyrants like Yazid, the many Yazids yet unborn. Numberless monsters still to come. But like his mother, while Husayn weeps he also rejoices. He rejoices at the forthcoming victory, the power, the glory of paradise!

'O my mother! Dear mother!' Husayn grasps the true meaning of her crying. He understands that her copious tears, tears mingling sorrow and joy, spell out love. Supernal, all-encompassing love. Fatima's weeping means love. Love for her father, the Holy Prophet, Husayn's beautiful grandfather, whom he remembers dangling his grandchildren on his knees, playing fondly with them on his lap. Love for his mother's handsome husband, Husayn's indomitable father, Imam Ali. The Lion of Islam. Love for her children and love for all the Muslims. And also love for all the people of the Book. Deep, selfless, all-embracing love. His mother is mother of them all - in an ecstasy of thought he knows that.

'O my mother, dearest mother!' In his mind's eye, the son sees his beloved mother crying. Her tears wound his heart yet he senses Fatima's tears are expression of tenderness. Of care. Of deepest compassion for all. She is the caring, silent one. She speaks not, yet her tears do tell, like a silent language. Her silence is a silence that speaks. Fatima's tears are tears of sorrow yet they also wipe out sorrow. Tears of comfort, of guidance, of warning, of encouragement, of eternal, abiding love.

A partisan critic, the Orientalist Jesuit Father Lammens, writes that Fatima's tears express physical pain yet he admits that the meaning of her crying extends beyond mere bodily discomfort. As regards the Prophet's daughter, he says that

tears also mean 'religious fervour'. A telling admission. A clue that the good Jesuit was aware, from his own tradition of Catholic spirituality, of the deeper significance of tears among mystics and holy persons. Naturally, Fatima's weeping refers to sad events that affected her life. As when she grieved for the death of her beloved mother, Khadijah. Those were normal tears because it is natural (not because of Fatima's 'melancholy character', as Lammens unsympathetically suggests) to grieve the loss of a much loved one in that way. Fatima's weeping and lamenting over the fallen Muslims at the battle of Uhud, however, reach beyond natural causes.

Uhud was a setback for Islam. Seventy-five Muslims were slain by the Meccan polytheists, against twenty-seven enemies. The Prophet himself received several wounds and could have been killed. Fatima nursed her father wounds. His pain was her pain too – hadn't the Prophet called her 'a piece of my flesh'? - quite apart from being a natural feeling for a loving daughter. But it would be purblind to regard Fatima's father as just her male parent and leave it that. Muhammad, the daughter's beloved father, is no ordinary person. He is a Prophet. The Qur'anic revelation entails that he is the mouthpiece of Almighty God. A man chosen to impart the supreme, complete and perfect message from above to humankind. Hence his sufferings, his wounds at the battle of Uhud transcend the physical realm. They allude to the world above. The sacredness of the Apostle of God is affronted by any offence against his person. And against the revelations he bore. If the pagan Meccans, the Quraysh, had succeeded in killing Muhammad in battle, the transmission of the divine message would have been stifled, cut off – an unthinkable,

awesome, catastrophic outcome. Fatima's grief while tending her father's injuries encompasses a much wider, cosmic dimension. Besides, she would also weep for the Uhud martyrs, the seventy-five who had died during the battle. The Qur'an does indeed refer to the momentous meaning of Uhud in clear verses (3: 152-155). It was a time of severe trial, of testing for the believers and yet part of an essential struggle of good versus evil. Seen in that light – and what other spiritual way is there to see it in? – the pain Fatima felt at Uhud unveils a heavenly significance, regardless of what malevolent Orientalist interpretations may seek to insinuate.

TRAVEL NOTES: THINKING OF HUSAYN AND THE MAHDI IN CAIRO

The al-Husayn Mosque, Cairo. Close to al-Azhar Square and the teeming Khan al-Khalili bazar. I am in Egypt's capital - *al-Qahira*, the Victorious, *Umm al-Dunya*, 'the mother of the world', it proudly boasts – to study Arabic at the Sibwayh Academy. On a hot and dusty day, I am visiting the mosque with my teacher Hamid to reverence the great martyr of Karbala. Many believe that is where the head of Husayn is kept. A striking prophetic hadith, '*Husayn is part of me and I am part of Husayn*', is engraved on the masjid's front. The Prophet Muhammad fondly loved his grandson and this saying underscores their intimate relationship. The occasion for the utterance was in Medina. Muhammad saw his small grandchildren running about, playing. Then the Prophet

caught hold on Husayn, hugged him and kissed him, uttering the hadith in question. Standing about, some Companions were awed by that.

Inside the mosque is a most beautiful prayer hall. A forest of white marble columns and splendid chandeliers. We make our way into the shrine where the head of the Imam is buried. The exterior of the tomb is a richly ornamented, shiny steel affair, covered with calligraphic inscriptions. Pilgrims, most in long white robes, sit or stand near the *Zarih*, where the precious relic is kept. Ceiling fans circulate the warm air, mingled with Cairo gritty dust. The pilgrims pray devoutly in silence, some holding their Qur'ans. They stare through the gilded grills, kiss or touch parts of the wooden railing encircling the shrine. Some are crying. Seldom have I seen such moving expressions of devotion in a religious place. I too quietly pray my own prayers, trusting they will be acceptable to the One True God, creator of Heaven and Earth, of all that is seen and the unseen.

Outside, I notice a number of men with shaggy beards, wearing slightly shorter white cloaks. They are stationed by the main entrance. Unlikely to be policemen. Look rather sour-faced and a bit disagreeable. 'Who are those guys? Don't like the cut of them', I ask Hamid. 'They keep an eye', he replies. 'Keep an eye? On what?' 'In case Shia' pilgrims try to enter the mosque and cause trouble'. 'Well, it is a masjid dedicated to Imam Husayn. It venerates his relic. Why shouldn't Shia' faithful pray here?' 'You don't understand, Father. The way they pray is not Sunna. And they beat their

breasts, slap themselves and slash their bodies. That's forbidden in Islam'.

Actually, I understood all too well. It was intolerance, pure and simple. Only months before the ministry of religious affairs had denounced the so-called 'Shia' heresy'. Peculiar opinion because an Ismaili Shia' dynasty, the Fatimids – named of course after the Prophet's daughter, Fatima – governed Egypt for nearly 200 years. Fatimid rulers were interested in learning and they founded the prestigious al-Azhar University nearby. Not many Shia' are left in Egypt today. Besides, only a minority of Shia' pilgrims go in for self-flagellation and the like. The authorities have forbidden not only the building of anything resembling a Shia' masjid, but even any distinctive rituals. Worse, a mob lynched four men of Shia' persuasion in a village months before. I wondered what harm a small number of Muslims praying in the mosque, inside or outside, could possibly do. What was it all about?

Sotto voce, Hamid told me: 'I think they fear the Mahdi...they want to catch him before he shows himself to the people.' I was incredulous. The Mahdi? The messianic, awaited deliverer? Did they really believe he was lurking in the vicinity of Imam Husayn Mosque? Was Hamid pulling my leg?

Not at all, he assured me. Gravely, he added that an Iraqi man and his followers had come to Egypt to prepare the way for the Awaited One. They had formed secret cells everywhere. The Iraqi leader – here Hamid was a bit unclear – was either the son of the Hidden Imam of Shia belief or the Mahdi himself. A sinister plot from abroad, aimed at toppling

the Mubarak regime. (These events go back to just before the now defunct Arab Spring.) An unlikely story, perhaps symptomatic of state paranoia and insecurity. I asked Hamid whether he knew that belief in the Mahdi is not confined to Shia' people. 'Surely you have heard of Muhammad Ahmad of Dongola, in Sudan? He who led a successful rebellion against the Egyptians, the Turks and the British nearly a century and a half ago? Tewfik Pasha was Khedive at the time. Muhammad Ahmad had proclaimed himself the Mahdi. He besieged Khartoum and cut off the head of General Gordon. A victorious Mahdi, up to a point. Does it not ring a bell?'

Yes, it did, Hamid averred but went on sternly to accuse Muhammad Ahmad of being a liar and an impostor, a mass murderer, false Mahdi, a madman and so on. A mildly xenophobic tirade followed: 'The Sudanese are poor, dirty and lazy, even today. How can you imagine they could have achieved anything against Egypt? Our civilisation is as old as the pyramids. What do the Sudanese have contributed? Nothing... I do not believe that Muhammad Ahmad managed to do anything. All inflated by the British to discredit our great Egypt...' There was no point in trying to budge Hamid so I changed the subject. Still, if the prospect of a returning Mahdi – the charismatic progeny of Ali and Fatima and Imam Husayn - was so worrying to the all-powerful security services, well, it argued for a lot of insecurity. The unemployment rate in Egypt then was about 12-13 per cent but the reality was much starker. The population explosion meant the country's limited resources could not provide an outlet for its youth, many of whom had to work in the Gulf as second-class citizens or migratory serfs. As to Hamid, he lives in Shubra, a quarter

consisting of awful, overcrowded slums. With his wife and seven children. As the Mahdi, be it in the Shia' or the Sunni version, will be a justice-bringer, an avenger of wrongs - ethical, economic and political wrongs - I could understand how the idea would have haunted the corrupted and corrupting Arab elites a great deal.

FATIMA ACCORDING TO LOUIS MASSIGNON

The Orientalist Father Lammens' negative picture of Fatima is redressed by the work of another, greater Catholic priest and writer on Islam. The awesome figure of Frenchman Louis Massignon. In a sensitive study, '*La Dame de l'Islam*', Massignon unveils Fatima's profound meaning. As a woman and mother she evokes the compassionate figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary, much honoured in the Qur'an. As Mary, the mother of Christ, anticipates and sums up in her person her son's redemptive role, so does Fatima vis-à-vis Husayn, as a champion of true Islam, a liberator. And this Fatima is a fearless promoter of justice. A combatant against all forms of oppression and discrimination in society. For Massignon she is a champion of equal rights amongst Muslims. Particularly the *Mawali*, the early, non-Arab converts to Islam. He envisions Fatima as the *hotesse*, the goodly hostess, the *Rabbat al-Bayt*, the Mistress of the Tent of Hospitality. The virtue so central to Arab culture, hospitality is Fatima's special charisma, her divinely conferred gift. Fatima is the receiver and protector of the freedmen, the slaves emancipated by her father.

Massignon holds that Fatima's meaning must be a universal one, because the values she stood for, the principles she symbolises are worldwide, inclusive ones.

Fatima's tears, Massignon contends, unveil the secret of her life. It is the life of a pious visitor to tombs and cemeteries, a life of deep compassion, of regular prayer for the faithful departed. Fatima loved her father very dearly and she grieved terribly during his final illness. She cried much and lamented much. Only once she was seen smiling. Why? According to a hadith, the ailing Prophet told his daughter how the Angel Gabriel had communicated to him that Fatima would be the first member of *Ahl al-Bayt* to join him in Paradise: 'Are you not happy, o my daughter, to know that you will be the first *Sayyida*, the first lady of Paradise?' he asked her. At that Fatima smiled a most beautiful smile.

If Massignon is right and the figure of Fatima signifies a standard-bearer for justice and equality, it is appropriate to invoke a key passage in the New Testament. The revolutionary words from the *Magnificat*. A canticle known as the Song of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Virgin sings how the Almighty, 'has put down the mighty from their seats. He has exalted the humble and the meek. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away.' Compare such sentiments with those conveyed by Fatima. Isn't she an upholder of righteousness? A spokeswoman for the marginalised and the downtrodden, such as emancipated slaves? An advocate of people who were treated as second-class citizens of the *Umma*? The Fatima who is the mother of

Husayn, *par excellence* the indomitable defender of the disinherited in Islam?

To refer to the cult of Fatima in sections of Islam, Massignon adopts a technical theological term, *hyperdoulia*. This word consists of two parts. *Doulia* is a Greek word meaning veneration, a high spiritual standing accorded to a holy person, like a saint or a martyr or an angel. *Hyperdoulia*, on the other hand, is a higher, more eminent type of honour, even superior to the dignity given to an angel. Daringly, Massignon suggests that Fatima is the rightful recipient of that extraordinary honour. Fatima, as the mother of Husayn, is especially deserving of that.

In Arabic a *kunia* is a name given to the mother or father of a child. So a married woman is called by her *kunia* name, which is *umm* plus the name of her first son. So for example Aminah mother of Jaafar is *Umm Jaafar Aminah*. (The *kunia* precedes the person's name.) Fatima has an interesting *kunia*. She is *umm abiha*, the mother of her father. Why? It seems that she was so called because it was revealed to her that her last, her very last descendant would be called Muhammad, like the name of her father. An allusion to the name of the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi. Massignon does not explicit say this but I wonder: having suggested an analogy between the cult of the Virgin Mary and that of Fatima in Islam, did he perhaps come to see the title of 'mother of her father' as resembling to that mystical title of 'daughter of her son', given to the Blessed Virgin in Christianity?

Massignon once visited the famous Catholic shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal where in 1917 the Virgin Mary

appeared to three peasant children. While praying there he was pleased to notice a number of Muslims amongst the pilgrim crowds. He knew all too well how highly the Virgin Mary is honoured in the Qur'an – indeed, there are more verses referring to Mary in the Book than in the New Testament. Still, he was curious and asked the Muslim visitors what drew them to the shrine. The answer delighted him: 'Fatima', they said. 'Fatima, the beloved daughter of our Prophet. That is why we are here.' A telling anecdote. The Portuguese shrine takes its name from a remote Moorish Princess and, through her, ultimately from the Prophet's daughter. Is it not stupendous how a sacred place originating in a supernatural event should succeed in bringing together Muslims and Christians? Thanks to the names of both Mary, the mother of the Messiah, and Fatima, the mother of Imams Hasan and Husayn, the grandchildren of the Prophet!

Massignon takes this idea of Fatima as champion of the lowly and the humiliated, the oppressed and exploited even further. Fatima for him signifies a protest against the subordinate role which, according to him, women have been confined to in much of Islamic history. In this connection he mentions the veil. Perhaps here the great man, despite his good intentions, betrays a mentality influenced by time-bound French cultural notions, namely those of *le siècle des lumieres*, the so-called Enlightenment. The fact is that Muslim women *choose* to be dressed in certain ways. Dressed, not oppressed. To believe that the veil stands for oppression is a prejudice. The practice is primarily an expression of religious piety and of Islamic self-identity. To perceive it as a sign of discrimination reflects and imports dubious Western cultural

obsessions about religious dress. The truth is that those notions are rather foreign to historical Islam.

Although Massignon had to parry accusations from fellow Catholics of having equated the Fatima of Islam with the Virgin Mary, which he denied, he must have believed something very close to it. He saw the Prophet's daughter as 'a merciful shadow cast by the Virgin Mary'. Of course, Catholics pray to the Mother of Jesus, unlike mainline Muslims who do not pray to the Prophet's daughter. Nonetheless I feel that Massignon must have enjoyed his discovery of an extravagant supplicatory prayer by the heterodox Alawi sect, addressed to Fatima:

'O betrayed daughter of the Prophet! You who at his home have been the stewardess of hospitality to the stranger!

You who have been denied! You who have been despised!
You whose inheritance has been stolen!

You whose death occurred in an unknown place! You whose place of burial no one knows!'

You who have suffered much! You whose power of intercession with God is ignored!

It is to you, O Fatima Zahra, Fatima the Radiant One, our Guide and Our Salvation, to whom we have recourse in our supplications to the Most High!

SECOND WORD MISUNDERSOOD: TEARS

And when they listen to the revelation received by the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears, because they recognise the truth' Qur'an 5:83

Tears, weeping, crying...expressions of weakness, effeminacy, powerlessness, even cowardice? 'A man doesn't cry' was the title of a black-and-white TV film directed by Alfred Hitckcock I saw as a schoolboy. It disturbed me. Also, my father cried when told he had cancer. I saw him weeping and it upset me. Was it because I felt it was a wrong, unmanly thing of him to cry? That tears are something to be ashamed of? To hide away? To do in secret? Or to suppress? 'Real men don't cry'. A callous, inhuman thing to say. I still feel guilty when I remember my father's tears. The boy I once was had bought into the macho prejudice that it is somewhat unbecoming for 'a real man' to shed tears. How wrong that was. I hope my beloved dad has forgiven me from the heavenly realms where he is now, I trust.

Fatima, the Prophet's favourite daughter. Her frequent tears are related by Muslim tradition as a historical fact. Fatima would cry and lament for hours, especially during and after her father's death. Father Lammens again, the Orientalist, uses that as a basis for painting a one-sided, spiteful portrait of the 'Lady of the House'. 'Pleureuse', prone to tears, he brands her, intending to diminish her character.

That is strange because Catholic spirituality highly values the 'charisma of tears'. A charisma is a divinely conferred gift, a grace, a special favour bestowed by God. Something exceedingly valuable and desirable. As precious as a row of shimmering pearls around a beautiful woman's neck. In monasteries, prayers were offered to obtain the gift of tears. Tears, the Jesuit Father should have known, are a language which may express a variety of meanings. There are tears of sorrow but also tears of joy. Tears of repentance and tears of exultation. Tears of despair and tears of love. You would object to tears if you took a purely negative, passive view of weeping but why should that be so? Fatima's father, the Prophet, also cried after being driven out of Taif by a howling mob, as we saw. No one would say that Muhammad's tears indicate a personality affected with feebleness or debility. The Prophet's strength of character, his courage, resolution and energy are attested by all. The Prophet's tears were tears of pity for the sinners of Taif, for the punishment their criminality would bring upon them. Tears of compassion. Tears of sorrow not for himself but for the faults and the folly of his *jahili*, ignorant foes.

Old Tabari chronicles another occasion when the Prophet wept. An episode concerning another of his daughters, Zaynab. When the Prophet left Mecca for Medina he had to leave behind two of his married daughters, Ruqayya and Zeynab. After Muhammad's migration to Medina the Quraysh, the pagan Mecca clique hostile to him, ordered the two women's husbands to divorce them and marry other women. Ruqayya's husband obeyed but Abu-As, Zaynab's husband, refused. He loved his wife dearly and was much

loved by her in return. 'I will not divorce her. Kill me, if you like, I won't do it!' he told the Quraysh. Abu-As was a man of great honour and integrity, a merchant much esteemed for his honesty and fair dealing. He was loyal to the leaders of Mecca and fought at the battle of Badr against his father in law. Captured by the victorious Muslims, custom demanded that a ransom should be paid to set prisoners free. Abu-As then sent word to Mecca about the condition was his release. Zaynab began to collect the ransom money as much as she could but it was not enough. Then she remembered she possessed a precious necklace, made of pearls, rubies and carnelians from Yemen. A gift for her marriage by her mother, Khadijah. On the wedding day Khadijah had asked the Prophet his permission to give Zaynab that necklace, one Khadijah had worn until then. Muhammad had loosed the precious item from his wife's neck and with his own hands put it on Zaynab's. When the ransom reached Medina, the Prophet saw the necklace and recognised it. His eyes, Tabari, reports, 'filled with tears'. Memories of Khadijah and Zaynab moved him. He sighed: 'What a wrenching sacrifice it must have been for my child having to take off and part herself from the necklace her mother had given her!' The Prophet's followers, seeing his tears, immediately told him: 'O Messenger of God, we are happy for you to take this necklace and all the ransom money. Send them back to Zaynab or do with them whatever you wish. And give Abu-As his freedom, if that is you will.' Muhammad gave back to Abu-As the ransom money and the necklace and told him: 'You are free. Only, my daughter cannot remain your wife, unless you embrace Islam.' Eventually, after other vicissitudes too long

to relate here, Abu-As became a Muslim and got Zaynab back. Like in a Hollywood movie, happy ending!

It is striking that the shortest verse in the New Testament is about the Saviour's tears. '*Jesus wept*', St John says. And his tears were not tears of weakness but of love. It happened after the death of Jesus' friend, Lazarus. The Messiah had just been told where Lazarus' body had been laid to rest. The bystanders took his weeping as sign of how deeply Jesus cared for his friend. As for Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, they too were very dear to his heart. Jesus' sorrow sprang from his affection, his deep love for the bereaved family. He was so emotionally moved – St John uses the word 'groaning' – that he worked a stunning miracle. He brought Lazarus, dead for four days, back to life. It was one of Jesus' mighty works, his dynamic deeds aimed at conveying God's power and God's love in action. His tears betrayed not impotence but exactly the contrary: the power of God's spirit over nature, absolute supremacy over life and death.

Elsewhere in the *Injil*, the Letter to the Hebrews also shows Christ weeping. Through his loud cries and tears his Father taught him obedience to the divine will. A will that meant submitting patiently to the ordeal, the horror of the Cross. An awesome image. It illustrates how tears can be a divine training into accepting the humanly unacceptable. Tears, I confess, well up into my eyes whenever I think of Jesus in that painful predicament. But my sorrow is mingled with joy. I rejoice at the great sacrifice that took place on Mount Calvary two thousand years ago. Because God had so willed. Therefore it was good.

Satan crept to the foot of the Cross, expecting to get a rich prize – the soul of the despairing Messiah - but he was fooled. The Cross of Christ was a trap. Like a mouse trap. One in which the fiend was caught, like a greedy rat. Was the devil prowling about Fatima's house, hoping she would give way to hopelessness in her last hours? That she would fall into his clutches? If so, Satan got his comeuppance. It was he who was caught. The flourishing of Fatima's fame after her death, the abundant grace and the mystical charm channelled through her name prove who was the winner. Fatima. The Mistress of the Tent of Hospitality, as goodly Massignon terms her. The Lady of Islam. It was Fatima who overcame.

Ali Shariati, the Iranian author, has penned an amazing book, 'Fatima is Fatima'. He tells how pious people make their way to Fatima's abode – wherever that may be – and cry tears of sorrow. Tears of happiness, too, he adds. Tears signifying love for the household of the Prophet. Shariati felt able to disagree with the public lamentations displayed in some Shia ceremonies but he approved of spontaneous crying for the Prophet's daughter. They were not organised events but natural, pure expressions of hearts hankering after piety and justice.

Although Shariati stresses Fatima's sufferings, he also affirms the heroine's ability to work her way through affronts, struggles and pressures. She was indomitable. Verily, the daughter of her father! And perhaps more than that, as the Prophet himself bestowed on his daughter the amazing title of '*Umm abiha*' – her father's mother. Shariati styles her as 'a

wounded bird' but equally emphasises her revolutionary meaning. So, a bird. But a bird of what kind? An eagle soaring in the sky!

The Iranian writer may not have gone far enough in valorising the strength of Fatima's personality and influence. On the eve of the surrender of Mecca to the Prophet, didn't Abu Sufyan, the powerful Quraish leader and lifelong enemy of rising Islam, seek an interview with Fatima? His intention was to solicit her support on his behalf. Had he not judged Fatima a pivotal, powerful figure, would he have done that? This episode speaks volumes for Fatima's political role. Besides, even the fault-finding Jesuit Fr Lammens admits that after the Prophet's death his daughter became the centre of opposition to the power of Caliph Abu Bakr.

Abu Bakr meanly denied Fatima a piece of property, the Fadak oasis, left to her in inheritance by her father. 'Prophets have no heirs', he quibbled. Fatima's quick response, a sign of her intelligence and learning, was to cite the contrary examples of David and Solomon. Ali reinforced the argument by adding the evidence of Zachariah, father of Yahya, the St John the Baptist of Christianity, whose inheritance is explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. (Surah Maryam, 6). Alas, bullying Abu Bakr prevailed. It condemned Fatima and her family to poverty and distress, yet she never surrendered her claim. Two centuries later the Abbasid Caliph al-Mamun recognised that the Prophet's beloved daughter had suffered an injustice. He commanded that Fadak should be returned to Fatima's descendants.

'Rebellious', Shariati terms her. A revolutionary. That is an insightful way to understand Fatima's tears. Not tears of passivity but the tears of a woman rebelling against man's inhumanity to man. 'Arise and bear witness!' her tears intimate, continuing to summon believers to fight for righteousness, as the Qur'an says, '*fi sabeel Allah*', in the way of God.

According to our writer, while Fatima and her sister Umm Khultum were following in the way of the Prophet from Mecca to Median, a brutal character from the Quraysh tribe, a certain Huirath ibn Naqiz, caught up with them, attacked the two women physically and threw them to the ground. A violent, uncalled-for act that made a great impression on Fatima's father, Ali and all the Muslims when they learnt about it. Years later the guilty man was amongst the few in Mecca who were sentenced to death after the city surrendered to the Prophet and Ali acted as executioner.

Is it sentimentality or fancy that Fatima might have interceded with Ali to spare the man's life? There is no evidence of that but I cannot help imagining the Radiant One, the Lady of the House, 'the Mother of her Father', the analogue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Shiism, begging the Prophet and her husband not to kill the offender. Shedding blood in Fatima's name, to avenge the insult... why does that feel wrong? Why does it seem to contradict Fatima's meaning? A meaning that for me spells out compassion, forgiveness, piety, tenderness, love. Not revenge. Some will say this is just the half-baked fantasy of a Christian projecting

his own subjective ideas, his theology, his spirituality on Islam. And maybe they will be right. Or maybe not...

What intrigues me about Shariati's reflections is that he doesn't try to fit the 'Lady of Islam' into a rigid conceptual mould. Rather, he allows for fluidity, mystery, even opaqueness in our understanding of Fatima. He wonders, for example, about Fatima's feelings for Ali. Father Lammens had been most sceptical and critical about that, writing that Fatima did not wish to marry Ali at all. And vice-versa. That it was a marriage arranged by the Prophet, regardless of any genuine feelings of the two for each other. Contrary to that, Shariati infers that the Ali was overawed by Fatima's role and personality. It was because of her spiritual function as 'Mother of her Father' that Fatima awed Ali. She had indeed rejected other offers of marriage to prominent men like Omar and Abu Bakr. Fatima must have known that a special fate had been reserved for her. She accepted that fate and submitted to it. 'Submission'. The very meaning of Islam. Fatima as the perfect Muslim, the perfect believer.

Submission should be properly understood. It is a word with slightly pejorative overtones in English. The prefix 'sub', meaning 'under', may suggest a passive, slavish or servile state. Like being under a yoke. Louis Massignon proposed a more positive rendering in French, but it makes sense in English as well. Submission should be better translated as 'abandonment'. Meaning to yield oneself completely to Allah. In this sense abandonment signifies a total trust. An absolute reliance on the will of God. That's what Fatima did. In her life she abandoned herself to God. She trusted in the divine will so

entirely that she yielded herself utterly to it. Fatima, this shining icon of Muslim femininity, is an example of trusting, willing abandonment to the will of God. Isn't that gloriously mystical?

Yes, the mystery. At the end of his book – a series of popular lectures delivered in Tehran prior to the Revolution – Shariati candidly admits that he doesn't really know what to conclude about Fatima. And he draws a comparison with what Massignon had said about Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Artists, sublime painters, famous poets, theologians, novelists, they all in various ways have rhapsodized about the Virgin. You can assemble a collage with all those works and believe you have achieved the totality of the figure, the face, the person, the complete meaning of Mary. Despite that, the full insight into the woman eludes them. 'Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ'. Only those words encapsulate the essential significance of Mary. Wonderful, sure, but you can still go on to ask: 'What does that *really* mean?'

Ali Shariati confesses he wanted to do something similar with Fatima, the Radiant One. He did try to conjoin Fatima to her father, her mother, her husband Ali, her children Hasan and Husayn, her daughter Zaynab. Would that have done it? If successful, the attempt would presumably have revealed Fatima's deeper meaning. But he had to avow that was not sufficient. It could tell all. Instead, he resigned himself to stating a glorious truism: Fatima is Fatima. A brilliant, inspired move, I feel. The mystery of Fatima endures. And that is what is truly splendid about the radiant daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, the wife of Ali, the mother of Hasan and Husayn,

the progenitor of the awaited avenger and liberator, Imam al-Mahdi: Fatima is Fatima.

THIRD WORD MISUNDERSTOOD: WOMEN

'Woman is oppressed under Islam'. A facile trope you hear or read. True or false?

Prior to the Qur'anic revelation the Arabs believed that having a daughter was a curse. That is why in pre-Islamic Arabia often baby girls were buried alive. The odious practice of female infanticide was not condemned. Until this verse was sent down:

'When the female infant buried alive is questioned – for what crime she was killed.' Sura Al-Takwir. 81:8

The opening of this Sura, whose title means 'The Folding Up', is apocalyptic. Nature is undergoing fearful upheavals. The sun is gathered up. The stars lose their lustre. The mountains vanish like a mirage. The wild beasts enter human dwellings. The oceans boil over. Human souls are sorted out. The Day of Judgement is nigh. The dead, innocent baby girl's tiny voice is heard, pathetically demanding of her assassin: 'What wrong have committed? Why did you kill me?'

Pagan Arabs hated having daughters to the extreme of murdering them at birth. Although they bizarrely thought angels were females and called them 'daughters of God', they looked on their own daughters as things of disgrace. Another

Sura refers to that, in words pregnant with psychological power:

'When news reaches one of them of a female child, his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief' *Sura Al-Nahl*, 16: 58

The verse that follows speaks of the 'evil choice' confronting the parent. Keeping the despised frail creature or bury her in the sand? Either alternative was evil to them.

Sura al-Takwir is eschatological. Its violent cosmic imagery leaves no doubt that sin against female babies will be judged by God at the Last Day. How could anyone seriously maintain that the value of a woman is not the same as that of a man in Islam?

In '*Fatima is Fatima*' Ali Shariati asks whether Muslims women are caught between two alternatives. The first is the 'traditional' female face or traditional model – which of course has nothing to do with Tradition with the capital T, the shining esoteric path described by masters like Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi and Julius Evola – meaning the backward idea of a married woman as a mere housewife or, worse, a housekeeper. The second model is what he calls, ironically, 'the new woman'. The face of that woman is European. An imported, derivative, neo-imperialist model. That woman's face you can view any time you pick up a glossy Western fashion magazine. Or when you watch any main Western TV channel, from the BBC, Sky, ITV, Channel 4, you name them. It is a female visage that mirrors pretty well the dubious secular values of the contemporary West. But Shariati introduces a third alternative. Another woman's face which beckons to

Muslims, men and women, reaching out to them from the dawn of Islamic history and spirituality. It is that of Fatima. The Prophet's most beloved daughter. Ali's wife. Husayn's mother. She is the third visage that invites, offers itself as a heroine, a martyr, a role model...but is that real? How authentic is that? Does Fatima represents a genuine portrait of female authenticity?

Authenticity is the heart of the matter. A category central to the philosophy of existentialism. Also a straightforward, everyday word. You don't need a PhD to grasp the difference between an authentic Rembrandt painting and a crude, childish dawdle. Or a fake banknote, without the Queen's picture on it, and a real, legal one. Or a grotesque impersonator who pretends to be the Pope whilst looking like Donald Trump.

A friendly sheikh informs me it is not uncommon to have complete strangers turning up at a mosque, claiming to be the Mahdi, the awaited Deliverer who comes before the Last Days. Their bogus status is quickly detected. As soon as they betray ignorance of correct Arabic or even a superficial knowledge of the Qur'an and other Islamic texts, they are shown the door. Such fakes and their total lack of authenticity are transparent.

It gets more complicated when it comes to determining what it is to live an authentic existence. Jean Paul Sartre's haunting play, *The Flies*, a reworking of an ancient Greek tragedy, has the nobleman Orestes coming to slay the murderer of his father. In the process he also kills his own mother. Sartre imagines a dialogue between Orestes and the

chief deity of the Greek Olympus, Jupiter. The pagan god displays before Orestes the harmony, the order and the beauty of creation, of the cosmos. 'I am the author of all that splendour', Jupiter boasts, 'as well as the moral law governing it. That's why you should confess your crime and crawl before me.'

Orestes refuses. 'You have created me free', he retorts. 'That freedom was meant to serve me', Jupiter reminds him. Orestes is unrepentant. He proclaims that freedom means that he must strike out his own path. Authenticity demands that Orestes must create his own freedom. His own rules. If necessary, even rebelling against the gods, at the cost of suffering eternal torment in the Hereafter. 'Every man should invent his own path', Orestes enunciates, before avenging Furies throw themselves unto him. His search for authenticity leads him to hell.

Sartre's concept of authenticity as based on radical, rule-free, individualistic freedom is beset with contradictions. When applied to politics, for example, the philosopher could never explain the difference between someone pursuing a quest for authenticity by joining the French Resistance against the Nazis occupiers and another person who instead chose 'authentically' to enlist in the Gestapo, as indeed some Frenchmen did. Each asserted his unconstrained freedom. What moral norms could govern that choice, desire for authenticity apart? What distinguishes a choice for good and one for evil? Sartre has no answer to that.

Conclusion: Husayn acted authentically at Karbala. There was no fakery in the course pursued by the Prophet's

grandson, the son of Ali and Fatima. And the price of that authenticity was horrendous martyrdom. That's the clincher. Fakes don't become martyrs. They rush to take the easy way out. But Husayn's choice was to rise up. Against hideous oppression and malignity. That evinces a quality of authenticity coupled with genuine moral norms. Hence Husayn's existential choice, his rebellion is genuine. Unlike Orestes, unlike Sartre's dubious existentialist heroes, the Imam could give objective, faith-based reasons for his choice. Far from being the 'inconsiderate hero' travestied by Father Lammens, Husayn was a thoughtful, authentic witness of transcendence.

What about Fatima? The lady of the house. The mistress of the tent of hospitality. The woman blessed with the gift of tears. Did she live authentically? What to make of her apparent conventional life as a daughter, wife and mother? I thought about this question long and hard. The answer eluded me. Until one night I had a dream. I was in Iran, in the city of holy city of Mashad, at the shrine of Imam Ridha, one of the seven Imams, a descendant of Fatima. I had visited the place years before, during a trip. Near the haram there were two men, praying. They looked very much like each other but one was wearing a green turban, the other a white one. Were they brothers? On impulse, as they had finished their prayers, I asked them: 'Women: please gentlemen, tell me, what's the role of woman in Islam?'

'The role of woman is in the family', the one with the white turban said. The other, the wearer of the green turban, shook his head: 'The role of women is to fight in the revolution', he

said. 'Like Fatima', he added. Surprisingly, his answer elicited approval from the other, who beamed. Then their faces dissolved. I woke up.

Fatima – a revolutionary. Is that it? The solution of the riddle? Fatima as a combatant against oppression? For equality and rights? Shariati would have agreed, I am sure!

For his part, Massignon suggests another, fascinating role for Fatima. That as a bridge, a link between Islam and Christianity. He sets Fatima up as almost the equivalent of the Virgin Mary for Christians. The sight of Muslim visitors at the Our Lady of Fatima Shrine in Portugal had really impressed him. Yes, Fatima's Shrine. A suitable holy place for establishing an interfaith, religious dialogue centre? But one problem is that these days such dialogue tends to be the favourite hobby of the religiously tepid. The lukewarm. Those who have no fire in their belly. Not martyrdom material, that's for sure. Dialogue with Islam was more risky and challenging and authentic in Massignon's days. When he publicly defended the cause of Algerian independence he was physically assaulted and beaten up. Today dialogue is conducted officially by Vatican bureaucrats, with the Pope's blessing. Rather a reassuring scenario but it robs the exercise of its radical value. Enlisting Husayn and Fatima into the ranks of the wishy-washy? The tepid? No way. That would be wrong. Which is not to say that interfaith has no point or value. My very writing this book aims at it, doesn't it? So maybe Massignon is right, after all. Yet I feel the second man in my dream essentially spoke the truth: Fatima, the Lady of Islam, was a revolutionary. *Al hamdulillah!*

ALI, FATIMA AND HUSAYN'S AVENGER: THE MAHDI

Did Fatima Zahra, about to close her eyes, at the end of her earthly life discern the luminous shape of a mighty, avenging figure to come? Imam al-Mahdi? The hidden, invisible Imam, but quite visible to Fatima, the Mother of Believers. Once upon a time the Mahdi walked the earth as a child bearing the name of 'Muhammad', the same name as Fatima's father. The rightly-guided One. The eschatological leader who sprang out of Fatima's descendants. A Deliverer ordained to cleanse the world from all infamies and iniquities, to restore purity and goodness. Did Fatima shed tears of joy in presaging the arrival of this Muhammad? He who would be her foes' nemesis? The Mahdi, the avatar also of Ali, Hasan, Husayn and other Imams and members of *Ahl al-Bayt*. The Prophet's family. The Mahdi, the champion of the Muslims multitudes, the masses of the poor and the underprivileged, the angry and the humiliated by the arrogance and the abuses of power. The simple, faithful ones, those downtrodden and robbed of their rights by the elites, the rich and the privileged down the centuries. The dying Fatima must have glimpsed this awesome figure. The angels surrounding her death bed could not have failed to give her assurance of his coming. The first lady of Paradise, as her father declared her, would have known her persecutors were not going to have the last word. That must have been a tremendous comfort for the Prophet's beloved daughter, as the words of the Qur'an echoed in her consciousness: *'Verily, they plotted but God is the best of plotters'*.

The Arabic term '*al-Mahdi*' has a multiplicity of uses. In the early history of Islam it has often been a political or just honorific title, without particular messianic significance. Soon, however, it acquired an eschatological dimension. It came to mean an Awaited Deliverer. A God-guided person who arrives before the end of time, '*al-Akhira*', to restore true Islam and bring perfect fairness and equity in place of dark injustice and immorality. Note that the Mahdi in this doomsday sense is closely linked to the figure of Jesus, because the latter, as the Qur'an affirms, is 'a Sign of the Hour'. Jesus, the Prophet Issa, will return in the last days before *Youm al-Qiyama*, the day of the general resurrection.

The Shia' *Ithna ashara*, or Twelvers' idea of the Mahdi is distinct from the Sunni one. Both strands of Islam believe in this ultimate superhero who will create a global Islamic rule, though not necessarily by force. For Sunni Muslims this person has not existed yet, whereas for the Shia' he has appeared before. He is a blood descendant – the twelfth, hence the phrase 'Twelver Shiism', designating the main Shia' branch - of the Prophet Muhammad, through Ali and Fatima, then through Husayn and finally culminating in Muhammad al-Mahdi, the Imam al-Zaman, *Imam of the Time*, the Invisible or Hidden Imam. It is this Mahdi who went into divinely-ordained concealment, *ghayba*, eleven centuries ago and who will return to restore harmonious human relations to a disordered world.

Belief in the Mahdi's *imminent* appearance is neither eccentric nor minoritarian in the Muslim world, whether Sunni or Shia'. Empirical evidence backs that up. The

reputable US Pew Research Centre has surveyed thousands of Muslims in 24 countries, ranging from Russia to Egypt. The results show the proportion of people expecting the Mahdi's arrival soon is high, averaging over 40 per cent. In Turkey, until recently the paradigm case of a secularised Islamic country, the rate is nearly 70 per cent.

Further, the Mahdi should not be equated with a theoretical, inert and abstract item of faith, such as has sadly occurred in modernity to the Christian doctrine of the second coming of Jesus. Amongst Muslims belief in this messianic figure is lively and fervent. It has continued to inspire and motivate insurrectionist and revolutionary movements in the Arab world and elsewhere. As exemplified by Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdi of Sudan, who in 1885 led an army of dervishes against Khartoum and slew General Gordon. More recently another Mahdi claimant arose, Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Qahtani. On 1 Muharram, the beginning of the fifteenth century after the Hijra – 20 November 1979 – armed militants occupied the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Their leader was Juhaiman ibn Saif al-Utaiba, al-Qahtani's brother in law. Juhaiman proclaimed his relative the Mahdi and called for the overthrow of the House of Saud, the ruling dynasty of Saudi Arabia. After a fierce battle (and thanks to the help of infidel French commandoes) the uprising was suppressed, the 'Mahdi' killed and Juhaiman later publicly beheaded. Such episodes show the political and practical implications of this belief. Will similar Mahdi-inspired rebellions arise in future?

Lastly, granted that the Twelvers Shia' concept of Imam al-Mahdi is not the same as the Sunni one, it is part of the

official doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as authoritatively declared by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Another fact pointing to the relevance of the Mahdi idea, one that extends beyond the merely credal or academic domain.

The Mahdi is not mentioned explicitly in the Qur'an (though some people think he is there *implicitly*) but he shines through in many sound hadiths. As a religiously-sanctioned Deliverer and justice-bringer, a sworn enemy of oppressors and false scholars, the Mahdi is an uncomfortable, threatening figure to smug supporters of the status quo. Even an intellectual giant like the polymath Ibn Khaldun takes a somewhat snooty and supercilious attitude towards him. Ibn Khaldun writes that the Mahdi is an instance of what the masses (*al-kaffah*), the rabble and the unlearned trust in. He also attacks the Shia' and the Sufis, because of similar expectations. Moreover, Ibn Khaldun hints at the appearance in the last days of an antichrist figure, the *Dajjal*, a liar and deceiver who will try to seduce the faithful away from the true worship of God. It will fall to Jesus, son of Mary, to descend from Heaven to terminate the *Dajjal*. Or possibly Jesus will assist the Mahdi in killing the *Dajjal*. A collaborative enterprise, it appears.

It is noticeable how a contemporary French writer, Jean Pierre Fliu, approves of Ibn Khaldun's critique of messianic popular beliefs as typical amongst 'the simple people of the lower classes'. But couldn't this reasoning be turned around? Ibn Khaldun's snobbish attitude towards what ordinary folks yearn for might well be one-sided, elitist intellectualism. Cultural elites usually distrust the feelings and sentiments of

the ordinary people. Not necessarily for good reasons but because they consider them a rabble of vulgar, dumb individuals. Ibn Khaldun does not consider or value what it was about the figure of the Mahdi that appealed to the Islamic multitudes. As the Mahdi is believed to be of Prophetic descent, his figure would carry favour with the grassroots, the majority of people, given the universal veneration all classes of Muslims feel for the Prophet Muhammad. Moreover, the partnership before Judgment Day between the Mahdi and the Prophet Jesus – *Issa al-Masih* in the Qur'an – would be pleasing to the minds and hearts' of pious folks, as well as constituting theological confirmation of the Mahdi's credentials. Ibn Khaldun is blind, I think, to the strong connection between eschatology and popular movements of dissent, protest and rebellion. The 'simple people of the lower classes', the multitudes long for a messianic deliverer because they are the chief victims of humiliation and oppression by those in unlawful power.

THE MAHDI AND JESUS: ESCHATOLOGICAL PARTNERS

The Qur'an refers to Jesus – *Issa* in the Arabic text – in at least 93 *ayat* or verses, in 15 different *suras*. He is given a variety of appellations. Two titles of special interest are '*Ibn Maryam*', Son of Mary'. Some Islamic scholars like al-Tabari and al-Qurtubi have argued that the Messiah's birth from the Virgin Mary has eschatological significance. It is a miraculous sign or symbol anticipating the Hour of Judgment. The second title is *al-Masih*, the Messiah or the Christ. In many hadiths the name *al-Masih* emphasises Jesus' role before the End of Time in his fight against the wicked *Dajjal*, also called *al-Masih*. The point is to emphasise *Dajjal* being a false Messiah, in opposition to the real Messiah. Jesus' return is affirmed by famous hadith collectors like Bukhari and Muslim. The latter reports that:

'...Allah will send Christ, the Son of Mary, and he will descend at the white minaret in the eastern side of Damascus wearing two garments slightly dyed with saffron and placing his hands on the wings of two angels. When he will lower his head, there will fall beads of perspiration from his head, and when he will raise it up, beads like pearls will scatter from it. Every non-believer who would smell his smell would die and his breath would reach as far as he would be able to see, He would then search for him (the Dajjal) until he would hold him at the gate of Ludd and kill him'.

Many Christians will flinch at the image of peace-loving Jesus slaying anyone. Actually, the Messiah's execution of the

wicked anti-Christ, the Dajjal, echoes an important New Testament passage in II Thessalonians. Jesus at his Second Coming is shown destroying a Dajjal-like figure, 'the man of lawlessness', by terminating him 'by the breath of his mouth'. Thus, according to key religious texts, at the last Hour Jesus and the Mahdi together will confront the forces of darkness. They will combat them with whatever means deemed necessary.

THE MAHDI AND JESUS FORESHADOW A FUTURE ALLIANCE OF CROSS AND CRESCENT

A close link, a rapprochement between Islam and Christianity, an alliance between the two religions in the interests of the liberation of all humanity? Is that an illusion, a fantasy, a pipedream? Or a real, exciting possibility? The latter, I believe. I see Wahab al-Kalbi, the hitherto unacknowledged follower of the Cross who shared Imam Husayn's sacred cause at Karbala, as a token of that forthcoming partnership. All the more imperative at this time when Islam is travestied and Christianity derided and demoted to the point of irrelevance. A time when barbarous fanatics distort the image of true Islam and so-called 'Christian Zionists' besmirch the teachings of the Church.

Many Christians will be scandalised. They will draw attention to plain contradictions in belief that seem to make an alliance impossible. For example, is Jesus the Son of God or

not? The Church says he is. Islam denies it. Christians believe in the Trinity. Islam affirms the doctrine of *Tawhid*, God's absolute unity. Insurmountable stumbling blocks?

Eschatology might offer a way out of the impasse. It is notable that Jesus of Nazareth, at his first coming as Messiah, shocked people. He showed himself rather different from what many of his own race, the Jews, expected him to be like. 'You can't be our awaited Deliverer!' they scoffed in disbelief at the carpenter's son from Galilee. Similarly, the Qur'an alludes to some Jewish tribes of Medina rejecting Muhammad's prophetic status because he did not conform to their expectations. By analogy, I ask: is it possible that at his Second Coming Jesus may deviate from the conventional ideas both religions have of him? I am thinking of an extraordinary passage by the Russian writer Dostoyevsky in his novel *Brothers Karamazov*. Jesus Christ has returned. He appears again in Seville, in the days of the Spanish Inquisition, when heretics are burnt at the stake. The crowds welcome him enthusiastically, as he goes around amongst them working miracles but the terrible Grand Inquisitor looks on aghast and orders his guards: 'Arrest him!'

At night the fiery-eyed old man visits Christ, as he lies in chains in a dungeon. 'Why have you come back? Do you intend to destroy the Church's power over men?' he demands. After a long tirade the Inquisitor tells Christ that tomorrow he will have him burnt alive in the public square.

Far-fetched? Yet it is not difficult to imagine how the Church authorities might perceive a returned Messiah as a deadly threat to their temporal power. Of course, what

impresses as a literary artifice does not work in actual, realised eschatology. At his Second Coming Jesus will be assisted by legions of shiny angels and no priestly crone will be able to counter his transcendent power. Still, the challenge of Dostoyevsky's parable endures. Conventional ideas of what the Second Coming will be like may be turned upside down when the Hour will come. Epistemologically speaking, absolute certainties about the invisible world – what Islam calls *al-Ghayb* – are misplaced. Only God knows the full truth about such matters. The philosopher Aristotle warns that an informed person seeks 'exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of the subject allows.' Therefore it is highly likely that when the astounding scenario of the Second Coming is unveiled, God will surprise believers. What is absolutely certain is that Jesus will crush the forces of evil under his heel and inaugurate an era of perfect peace and justice on earth. And 'forces of evil' includes destructive social factors like materialism, atheism, unreason and filth.

Muslim ideas concerning the Mahdi as a liberator, a fighter who comes to redeem the world from oppressions and injustice, cohere well with Christian belief about Jesus' return. A genuine, dynamic common ground between our two faiths? Insh'allah!

THE MAHDI'S FINAL MANIFESTATION

'Wonderful, Father Frank. But, please, tell me: how are righteous goals like freeing the world from iniquity and injustice to be achieved? Will the Redeemer just wave a magic wand, like Harry Potter? Or will he slay the wicked with a Zulfiqar sword? Or with a Kalashnikov?' A question a devout but perhaps naive Muslima put to me online. She had grasped the problem. Man-created evils will not be abolished by the Mahdi just uttering an incantation. Some use of force – call it violence, if you like – appears inevitable. Yet, sensitive believers would not rejoice at the idea of a just world achieved at the price of shedding oceans of blood. Imam Husayn was hideously slain at Karbala by violent men acting at the behest of a tyrant. Should the Mahdi's revenge be qualitatively different? Eschew acts like killing and slaughter as unworthy of the Awaited Redeemer? Or is this just sentimental, liberal hogwash?

I sense a paradox. The Qur'an contains verses which proclaim the sanctity of human life, as well as others urging Muslims to bear arms in the name of righteousness. The Book also lays down rules and limitations for a morally justified combat, akin to those of the Christian just war criteria. Nonetheless, St Thomas Aquinas teaches that war, however just, still borders on the sinful. That perhaps echoes the contemporary view of Kaveh Afrasiabi, a scholar writing from a Shia' perspective. In a paper presented years ago at the Islamic Centre of England in London he urged the rejection of recourse to violence 'under the false guide of Mahdism'. The

Mahdi's promise, Afrasiabi contended, would be in harmony with United Nations principles, basically non-violent.

Remarkable how the UN General Assembly heard Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad affirming something strikingly similar in his famous speech of September 2011. 'Imam al-Mahdi', Ahmadinejad said, 'is the Ultimate Saviour of mankind...a perfect human being, a true and sincere lover of all human beings...he will come alongside Jesus Christ to lead lovers of justice and freedom to eradicate tyranny and discrimination and promote knowledge, peace, justice, freedom and love across the world. He will disclose to any single individual all the beauties of the world and all good things that bring happiness to mankind.' No reference to violence or bloodshed in those words. Was Iran's former President ducking the question of the means by which the Mahdi will accomplish those goals? Or perhaps doing *taqiyyah*? Dissimulation for a higher purpose? A teaching common to Islam and Catholic moral theology because the latter allows that there are people to whom 'you do not owe the truth'.. Who knows? Maybe the President, whom I once met in Tehran, was relying on some higher juristic or Imami authority. Or perhaps Fatima Zahra, the Radiant One, the merciful mother of Imams, appeared to him in a dream and inspired him to speak what he spoke. Not that I can produce any evidence for that – still, Ahmadinejad's peaceful portrayal of Imam al-Mahdi's return, alongside Jesus, appeals to me.

There are interesting Islamic precedents for favouring the image of a peace-loving Mahdi as opposed to a blood-shedding one in the Sunni tradition. When the dervish forces

of Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdi-claimant of Sudan, captured the Egyptian-held town of Obeid they engaged in extensive slaughter. That elicited a strong reaction of Sheikh al-Sanusi, the head of the Sanusia Sufi tarikat in Northern Sahara. He refused to believe anyone so sanguinary could be the true Mahdi. Thus, in a letter he branded Muhammad Ahmad as 'an apostate of religion and a renegade'.

Why should there be a contradiction between Imam al-Mahdi as non-violent bringer of universal peace and his being a fighter for justice? The shining example of martyr Nimr Baqir al-Nimr shows it is possible. An indomitable, non-violent advocate of the human rights of his community in the Eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Nimr's combat was not by the sword but by 'the roar of the word'. He did not agitate for a violent uprising against the Saudi regime, but for equality, for religious freedom, for an end to discrimination against his people. An activist in the protests that followed the Arab Spring in 2011, he was an inspiration amongst the young. Yet the authorities shot him, jailed and tortured him, before cruelly executing him. *'The Lion of Qatif'* is thus a shining example of a martyr for freedom who rejects violence as a means to achieving his just ends. Might Sheikh al-Nimr represent 'type', a hint given before end, of the Awaited Imam al-Mahdi to come?

I am aware of putative hadiths situating Imam al-Mahdi's eventual manifestation against a background of apocalyptic signs and catastrophic events. A lurid scenario of *fitna* and *fasad*. Dissension and corruption. Trials and tribulations,

earthquakes, attacking armies being swallowed up, bloodshed, killings galore, universal fear... 'You will see the graves of dead people and wish to be one of them', a tradition has it. Violent stuff. You cannot dismiss it out of hand. How to understand it? A task for serious scholars of Islam, primarily. Some will say that many of those events are instantiated in our own time and so the coming of the Mahdi is near, very near. Fantasy, wishful thinking or...reality?

A hadith tells of a fabulous treasure buried in Mecca, near the Kaaba. Mohsin, a Sufi friend, glosses the story in this way: 'Quite a story. I should imagine that many a Muslim may wish to travel to Mecca and search for the treasure. It would be a difficult task because the Saudi guards are posted everywhere near the Kaaba. If they saw anyone digging the ground in the vicinity, he would be arrested. Well, a man from Baghdad did just that. You see, he had had a dream in which a jinn revealed to him the exact location, the precise spot where the treasure was buried, so he travelled to the holy city to find the fabulous treasure. He was a trader, not very well off and thought the treasure would have solved all his problems. Immediately in Mecca, as he started digging, he was apprehended. The guards took him to their commanding officer who asked him roughly what he was trying to do. The man told him of his dream, at which the officer laughed out loud and he said: "My friend, what a fool you are! I too had a similar dream the other night. A jinn gave me a detailed description of a house with a well and a garden in Baghdad where a huge hoard of gold was buried. But, unlike you, I am not a gullible idiot. I wouldn't dream of quitting my job and flying to Baghdad and searching for a non-existent treasure.

Now go! You are too simple-minded to be a criminal. Just get out of Mecca fast, all right?" The man obeyed. He went back home happy. Because he had recognised from the officer's description his own house. Back home he dug up the ground and, lo and behold, he found the treasure!

Mohsin paused, letting the meaning of the tale sink in. I thought I had read it before somewhere – in the 'Thousand and One Nights'? - never mind. I could see the point. Like the buried treasure, the Hidden Imam is already here. He is near, very near the seeker, maybe hiding inside the seeker's hearts. Through the deeds of the pious the Mahdi is already at work in the world to redress the world's wrongs. From destruction of the environment to oppressive rulers, exploitative capitalists, greedy bankers, usurious financiers and so on. Note that the story does not mention any violence. The treasure is sought and discovered without blood being shed. A bit too naive? The dilemma of how to realise justice and equity on earth when faced with their ugly opposites cannot be conjured out of existence simply by telling a parable. Still, I feel the life of Sheikh Nimr gestures at how to do it. If martyrdom is the price, so be it. Isn't that what Jesus Son of Mary showed by his own life? Well, in the end God knows best.

I plead guilty to it. I love the vision of a Hidden Mahdi who at his unveiling confounds traditional expectations. By divinely-bestowed grace, this Rightly-Guided One is a Redeemer who inspires and directs souls adrift into a distorted world by the magnetic attraction of his righteousness, albeit non-violently. Some mystical literary

fiction harmonises with that. I have in mind another short story by writer Jorge Louis Borges, *The Approach to al-Muta'sim*. I once presented a paper analysing this Sufi tale to a conference held at a secret venue. It caused no splash. Few seemed interested or responded. Maybe an ironic vindication of the thesis I am suggesting? When the Hidden Imam eventually appears, he will so intrigue the faithful that they at first will fail to recognise him. Or, perhaps, like the Jesus of the Russian story, he will be feared and opposed by some of his own people. I hope and pray that the opposite will be true. That the Mahdi and Jesus will be joyfully welcome and together inaugurate a new era of love and peace on earth, insh'allah!

SUFFERING: PRELUDE TO REDEMPTION

The novelist Somerset Maugham had trained as a doctor. In his autobiography, *The Summing-Up*, he says that as a schoolboy he had been taught the Christian idea that suffering has a redemptive value. Later, as a young man, he trained as a doctor. It was then that what he saw in medical wards persuaded him that such a view was wrong. He felt that suffering stunted and impoverished patients, mentally and physically. He did not perceive any spiritual elevation, any inner refinement or meaning brought on by much anguish and pain. That sad realisation led Maugham to lose his faith in a benevolent and loving God.

Maugham was a sensitive and gifted writer. Pity he failed to see that there is a difference between voluntary and involuntary suffering. Maugham's patients had not freely

chosen to suffer. They had not of their own free will embraced their pain as means to redemption. It came on them as a necessity imposed by physiological conditions over which they had no control. That is not always the case. The example of Jesus Christ is that of a suffering freely embraced, at God's behest. On that basis the Church teaches that suffering is not a brute, disagreeable fact about the human condition. It may yield redemption. The supreme and normative example being that of the sacrifice of the Cross. A supernatural event willed by God as indispensable to the salvation of humanity, to which Jesus freely submitted. Accordingly, article 31 in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer states that: 'The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world'. And the Catholic Catechism teaches that it is 'love to the end that confers on Christ's sacrifice its value as redemption and reparation'.

Many mystics have focussed on the Passion of Christ to the radical point of wanting to share in his sufferings. St Francis of Assisi did it. At the end of his life the great Saint received on his flesh the stigmata – bleeding marks corresponding to those left on Christ's body by the nails and spear at his Crucifixion. And today in the Philippines you find passionate extremists who literally have themselves nailed to a Cross, just before Easter, in order to share in Christ's agony.

It is distinctive of the Shia' tradition that it spiritually focuses on the martyrdom of Imams like Ali, Hasan and Husayn. Suffering then takes on a more profound meaning and purpose. Like Jesus, Husayn had voluntarily accepted his martyrdom. His cruel death at the hands of his unrighteous enemies was not shirked, as it would be unbecoming to the grandson of the Prophet. No, the Imam saw his ordeal as a heavenly imperative, because willed from on high. A

foreordained event, leading to liberation from tyranny. Every year during Muharram, in the rites of Ashura, devout Shia' Muslims commemorate the sacrifice of Husayn and his companions with the utmost sorrow and passion. Some commentators have seen a parallel between the Shia' position concerning the spiritual benefits of innocent suffering and the Christian view, despite the obvious differences in doctrine. Well, why not?

IMAM ALI: HERO OF IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

'Who killed Imam Ali?' demanded Hasan, the Beirut cherub, in the *Café du Liban*. More than a question, it sounded like an accusation. Out of the blue. To my friends, sipping cups of excellent *qawwa arabya* in the souk. They were chatting in what Hasan thought was Saudi-accented Arabic and they quickly got the message.

Unflustered, Yaqoub answered: 'Brother, we aren't Saudis. We are Kuwaitis. And, if you want to know, we are Shia. Brother Uasim here is a *seyyed*'.

Hasan brightened up. Muttered a sort of apology. Made me think, though. His abrupt question had an intensity...A melange of remembrance, rancour and grief. It said a lot about Shia'-self-consciousness.

Imam Ali was assassinated while at prayer in the Kufa chief mosque by a certain Ibn Muljam. He was a *khawariji*. A word meaning, roughly, a secessionist, 'one who goes out'. A

member of a fanatical, irrational sect that rejected the slightest compromise in politics, never mind how necessary and reasonable. The *khawarij* gang's anger was directed at Ali because he had accepted arbitration at the battle of Siffin. (Some see the ISIS fighters of our time as latter-day incarnations of the *khawarij* movement. It is said that they consider the Kaaba as idolatrous and have vowed to destroy.) Actually, Ibn Muljam's motives were not purely ideological. He was infatuated with a woman whose relative had fallen in a battle led by Ali. Killing the Imam was the price the wicked woman requested. Maybe reminiscent of Herod's concubine demanding the head of St John the Baptist. Ibn Muljam never reaped the rewards of his infamous act, however. After Ali died, Ibn Muljam was dutifully executed by Imam Hasan.

Is the Shia' veneration of Imam Ali excessive? No. Ali Shariati helpfully explains: 'We Shia' have not, as some accuse us, added Imam Ali to the Prophet Muhammad. We have Imam Ali to better join ourselves to the Prophet Muhammad'. So, what about this great Ali?

The Caliphate of Husayn's father, Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son in law, was beset by challenges, severe tests and trials. Another challenge is how to properly understand them. As well as how to analyse Ali's response.

Did Imam Ali lack in political ability and cunning? Or was he a victim of events beyond his control? Or maybe just bad luck? Whatever the answers, human-centred categories like political leadership, success and failure must be seen against the crucial background of transcendence. Any conventional judgments concerning Ali's rule is misleading if not viewed in

reference to a total, spiritual and theological-political picture of his significance in true Islam. Ali's deep religious piety, his military prowess and, above all, his sense of Islamic fairness are among his greatest strengths. The exceptional honour and authority that many thoughtful Muslims, both at the exoteric and the esoteric levels, assign to this Lion of Islam point to a recognition of his overall virtues as a supreme champion and role model of religion .

Ali as emblem. Ali the Lion of God's religion. Wahab al-Kalbi, the obscure Nazarene who fought with Ali's son at Karbala, must have been aware of that virile sobriquet. It would have evoked to him the image of another Lion of God: Jesus Christ, whom the Apocalypse of St John calls the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Here is an unlikely, shocking spiritual connection. Jesus and Ali. Despite being separated by six centuries and diverse histories, the Lion symbol links them together. A symbol meaning courage and strength and authority. But note the rich ambiguity of this image. Because the Bible refers to the Devil as 'a roaring lion' who prowls about in search of victims to devour. A roaring lion! A violent image, as the roar of a lion is terrifying. Christ as a Lion also roars but it is the infinitely awesome roaring of the Messiah. And the Apocalypse in violent paradox combines the image of the Lion with that of the Lamb, because Jesus Christ puts aside his strength to lay down his life in supreme sacrifice for the salvation of others. The deaths of Imams Ali and Husayn also evoke the idea of a redeeming sacrifice, as the Tazieh play I saw in Leicester memorably conveyed...

Beyond iconography, Ali's vindication ultimately must lie in the realm of transcendence. In the *Najhul al-Balagha* the Imam says:

'I am faced with men who do not obey when I order and do not respond when I call them'. He goes on to reproach the miscreants: 'What are you waiting to rise for the cause of Allah?' And he adds: 'I stand amongst you shouting and I am calling you for help but you do not listen...'

You might be justified in reading this passage as expressing the sentiment that Imam Ali often felt let down by people who should have been on his side. The above quotations are confirmed by another sentence attributed to the Lion of Islam, reported by the historian Al-Tabari:

'By Allah! Since I became Caliph things have continually gone against me and diminished me, and I never attained anything I should'.

Why was the Imam confronted by such terrible incomprehension and disobedience? Again, the answer lies in the dimension of transcendence. Unless Imam Ali's figure is understood in that context, the picture of the hero is truncated. 'Transcendence' is a word of Latin origin, literally meaning 'to go beyond'. Its spiritual sense is 'going beyond all finite being and existence'. It designates God and His unique mode of relationship with the world. He transcends the world because He is other than the world. His power is not limited or circumscribed or exhausted by the realm of the finite: the immanent, the limited, the merely earthly. Therefore when reflecting on key events in the life of the Lion of Islam – such

as those situated in the immanent, historical, everyday world
- you should never lose sight of the higher dimension of
transcendence.

THE KILLING OF UTHMAN

Although Ali had taken no part in Uthman's murder, after he received the Caliphate his inheritance was troubled by the burden of his predecessor's death. Leaving aside the matter of whether Uthman was genuinely entitled to the Caliphate, historian Tabari comments that Ali vehemently affirmed his innocence and swore personally to stab Uthman's murderers 'unless Allah should will otherwise'. In the *Najhul al-Balagha* the Imam indeed rebuts those who blamed him for killing Uthman, saying: 'I am the contesteer against those who break away from Faith and the opponent of those who entertain doubts.' Ali was defending the rights and privileges of early Muslims, against the traditional Quraysh elite hiding behind Uthman, i.e. those striving to maintain their self-seeking control over the Islamic *Umma*. Thus, the Imam's political challenges started, so to speak, because he sought to uphold genuine Islamic principles.

This is important because it implicitly relates to a Qur'an verse:

"Take not life which God has made sacred, except for a just cause and if anyone is slain unjustly we have given him authority to demand *qisas* or to forgive but let him not

exceed bounds in the matter of taking life.' *Sura al-An'am* (6), 151.

The crux of the matter is: was Uthman killed lawfully or not? If it is true that Uthman's caliphate was trampling over the rights of Muslims in general, then a juristic argument could be made for the justness of his killing. Admittedly, a complex question to decide. However, if Imam Ali as *khalifa* was upholding the rights of the generality of the faithful against the privileges of the few, his stance would be morally vindicated.

THE BATTLE OF SIFFIN

A crucial test Imam Ali encountered as a Caliph was at Siffin. The *Amir al Muminin* was leading his army against that of Mu'awiya, the governor of Syria, his scheming enemy. The course of the battle was going in Ali's favour until the moment when the enemy soldiers affixed verses of the Qur'an to their spears. It was an appeal to arbitration, or a consultation of the Holy Book, to decide the issue. Both sides were presumably disturbed by the shedding of Muslim blood. However, the episode can also be seen as a wily stratagem by Ali's enemies to prevent his military victory.

Three points are relevant:

First, the secessionists. Amongst those who turned away from Ali after Siffin were the notorious *Khawarij*, or the

secessionists. Literally, 'those who went out'. Extremists who perpetrated atrocities against fellow Muslims who did not share their ideas. (The *Khawarij*'s own leader was closely watched. If he committed the smallest deviation from extremism, he was immediately removed.) They accused the Imam of more than making a tactical mistake or a false step. They claimed he had actually committed a *kabirah*, a grave sin. *La hukma illa lillah* – no decision save God's decision, was their battle-cry. In the *Najhul al-Balagha* we find the Imam astutely responding to the *Kharijite* extremists.

'It is true the verdict is from Allah', he said, 'but these people say that governance is only for Allah...Through the ruler (meaning the Caliph) tax is collected, enemy is fought, roadways are protected and the right of the weak is taken from the strong till the virtuous enjoys peace and allows protection from the wicked.'

In other words, Imam Ali pointed out how government is necessary. The rule of the *Khalifa* for Muslims does not contradict the rule of God on earth but it affirms it and makes it practically real and effective in the life of men. Similarly, in the New Testament, the *Incil*, St Paul states that all rule, all power belongs to God, yes, but that the state is still necessary to enforce God's law against wrongdoers. It is a sound principle and a sound doctrine.

Second, the charge against Ali of having accepted arbitration and hence having compromised his authority. It was a mistake, critics say. Well, if it was a compromise, since when is compromise a sin in human politics? The prophet Muhammad himself was strongly criticised for the

'compromise' of the treaty of Hdaybiyyah, which led eventually to his conquest of Mecca. The Prophet was willing to accept political compromises when necessary. They were useful to him and eventually led to his ultimate success. The art of making compromises is part of a statesman's skills. In that sense, a fair observer can judge that Ali was not wrong in accepting arbitration at Siffin. He did the right thing. What perhaps was unlucky for him – if you look at this exclusively from the limited perspective of immanence – was not the compromise itself but the consequences that flowed from it, such as the disproportionate, extreme reaction of the *Kharijites*.

Some believe that while besieged in the Iraqi desert, prior to the battle of Karbala, Ali's son contemplated the prospect of coming to terms with the opposing army. He would then have regarded a possible compromise as compatible with maintaining his honour and integrity. According to Tabari, Imam Husayn, having realised the hopelessness of his plight, was willing to return to Medina. That is the opinion also of Nishaburi, a Shia writer. Husayn met with Ibn Sa'd and discussed a possible withdrawal, Nishaburi relates. It was Ibn Ziyad, who governed Basra and Kufa for Caliph Yazid, who rejected the offer, fiendishly hell-bent on exterminating the family of the Prophet. However, mainstream Shia accounts have denied that Husayn ever dreamt of compromising his mission, as his martyrdom was in conformity with God's will. A predestined event. That may well be the truth. The intrepid nature of Ali's son accords better with the latter, traditional interpretation. Still, the existence of the alternative account – not necessarily meant to denigrate the Imam – reinforces the

notion that righteousness and compromise are not always incompatible.

When Ali agreed to the arbitration he certainly did not intend to bargain away his title of *Amir al Muminin*. It was Abu Musa al-Ashari, Ali's arbitrator (not chosen by him), who agreed later to omit the title from the arbitration agreement. That was al-Ashari mistake, or perhaps deliberate malice, not the Imam's fault.

Third, *Najhul al-Balagha* has Imam Ali saying: 'We did not name people arbitrators but we named Qur'an arbitrator.' He also quotes the Qur'an:

'And then if you differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and his Messenger' Sura an-Nisa' (4), 59.

So the Imam did not object to the correctness of invoking the Qur'an in the dispute. He went on to say that by both the criteria of the Qur'an and the Sunna a faithful interpreter would see that his own claim of Commander of the Faithful was just.

SOME KEY QUESTIONS

In the light of the events that flowed out of battle of Siffin, doubts have been raised about the Imam's political ability. There is no question concerning Ali's courage, strength and military valour. His own mother had named him 'a lion', alluding to his phenomenal power as a warrior. At the battle of Khaybar, after Umar had fought unsuccessfully all day, the Prophet entrusted his standard to Ali, saying: 'I give this standard to a man who loves God and his Prophet, and who is loved in return. He will hold it aloft valiantly.' Then Muhammad ordered Ali to take Khaybar. A difficult task, as one of the city's fortresses had a massive iron gate. It was so heavy that four men were needed to open it. Ali alone, by himself, took the gate off its hinges. Because his shield had been cut into two by an enemy, Ali then with a single hand grabbed the gate and used it as a shield. And there are many more reports testifying to Ali's exceptional, Samson-like martial ability.

Military prowess is only one amongst the qualities useful in a leader. There are others. The most important virtue in a statesman is justice and that virtue Ali definitely possessed. According to historian al-Tabari, at the battle of Khaybar the Jewish defenders surrendered on certain conditions. One was they should continue to cultivate their date plantations, though giving half of the harvest each year to the Prophet. After Muhammad's death and Umar had become Caliph, orders came to expel the Jews from Arabia. The Jews went to Ali, showed him the treaty and complained:

'Look at this treaty. It guarantees our rights. Has it not been signed by Muhammad? Have you not yourself witnessed it? And now Umar wants to throw us out. That is unjust.'

Ali's innate sense of fairness moved him to intercede with Umar on behalf of the Jews but the Caliph was deaf to his request. The Jews were forced to abandon their homes, fields and depart. Al-Tabari adds an interesting comment: 'This is the reason why to this day the Jews love Ali and not Umar'.

The Prophet confirmed the high status Ali held in his eyes. Again, Tabari narrates that hypocrites in Medina were spreading the rumour that Muhammad had little trust in him. Ali reported it to the Prophet, who responded: 'They lie. Because I consider you like another myself and I have entrusted you with my family and my household. You are for me what Aaron was to Moses. Was it at all conceivable that there could another Prophet after me, it would be you.' Can a higher praise be imagined?

Back to the question of the virtues necessary to a statesman. First, I observe that Ali's conduct towards Aisha after the battle of the Camel suggests not just honour and generosity but also a distinct, far-sighted political acumen. Al-Tabari again describes how respectfully Ali, the victor, acted towards Aisha. He behaved towards her in an exemplary manner and indeed even punished with the lash two men who had abused Aisha verbally. Later he had Aisha sent back to Mecca with an escort and all honours. That argues for wisdom and political skill. Had the Imam treated Aisha harshly, it would most likely have alienated many of his

followers. He did not do so and thus he demonstrated both spiritual and political leadership.

Thus, Ali was both deeply spiritual and a possessor of political skills. His behaviour after Siffin indicates that he indeed had a key quality in a statesman: flexibility, the skill to act wisely in specific, contingent circumstances.

Second, at the peril of repetition, I want reiterate what just said above about Ali's valour. The Amir al-Muminin is also a leader in the sense of being a commander of the Muslim armies. In many battles Ali displayed legendary courage. His nickname of 'lion' proves it. Ali was victorious in all the battles fought during the life of the Prophet, as well as the ones he headed as a Caliph. A Commander of the Faithful must have the capacity to be an able general on the battlefield and the Lion of Islam certainly was that. The Imam was never defeated in battle but fell under the dagger of an assassin while at prayer.

Third, even allowing that contingent historical events, the circumstances, conspired against Ali's political aims, so that he was ultimately the victim of events beyond his control, is political success necessarily a mark of moral or spiritual worth? If the answer is 'yes', a tyrant and mass murderer like Stalin should be revered as an admirable and exemplary statesman. Stalin, Churchill's chum and England's wartime ally, led the Soviet Union to political and military victory in WWII and died, still as ruler of the Soviet Union, in his bed. However, such an atheistic tyrant and monster - responsible for fifty million deaths - could never be a moral exemplar.

Stalin was a murderous *taghuti* despot, not a hero in any sense, neither of immanence nor of transcendence.

WAS IMAM ALI UNLUCKY?

To reiterate, it looks as if Imam Ali's rule as a Caliph suffered from a remarkable degree of bad luck. There are passages in the *Najhul al-Balagha* in which he seems to concede that much:

'I looked around but found no one to shield me, protect me except members of my family.'

The category of bad luck is a questionable one for a believer in the supremacy of transcendence, in the principle that ultimately Divine Providence governs the world of space and time. The celebrated philosopher Immanuel Kant denied that the moral worth of a man could be affected by contingent events, such a misfortune. He wrote:

'A good will is good not because of what it affects or accomplishes...but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself...Even if hit by a special disfavour of fortune...it would still shine like a jewel, as something which has its full worth in itself...usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add anything to this worth nor take anything away from it.'

Thus, Kant claimed that no amount of bad luck can destroy what he calls a 'holy will', the will of a person acting according to the moral law, the rational capacity for righteousness.

Misfortune places limitations on human endeavours but it can never force a righteous agent to act in an unrighteous way, like deliberately performing evil acts. For example, the Greek philosopher Plato described his teacher Socrates as arguing that it is worse to suffer wrong than to do wrong. And the philosopher Plotinus denied that even an excruciating death under torture can rob a just man of his virtue. Therefore no putative reversal of fortune could be an insurmountable impediment to leading a virtuous and noble life. Serious examination of Ali's life evinces that he ruled according to the key principles of Islam. Moreover, as the *Najhul al-Balagha* shows, it was a life lived with a great sense of personal humility. His relative, earthly misfortune did not force him into evil, tyranny or despotism. In this sense, Imam Ali rose morally and spiritually, as a hero of transcendence, above any putative political, contingent 'failures'.

WHAT COUNTS AS FAILURE? WHAT COUNTS AS SUCCESS?

Failure is a word with pejorative connotations. But...what does it mean?

First, not all human cultures consider failure as an ultimately bad thing. Japanese tradition provides the interesting example of a 'nobility of failure'. The failed hero is not despised in Japan. On the contrary, he is a highly revered person. He is one who pits himself against the odds and, even when events eventually overwhelm him, his culture honours and glorifies him. There is nothing shameful about being a failed hero, therefore. A poetic analogy refers to the autumnal falling of the cherry blossoms. The cherry flowers' scattering is a symbol of impermanence. It alludes to the evanescence of human life, but it is also beautiful. Writer Ivan Morris suggests that the young, suicidal Kamikaze pilots of WWII point to the same cult of failure as not shameful but ultimately as beautiful as the falling blossoms.

An unduly romantic idea? It might appear so but what underlies and fleshes it out, so to speak, is the category of transcendence, the Unseen. What appears as failure in human eyes is something very different when contemplated from the perspective of the Divine. This is a clue of the deep significance of Ali's life and personality. It refers back to the Holy. To what is not merely contingent and temporal but necessary and eternal. Success must not be measured by the standards of the former but by reference to those of the latter, the nature of the Divine. In this crucial sense, Imam Ali

must indeed be regarded as a victorious, conquering hero of transcendence.

It must also be remembered that the Imam was not in charge of any secular polity but of the Islamic state. The *Khilafa* concept encompasses normative, religious and ethical criteria. Professor Kennedy points out how Ali's rule stressed both 'the importance of the equality of believers and the religious role of the caliph or *imam* (spiritual guide)'. Hence, Ali's leadership should be properly judged as a whole. The evaluation should include, first, Ali's deep Islamic piety, a practice that straddles both categories of immanence and transcendence. The seen and the unseen. (The *Najihul al-Balagha* is replete with evidence of that. Amongst other things, it is a veritable treasure trove of Muslim spiritual teachings.) Significantly, Ali is said to have been born in the Kaaba and to be one of the ten people to whom the Prophet promised paradise.

Second, Ali's sense of justice and his commitment to the cause of less advantaged Muslims matter a lot. Historian Hugh Kennedy writes that concern for a just government and 'for underprivileged Muslims' was part of the appeal of Ali and of his descendants throughout early Islam. I would add: and for centuries to come.

Third, evidence of Imam Ali's deep success is amply indicated by his *post mortem* status as a supreme Muslim hero both among Muslim Shia' communities and indeed amongst the Sufi tradition. The existence of an crucial collection of texts like the *Najihul al-Balagha* is a further proof of that.

To recapitulate. Imam Ali was appointed *Amir al-Muminin* in excessively difficult circumstances, referred to in the *Najhul al-Balagha*, following the killing of his predecessor, Uthman. The arbitration which followed after the battle of Siffin entailed a set of new problems and challenges. However, on the whole the Imam dealt with them shrewdly, giving proof of political, military and pragmatic acumen. Indeed, his conduct towards the Prophet's widow, Aisha, after the battle of the Camel, suggests both wisdom and magnanimity. Thus, it would not be correct to judge that Ali was politically naive or, worse, inept.

Having considered notions like 'success' and 'bad luck' in the light of the political career of the Imam, I conclude that, first, success should be measured not solely by earthly, human criteria but in the light of the category of transcendence. Second, that no idea of misfortune or adverse luck can ultimately affect the moral and spiritual status of a figure like Ali ibn Abi Talib. The evidence is that he saw himself and his rule primarily as defender of the rights and equality of the mass of Muslims, as opposed to the privileges of the Quraysh clique. In this decisive sense it is justified to call Ali a hero not just of transcendence, of the unseen, but also of immanence, the seen, this visible world here below, insofar as he fought for justice for the exploited and downtrodden believers.

In the end, of course, the full, complete truth on these matters, as the *Najhul al-Balagha* itself often indicates, is known only to God.

PROPHET MUHAMMAD'S FONDNESS FOR HIS GRANDCHILDREN

There is a touching story about little Ali Asghar. (*'Asghar'* means younger.) Supposedly this Ali was Husayn's youngest child. Only six months old at Karbala. The youngest to be slain, by a cruel, three-headed arrow. However, the historicity of this episode is disputed. A scholarly text I have consulted makes no mention of such Husayn's baby at Karbala. This source only tells of a 'newly-born martyr', an infant who had just been born, killed by an arrow into his tiny throat. It does not specify whose child this baby was. What to believe? I leave it to scholars to judge but history is only one part of the answer. The meaning and the import of it interest me more. The reason why pious Muslim people liked listening to this type of narrative – indeed, to any type of hagiography - is because it appealed to their deep feelings, their emotions. Sentiments connected with their deepest spiritual needs. Likewise, the meaning of the legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood is independent of whether such persons ever existed or not. The story of Arthur is that of just and chivalrous English leader who valiantly fight to protect his people from the forces of darkness. And the story of Robin Hood is that of a chief who takes away from the rich and gives to the poor. That explains why ordinary people liked both stories – and always will. Similarly, the point of the Ali Asghar story is that it vividly illustrates the inhumanity of the massacre of Karbala. What could be more atrocious than the killing of an innocent baby? That is what is important and perennial about such

figure, even if he never existed. Karbala was a slaughter. That cannot be denied. That is my rationale for telling the story of little Ali Asghar at Karbala.

‘Oblivious of the unfolding drama, of his own impending martyrdom, the tiny lad sleeps in his cradle. His father looks on him with infinite love. He takes the infant on his knees, kisses him and caresses the cute little face, the tiny lips and nose. Husayn’s own childhood flashes before his eyes as he does that. He sees himself and his brother Hasan on their grandfather’s knees. The Prophet’s inordinate fondness for his grandchildren is touching. ‘My dear little ones, you are like the fragrance of God!’ he exclaims. Muhammad knows how to bond with kids, his little bundles of joy. He showers them with affection. He is a granddad not afraid of skin-to-skin contact with the little ones. He instinctively knows the language of love. He rocks, holds and pat them, plays with them. They run between his legs, romps about him. Husayn remembers the Prophet’s voice, his tones, his whispers, his advice, how he taught him to pray. How lovingly the Prophet laughed when he held him in his arms and his own fun, his laughs in response.... Who says babies can’t think? He was thinking all the time, thinking of his grandfathers, his parents, the beauty of religion, the Qur’an, the Angel Gabriel, battles against the polytheists, the holy Kaaba...He climbs on his grandfather’s back while he is at prayer and the Prophet, not to spoil the pleasure of his grandson, continues to pray unaffected. And Muhammad once takes him up on the

mimber, the mosque's pulpit, and preaches the sermon with Husayn by him.

Once he and his brother come into the mosque, tottering about, as their grandfather is preaching. Solicitous of the boys' safety, Muhammad interrupts the sermon, comes down from the pulpit and lifts them up into his arms....Husayn beholds all these memories, like a film screened before his inner imagination. He then takes in his arms his innocent child, suffering from unbearable thirst, and walks towards the besiegers, asking for water. The heartless response is an arrow aimed at Husayn. Ali Asghar, it is said, twists his little neck to take the arrow unto him throat and save his father. So perishes the youngest martyr of Karbala.'

Baby Ali Asghar. The perfect embodiment of an innocent victim. Wahab al-Kalbi, the Christian, looks on the atrocious crime with horror. Once again, an innocent little one is dying. And more will follow suit. He has no illusions about mercy from such bestial foe. Shades of the massacre King Herod planned to destroy the child Jesus. The tragedy of Bethlehem occurs once again across space and time. From Galilee to Karbala. A baby dies because an inhuman tyrant wants to crush innocence, beauty and truth in the cradle. *Al-hamdulillah*, it only steadies the Christian hero in his purpose. Wahab al-Kalbi will fight on. And he will die at Karbala for the truth of the Cross, in the cause and ranks of Imam Husayn. As a token and pledge for the common battles to come between Christians and Muslims. Together, with God, against the whole world of scoundrels, kings and despots!

FOURTH WORD MISUNDERSTOOD: LOVE

'Love your enemies', Jesus commands. 'Turn the other cheek', he adds. Are they words misinterpreted, fostering a flawed, false view of Jesus Christ? Like the distorted image conjured up by John Wesley's sugary hymn: 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon this little child...'? Jesus as the 'Pale Galilean' mocked by the decadent poet Swinburne. Christ as the wan, weak, effete preacher from Galilee. The contrary ideal of the vigorous, lusty and imperious Roman pagans. Only a caricature, trust me.

J'accuse Nietzsche! The German philosopher who burlesqued what he travestied as Jesus in a raving tract, *Antichrist*. Injunctions like loving your enemies and resisting not evil, Nietzsche considered the most revealing sentences in the Gospels, key to understanding the message of Christianity. Jesus was a bloodless, feeble individual. Deficient in strength and power, he would not have been able to resist evil, hence he advised against it. A flaccid inability to fight that the Nazarene cunningly rationalised into a morality. The Christian ethics of love is built on that debility, that spinelessness, that psychic infirmity.

A caricature. Why? Three counterexamples. First: 'Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword', Jesus warns in St Matthew's Gospel. Nietzsche conveniently ignores passages like that. They do not fit his skewered portraits of a bloodless, pacifist Messiah. A sword is a warlike symbol. That is what Jesus wields, like a warrior. How so? Though perpetual peace is the ultimate end, the sword of divine justice is imperative for combating the wrongs of a broken, unjust world. A teaching that accords

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well with that Islam and the example of Imam Husayn. Words like that would have inspired Wahab al-Kalbi to fight alongside the Imam.

Second, Nietzsche keeps silent about Jesus cleansing the Jerusalem Temple by wielding a whip. In that non-peaceful manner he drove out the crooked money changers from the holy place. A pretty energetic deed. Not undertaken by a limp personality. The whip was the same kind of rough tool used to drive out cattle – certainly not a child’s toy. A forceful action that evoked in his disciples the line of a psalm: ‘Zeal for thy house will consume me’. Jesus’ righteous violence was in pursuit of God’s cause. A fury justified, good and holy. Defiling the Temple was a type of idolatry and the idols had to be overthrown. (Am I wrong in thinking of the Prophet Muhammad cleansing the Kaaba from idols?) The lesson is that wrongdoing and impurity are utterly offensive and unacceptable to a holy and righteous God. They cannot be tolerated, and the Messiah didn’t. So much for the meek and mild Jesus of John Wesley.

Third, consider the battles Jesus conducted against demons. Scattered throughout the Gospels you find accounts of suffering people possessed by evil spirits. In one case two men are mentioned, so deranged and dangerous that no one could go near them. In another, the victim is invaded by a multitude of demons. People had tried to subdue the man, bind him with chains and fetters but he was of such superhuman strength that he wrenched them apart. The demons tormented him all the time, causing him to cry out and lament day and night. Jesus tackled the demons boldly. He addressed them directly:

‘What is your name?’ he demanded.

'My name is legion, because we are many!' was the growling reply. Meant as a warning. 'We are strong!' One likely to discourage any faint-hearted person. Yet Jesus was not intimidated. He confronted the evil spirits head on and commanded them:

'Be cast out!'

The demons had no choice but to obey the Messiah's order. They flung themselves into a herd of pigs nearby - two thousand of them. Whereupon beasts in panick rushed down into the sea and drowned. A great story, underscoring the spiritual and physical force of the Messiah, *pace* old Nietzsche.

Did the demons realise they were fighting a rear guard action? That Jesus had already resisted and rebuffed their commander in chief, the Devil? In the wilderness, at the start of Jesus' public ministry, the Fiend had sought to divert him from his God-appointed path. The lures the Evil One dangled before the Messiah's eyes were formidable, virtually irresistible to ordinary mortals. Amazing miracles, lordship over of kingdoms, instant, worldwide abolition of hunger and poverty – Christ could have had them all but at a price: he had to fall down at Lucifer's feet and worship him. Jesus scorned that. 'Bugger off!' he basically told the devil. Lucifer then left him, his tail dangling between his scrawny legs. Another episode giving Nietzsche's calumny the lie. When he walked the earth Jesus did squarely face up to sin and injustice and he resisted them. Was he then contradicting his own precepts? No. Because, Jesus' words are not always meant as commands. Sometimes they function like advice or counsel. Addressed not to all hearers but to those who are able to make extra, beyond-the-call-of-duty commitments. Like monks and nuns. And Wahab al-Kalbi was no monk. That is

why he was entitled to resist evil, namely tyrant Yazid and his henchmen.

Not all evil is demonic. There are lesser varieties. But when the Book of Revelation speaks of the Beast rising out of the sea, uttering haughty and blasphemous words against God and making war on innocent believers, the evil in question is total, cosmic. No question of coming to terms with it. It must be fought. Still, there are more humdrum examples, from pickpockets to burglars. Jesus says they must be loved. A tough one. Loving someone who breaks into your house at night, endangering your loved ones and stealing your property? How do you do that? A real conundrum. St Augustine, a sharp theologian, maybe is helpful in dealing with it. What does 'love' mean in this context? Not love as Eros or sex but love as Agape. A Greek word meaning to care. To love someone, even your enemy, means to care for them, regardless of whether they are loveable or not. The Saint argued that when you stop a wrongdoer from doing wrong you are actually doing him good. Your action shows care, care for the real well-being of the criminal. In such cases you must love your enemy with '*benigna asperitate*', a certain benign severity. Apprehending a burglar and handing him over to the police may be an example of caring. Also, a legislator who seeks to pass a law bearing down on the poor should be opposed. That too is real caring. The politician would be held to account at the Last Judgment for his iniquitous law. You stop him from getting it into the statute book and so you benefit his eternal soul.

Turning the other cheek. Counsel or command? For St Augustine this refers to a 'disposition not of the body but of the heart'. Refraining from the passion of personal revenge. Not incompatible with justice. According to the Gospel of St John, Jesus himself was once struck on the face. It happened

just after he had been betrayed, arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and taken bound before the Jewish High Priest. A servant of that great authority did not like the way Jesus spoke and so he struck the Messiah with his hand, growling:

‘Is this the way to answer the High Priest?’

Jesus did not turn the other cheek. He didn’t behave like a doormat. Not as ‘gentle Jesus, meek and mild’ but as an injured, righteous person asking for justice:

‘If I have done wrong, bear witness to the wrong. If not, why do you strike me?’ he demanded.

Turning the other cheek then is not incompatible with demanding ‘why?’ A just reason. A good reason for being struck. It follows that Nietzsche’s caricature Christ in his ‘*Antichrist*’ is merely a libel. A wilful defamation with no basis in the actual person and teaching of Jesus as recorded in the sacred texts.

Postscriptum. Did Nietzsche at some stage have second thoughts about Jesus? Did he realise his mistake? A mind-blowing fragment in his ‘*Will to Power*’ holds out a tantalising hope: ‘*Roman Caesar with soul of Christ*’, he wrote. In a fragment dated 1884. (But it could be dated much later, as the book comprises thoughts extending over diverse periods.) Amazing! A Roman Emperor – a Hadrian, an Antoninus Pius, a Marcus Aurelius - with the soul of Jesus?! Aggressive Roman Eagle and lowly Cross combined? The Cross Nietzsche despised and reviled in ‘*Antichrist*’? Jesus and the *Urbemensch* as the same? Wow!

Maybe Nietzsche had already gone mad. Or maybe not...

If commentator Walter Kaufmann is right, in this fragment you glimpse how Nietzsche had come to envision a union of opposed qualities like compassion and toughness, love and power, spirituality and politics. Syntheses also well demonstrated in the person and mission of Imam Husayn – and this is not an after-thought!

THE CRISTEROS

Wahab fingers the blade of his sword. He is about to fight. For Imam Husayn and his little band. He will shed blood in the name of Him who died for the sake of humanity. Residual doubts linger. 'Is it really necessary....?' Until his good angel draws aside a celestial curtain and commands. 'Look and learn! Behold, Christians yet unborn. They too will have to resist evil. And die with weapons in their hands, to save freedom from a monstrous state. Like you are about to do!'

It is a strange scene Wahab now gazes on. People wear broad hats and ragged clothes Wahab has never seen and finds bizarre. They are not Arabs, impossible. But their faces shine with simplicity and goodness. Astonished, he notices that they wear crosses around their necks, as well as clutching strange arms, like long sticks of iron. The sticks make a frightening, deafening noise and their enemies, fall down. The fighters must be Christians, he reasons, because of the

crosses. But...who are they? Why are they killing other human beings?

‘They are called Cristeros, the angel explains. ‘People of Christ. Like yourself. In a faraway land, in a future yet unknown to you and to anybody else in your part of the world. They are forced to rise up to protect their families and children from wicked tyranny. All they want is to worship God and Christ in peace. To pray in their churches, attend Mass, receive the bread and wine, confess and take the Sacraments. Receive the grace and the peace their faith entitles them to. And they want their children to be taught their faith. They don’t want to fight and kill but have no choice. They must. To save their churches and priests from the Yazids, the tyrants of their epoch, who plot to exterminate them. That is the only way. Heroic women also fight with the men, forming female brigades. When captured, they are slaughtered outright. Often tortured horribly before being slain. After being hanged, their bodies are left to rot on the gallows, in plain view of the people...’

Wahab shudders. The angel goes on: ‘I could show you numberless atrocities committed against these fellow Christians of yours. Yes, they are obliged to kill in the name of Christ. But they never wanted to. They tried peaceful resistance first. It didn’t work. Violence was forced on them. They have to fight. The people are on their side. Many were martyred and now wear an imperishable crown of glory in Heaven. So, you see? Like them, you are not committing sin, because your struggle is just. Be confident of that. Wield your sword firmly and trust in God.’

The cross-wearing people the angel shows to Wahab al-Kalbi were indeed called Cristeros. Meaning 'Soldiers of Christ'. In the early twentieth century, these Mexican Catholics revolted against the iniquitous laws passed by the President of their country. A tyrant named Plutarco Calles. A renegade Christian, a vicious, immoral man. One of the many Yazids who have befouled human history. Like Stalin and Mao, Calles' plan was to create an atheist, materialist, anti-human state. The madman wanted to shut down God. To bar the Almighty from people's lives. As if one could stop the sun from shining! The main obstacle to that mad, vile goal was Christianity. A faith that affirms the existence of a Creator and his providential oversight over human history. Something Calles and his henchmen loathed with deep loathing. Hence the storm of hatred, the onslaught of savage state violence against Christians. A powerful Army was pitted against badly trained and poorly organised peasants. An epic struggle, immortalised by English writer Graham Green's his novel, *'The Power and the Glory'*. The martyrs invoked Christ together with the Virgin Mary. And the Church authorities backed the Cristeros. Their struggle was called a 'Cristiada'. Not a crusade but a righteous war for the freedom of man from godless oppression. Many were barbarously treated, shut up in foul jails, starved, tortured and eventually slain. Yet they still died praying, holding their prayer beads. Pope Pius XI himself defended the Cristiada. Dozens were officially proclaimed martyrs and saints. The Cristeros have been vindicated and with them, I think, any faithful believer who rises up against a monstrous tyranny.

IMAM HUSAYN: KARBALA'S NECESSARY SACRIFICE

At Karbala Imam Husayn was a victim of Umayyad violence. Victim... but victim in what sense? A sacrificial one? The victim as a scapegoat for the sins of the betrayed Islamic *Umma*? Of those benighted Muslims who after the Prophet's death failed to live up to his message of equality and justice?

The French writer Rene Girard conceives what he calls 'scapegoating' as a sacrificial mechanism essential to the peace of human societies. A scapegoat is a substitute. A surrogate victim. It is very ancient idea, taken from the Bible. In the Book of Leviticus the sins of the Hebrew people are symbolically placed on an innocent animal, a he-goat, and 'substituted' for the people's sins. The beast is then driven away into the desert, to be devoured by the demon Azazel. The sacrifice of the scapegoat was the price paid for the people's ritual regeneration and cleansing. Christ's sacrifice on the Cross for the sins of humanity is the ultimate replaying of the scapegoat ritual, with a human victim instead of an animal. But Girard warns that an essential condition for scapegoating to be effective when applied to a society is that the process must be unconscious. The perpetrators must be blind to the true meaning of what they are doing. They must see the victim as a dangerous enemy, whose destruction is necessary for the order and survival of others. So the humiliating passion and death of Jesus were perceived by his enemies as indispensable for the survival of Jewish nation. Thus St John's Gospel has the Jewish High Priest Caiaphas declare: 'It is better for you that a single man should die for

the people than the whole nation perish'. A sinister application of the scapegoating principle. Ironically, behind the savage mechanism God was at work. Jesus' sacrifice fulfilled the divine plan and, conversely, brought about the ruin of the Jewish establishment, the Sadducee party controlling the Temple. Forty years later the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem Temple and expelled all Jews from Jerusalem.

Did Husayn's death follow a similar pattern? Ibn Ziyad, Yazid's chief henchman at Karbala should perhaps be given the benefit of the doubt. He must have believed the Imam was a deadly threat to the cohesion and integrity of Islam. To the Damascus empire and its wordly conquests. That is why Yazid and Ziyad were determined to destroy the Prophet's grandchild, in the most cruel and bloodthirsty way. In their ignorance and stupidity, they might have believed that Husayn was really guilty. As a traitor, a subversive, a disrupter of society's peace. So the Imam was hounded, persecuted and destroyed, to the point of his body being trampled by horses. An odious task, which few soldiers were willing to do. Omar ibn Saad had to offer them money to persuade ten horsemen to run over Husayn's body. That they did several times, crushing his chest into the blood-soaked ground. Yet God had cast a veil over the persecutors' eyes. They plotted but, as the Qur'an intimates, 'God is the best of plotters'. Husayn's humiliation was instead his triumph. The shock Karbala imparted to all Muslims discredited the Damascus regime and eventually led to the fall of the Umayyads. Moreover, Husayn's sacrificial stance continues to inspire Muslims everywhere. It timelessly teaches the values of

resistance and struggle for God's cause. The Imam remains a shining emblem of indomitable resistance against oppression.

Modern culture is increasingly sensitive to the plight of victims. Minorities like the Rohingyas of Mianmar or the Uighurs of China's Eastern Turkestan . Yet, it is distinctive of Islamic ethos and tradition that victims do not embrace a merely passive role but often resist and fight back. So the Prophet Muhammad patiently suffered persecutions and slights in Mecca. Later, after the Hijra, in Medina he faced up to his enemies and fought them. Likewise, Husayn accepted his brother Hasan's compromise arrangement with Mu'awwiya's imperial rule until the latter's demise. It was then that he decided the time of struggle had come. He marched towards Kufa and at Karbala he died with the sword in his hands, fiercely combating his enemies till his last breath. It was a necessary sacrifice. The Imam's example has reverberated down the centuries. It has manifested itself with power through Ayatollah Khomeini's Iranian Revolution and it is still active and potent in the present.

HUSAYN AND ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

Damascus. The survivors of Karbala stand captive before the tyrant Yazid. The Imam's head is brought to the usurper Caliph, who has the blasphemous temerity to strike it on the mouth with a cane. Did the martyr's mouth speak to reproach the offender?

'O despicable man! You have sunk lower than your fellow criminal, the vile despot who dared to cut off the head of a Prophet of God! Herod ordered the abominable thing to be done, yet he did not go as far as you have. He did not strike John's head on the mouth. Verily, you have outdone even a Prophet's murderer. When your time comes, God will see to it that you pay the harshest penalty. And that will be soon!'

Near Yazid's palace, the scene of his dastardly deeds, rises today the great Umayyad's Mosque. Inside the masjid, under a green-domed marble shrine, a holy relic is kept. The head of St John the Baptist. John, Jesus' kinsman. A holy figure constituting a beautiful spiritual link between the three main Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In the Qur'an St John is called Yahya. A name related to the Arabic word '*hayya*'. Meaning to make alive or to quicken. An allusion not only to the prodigy of Yahya's birth – his father Zachariah being over 100 years old and his mother barren until then – but also to his prophetic mission to renew the flagging faith of his people.

The Qur'an mentions Yahya several times but most of the narratives about his nativity are from Sura al-Imran and Sura Maryam. The similarities between those passages and what the Gospel of St Luke narrates about the Baptist are striking. In both texts the good news of the Prophet's birth is announced by an angel. Another instance is that his father Zachariah remains speechless for three days. Yahya '*shall be noble, pure, a Prophet among the righteous*', the angel proclaims.

The Gospels are mysteriously silent about Jesus' physical looks. By contrast, St John's lifestyle and personality are graphically conveyed. He lives in the wilderness, wears a rough garment of camel's hair and a leather girdle about his waist. He feeds on wild berries and honey. The Qur'an calls him 'chaste' which harmonizes well with the Gospel account. Yet, this John is no detached, other-worldly ascetic. A fiery, messianic preacher, he summons the Hebrew people to repentance, to beg forgiveness for their sins and to undergo a purification rite – baptism – in the River Jordan. His language is forthright: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you of the wrath to come?' Unless the sinners change their minds and their hearts, he warned them, they would be thrown into the fire of Hell.

Prophet Yahya perished, like Imam Husayn, at the hands of an infamous creature, Herod Antipas. Not the King Herod who tried to kill baby Jesus but one of his sons. A lesser despot, a puppet monarch installed by the pagan Roman occupiers with the title of Tetrarch, a ruler over part of Palestine, including Galilee. This Herod was furious with John because the

Prophet had publicly preached against him, accused him of adultery – Herod having married his brother’s wife, Herodias. An unlawful act in Jewish law. So Herod, goaded by his wife, much desired to kill the Prophet of God but he dared not. The people’s admiration for the Baptist was such that the despicable man, a coward at heart, was afraid. He fell back on the safer course of imprisoning St John in the harsh fortress of Macherus, by the Red Sea. From there John sent messengers to Jesus, to inquire whether he was the awaited Messiah, the Bible relates.

The Gospel’s description of St John’s death is harrowing. On Herod’s birthday his wife’s beautiful daughter, Salome, danced before him. She knew how to stimulate the flagging passions of the old lecher and danced before him the erotic dance of the seven veils. A sort of belly-dancing or, if you prefer, strip-tease. That turned on Herod so much that he told the girl: ‘Salome, ask me for anything and I will give it to you. I swear!’ The wicked mother then prompted her wanton daughter: ‘My dear, this is our chance to revenge ourselves on that turbulent Prophet who branded you and I as strumpets. Ask your father for the Baptist’s head!’ And she did. Herod the hypocrite pretended to be sorry but he readily gave in. So Yahya was beheaded and the head brought to the girl on a dish. After that John’s followers buried his body, then they went and told Jesus.

Was there perhaps a Salome amongst Yazid’s many concubines? Someone who incited him to have Husayn’s head stuck on a spear and brought to Damascus? And to insult the noble head by striking it on the mouth with a stick? The caliph

was notorious for his penchant for flute girls and other decadent pleasures. That would make sense, would it not? Although there is no tradition to that effect, it would have been in keeping with the tyrant's debauchery. He was known as a wine bibber and under the influence of drink he was easy to sway. Indeed, he called for a banquet and wine to be drunk in celebration of the slaughter of Karbala. But it is an unnecessary speculation. Besides, it would shift the burden of the guilt on someone else. Yazid's vileness should not be mitigated. There is a story that the night after he had slighted the severed head of his victim, Yazid had a dream. The Imam's gory head appeared to him, floating before his very eyes and then speaking with a voice of thunder: 'O savage beast, you have enjoyed striking my mouth when I could not defend myself. Now it is my time to answer back!' The terrified Yazid then felt a mighty blow on his face, as if he had been struck with a heavy hammer. His mouth felt full of blood and he spat out broken teeth. 'Who...what has done this?' he stammered. 'I have asked an angel to avenge me a little. He is one the angels who cried in Heaven at the instant when I was slain', Husayn's terrifying head answered, adding: 'That is nothing. Much more still to come...' And the Imam's lips recited the verses from the Qur'an in which the punishments of *Jehannum* are depicted in all their horror. When he woke up, drenched in a cold sweat and his mouth hurting like hell, Yazid was so frightened that he wanted to see Husayn's sister, to beg forgiveness from her, but his hard-hearted counsellors dissuaded him and he did nothing. On the Day of Judgement the monster will get his comeuppance, I trust.

ST JOHN-YAHYA POINTS AT THE TRUTH

All Christians, East and West, revere St John the Baptist. The Eastern Orthodox Church places him next to Jesus on the iconostasis, the painted screen that separates the altar from the main body of a church. The painter who has conveyed the meaning of that proximity most effectively is the German artist Grunewald. In his portrait of the Baptist he shows him with an exceedingly elongated forefinger. A finger that points to the figure of Christ standing nearby. The same image is used in some Byzantine icons to express the main purpose of St John's life: the signalling of Jesus as the Awaited Messiah. Yahya was the precursor, the forerunner who prepared the way for the coming of Christ.

I like to imagine that long finger also gestures towards another figure. Another martyr, one like St John. For me the finger indicates Imam Husayn. It means to signify the link and common ground between Christian and Muslim spirituality. To affirm the importance figures like St John and Imam Husayn have for religious dialogue, for interfaith. And, crucially, it stresses what many Christians appear to have forgotten: the supreme value of martyrdom. Above all, the obligation to resist and fight oppression, whatever its forms, ancient and new.

The angelic being in Yazid's dream did not limit himself to punching the tyrant on the mouth. He also made a promise: 'A Deliverer will come before the End. He will avenge the wrongs perpetrated against the Household of the Prophet. He

is the Mahdi. The Awaited One. He will vindicate the Imam and crush your brood under his heel, o Yazid!

THE SEVEN TEMPTATIONS OF WAHAB AL-KALBI

On his march across the barren, scorched landscape, despite his resolution doubts continue to assail the Christian knight. Doubt is human, all too human, never mind how strong and resolved a good person may be.

'Are you doing the right thing? Risking your life for a Muslim chief? A quarrel between this Imam and the Caliph of Baghdad? Is that your battle? Are you so sure that is all right?' a mellifluous voice inside him keeps asking. The voice of conscience? Or that of cowardice? Or that of a demon?

Seven temptations follow. The first is uttered by a strange, caged creature. With the shape of chatty, green bird, a parrot. 'Look at me! Look what bad people have done to me. Imprisoned me in this narrow cage. What sort of creatures are human beings that can do this to a fellow living being? Don't we all owe our existence to God? What harm have I done to deserve this? Does it not tell you much about the children of Adam? The same humans for the sake of whom you and your Imam intend to undergo suffering and martyrdom. You too could end up a prisoner. Shut into cage, a horrible dungeon. If only you could realise how dreadful it is! Fed scraps, mocked and baited by the rabble, wounded by cruel spikes thrust through the bars. Believe you me, I know

how degrading it is. I tell you, not worth it! Desist and follow a better course.'

The second temptation issues from a gorgeous siren, wearing a mantle of dazzling bright colours. Like a large peacock. 'Dear man, you are embarking unto a noble cause. But are sure there isn't any nobler? You are a man of high quality. Look at you! Handsome, well-dressed, riding a beautiful steed. What splendid sight you are! An intellectual, as well as a warrior, maybe? Your high, domed forehead suggests a scholar or a philosopher, a fountainhead of knowledge and wisdom. And you must be aware of it. Don't be too modest. Don't hide your light under a bushel, as Jesus, the Son of Mary, warned. I see great potential in you. The Church would benefit greatly from your scholarship. Don't throw away your life. Go back and become what you should be!'

The third tempter, half woman and half fish, is splashing away in a pond. Her insinuation is insidiously simple:

'Water! Look at it! Isn't it the purest thing? The most blessed element? The source of all life? Water comes down from the sky – God send it. Water refreshes thirsty wayfarers. Water is so much better than this hideous dry desert you are riding into. At Karbala you will have to endure unbearable thirst. You'll ask for water, long for water, dream of water, give anything for a little sip of it. To no avail. You will taste blood in your mouth but not water. Is that a prospect to look forward to? Come on! Give up and turn back where you can drink this delightful substance to your heart's content.'

The fourth seducer had the sweet face and the luscious shape of a girl. One whom Wahab had known and loved years before and whose memory he had never forgotten.

‘Darling! What are you doing? You are putting your life in mortal danger. Why don’t you turn back? I long to have you again with me. You and I together. Don’t you miss me? Don’t you recall how happy we were? Run back into my arms and we shall renew the hot nights of love we enjoyed once. I promise you exquisite pleasures. Such as those described by that prince of amorous poets, Ovid. They will rival even those of Queen Cleopatra for Julius Caesar. Come on! Renounce this mad enterprise, I beg you!’

The fifth creature is not alluring but horrible. Like a walking skeleton. Hardly any flesh hangs unto her bones. She has a grim, mournful visage, with the features of a skull. Just looking at her strikes a chill, fear into the bravest man’s heart.

‘I am death’, she whispers. ‘The kingdom of the dead is peopled by ghastly figures like mine. Ghosts and phantoms. We yearn to get back our warm human body of flesh and blood, to feel again the sun’s warmth, the freshness of the morning air, the caresses of our beloved, but we are unable to. We would give anything for a moment of our previous, living life – alas, we can’t. Because we are dead. Like me. Tomorrow the Caliph’s men will slay you and you will become as I am now. A heap of bones. Dead. A non-man. That is your destiny if you persist on your crazy, unnecessary path of self-destruction. But you still have a bit of time left. Change your mind. Leave!’

The sixth siren takes the appearance and the speech of a high leader of the Church. A Christian bishop. Wearing the rich liturgical vestments appropriate to his rank. His deep, sonorous voice was alarmed, shocked:

'O my son! What are you doing? I cannot believe what I hear. You are going to fight, kill and be killed for the sake of a Muslim chief? One of the enemies of our faith? The people who hate and spit on the cross of Christ! The sacred wood on which the Saviour was hung and died. The sect which disbelieves in his divinity. The people who deny that Christ was crucified, died and rose again for our sins. People whose holy book is filled with attacks and refutations of the true faith. How is it possible you wish to unite yourself to their cause? This is madness on your part! If you die fighting for them tomorrow how can you hope your soul will be saved? More likely, Satan will grab it and throw it down into the nethermost pit of hell. Harken to my words. Abandon your insane, apostate project. Turn back, I beg you!

The seventh, last tempter wears the disguise of a nightingale. The amorous bird. Her is perhaps the most diabolical temptation. One to holiness:

'O Wahab! Listen to my song! I call you to passion, to ecstasy, to love. Not any old kind of love but mystical, supreme, spiritual love. Love of your Creator. Surely that is a higher form of love than even following Imam Husayn. Besides, you know that you are not a very strong man. Your physique is weak. You are not used to fighting with weapons? Are you? Better become like me. An amorous being. A mystic.

Like a Sufi. Lose yourself in the Divine. A higher, superior course of action, is it not?’

What is Wahab to do? He now rides past a primitive chapel, hewn cave-like into a rock. And he muses:

‘Each tempter has a point. Together, they have built a formidable case against my mission. Yet... What does the Lord really want me to do? Oh, look that rock chapel...so inviting...Is that a sign from Heaven? Maybe so, maybe not. Still, nothing to lose if I try. I shall go in and ask Christ for a sign. Whether I have made the right choice or not. He will tell me’, he decides.

Inside, a geometric, one aisle space, with a riot of frescos. Colourful images of saints. Only some aged worshippers are present, women mumbling their devotions. Stern figures of prophets, priests and martyrs decorate the barrel vault. Wahab crosses himself, stands and raises his hands in prayer: ‘O Lord, give me a sign, I beg you. Am I on the right path? Am I a fool in going to fight for this Amir called Husayn? Or shall I turn back? Is that your will or not?’

No voice answers him. Again and again, he prays, imploring the Lord for a sign. Only silence. After repeatedly crossing himself he is about to walk out when his eyes fall on one man in the wall procession of saints. A shaggy, ascetic character, with a lamb at his feet.

‘Saint John the Baptist...but what is he doing?’ Wahab notices the point gestures. At Christ enthroned, of course, but

who is Christ himself pointing at...is that Husayn? Isn't that absurd? How can that be?

Wahab screws up his eyes, he rubs them. No mistake about it. Christ with his right hand is gesturing towards the turbaned figure of Husayn. 'Incredible! Right here on a church wall! I see it with my own eyes. This is no dream!'

The Christian warrior tussles with himself but then... 'Who am I to question my Lord's will? That must constitute the sign I sought'.

Wahab has got his answer. *Al-hamdulillah!* Praise be to God! Gratefully, he crosses himself many times and, in a hurry, walks out. Like foul spirits of the night, his doubts dispelled, he rejoins the little band marching towards Karbala.

EPILOGUE

The author of this book is a priest of the Anglican Church. An ecclesial body which since the Reformation has ministered to the English people in its epic history of worldwide expansion and imperial rule. As such, the historical role of the Anglican Church has been ambiguous. On the one hand, it has represented the Bible, the Gospel to the nation. From the highest level – the monarch bearing the title of Defender of the Faith – to the grassroots life of parishes scattered up and down the country, my Church has stood for divine revelation. On the other hand, the organic link with the establishment, with power, has severely constrained - even compromised – Christ's subversive message of justice and freedom addressed

to all humanity, including the wretched of the earth. Tragically, at this juncture in history the prevailing Western culture, of which Britain is an integral part, has turned its back on the Gospel. It hardly bothers to attack God or to fight him, like the aggressive state atheism of the old Soviet Union. The Russian revolutionaries shot thousands of priests and sent the rest to the Gulags. Today the bourgeoisie has no need of those measures. Corrosive phenomena like globalisation, consumerism, materialism and hedonism have replaced spiritual values. To the irreligious powers that rule us the support of the Church has become useless or superfluous. Twenty-six Anglican bishops still sit by right in the House of Lords but, like dogs on motorbikes, they serve no purpose. And parish churches are emptying fast. The virtual liquidation of Christianity from national life – apart from fatuous, absurd distractions like royal marriages - is under way.

What is to be done? The emblematic figure of Wahab al-Kalbi gestures, I believe, towards a radical option. Instead of passively suffering its 'gentle decline', as *The Times* newspaper once malignantly put it, the Church must embrace rebellion and revolution. Like the visionary Italian writer and film maker Pier Paolo Pasolini once wrote, addressing Pope Paul VI, the Church must become the vanguard of all those who say no to globalisation, no to consumerism, no to financial capitalism, no to secularism, no to the vast, tyrannical machine of exploitation, robbery, immorality and military adventures that the West had come to embody. When the Spirit of God will guide the Church to take up the mantle of revolt, the Body of Christ on earth will not

ignominiously wither away into oblivion but will get back to its genuine *raison d'être*, be resurrected and live.

The goal is clear. Revolution. The overthrow of secularist tyranny. Of the unjust, exploitative system of financial, global capitalism. And the means? That raises the problem of violence. How is the rebellion going to be conducted? Peacefully and non-violently or by more energetic, forceful means? That will depend on the way the state apparatus of oppression will react. The neo-capitalist, financial power system, despite the 'tolerant' mask it wears, is completely irreligious, totalitarian and violent. It corrupts, it degrades, it represses and it reduces human beings to the level of objects. Humanity, dignity, love and ideals become commodities, purely means of material exchange. It is improbable, unrealistic to expect that such rapacious mechanism of deep-seated exploitation will relinquish its grip peacefully. Therefore, the revolutionary Church must be mindful of the teachings of theologians and Saints like St Thomas Aquinas. When a power system turns overtly tyrannical, it becomes the enemy of the common good. Then to oppose it and bring it down are sacred duties. The means to that end will be proportioned and functional to the objective. The examples cited above, like the heroic, holy Mexican Cristeros, show the way. Further, the stern words of the charismatic South African Imam Ahmad Cassiem, who was imprisoned on Robben Island like Nelson Mandela by the apartheid regime, spring to mind: 'It is not up to the oppressor to decide which means the oppressed should use in their fight against oppression'.

Could Pope Francis incarnate the new Pontiff advocated by Pasolini? It looks unlikely. The messages this eccentric Argentinian sends out are contradictory. Theologically speaking, his purported abolition of hell appears bold but then you could argue that, when it comes to the crimes of Western imperialism, hellfire is a most appropriate symbol of righteous chastisement. Further, giving Holy Communion to the divorced and the remarried hardly impact on the struggle against real oppression. A better bet is the figure of another Francis, St Francis of Assisi. The Sufi-like Christian holy man who travelled to the Holy Land in the midst of a bloody crusade, met and dialogued with Sultan al-Kamil and returned to Europe to preach his radical gospel to the marginalised. St Francis, the son of a rich man in Umbria who gave out his wealth and even his clothes to the poor and created an alternative society of property-less brothers and sisters. To redeem the misery of the masses Francis embraced their condition and became thus the existential sign of a new Church. St Francis' canticles luxuriate in an exalted, ecstatic consciousness. A sort of sacred cosmic liturgy, embracing all creatures of the supernatural and natural worlds. True, the Saint drew the line at real rebellion, violence in the name of the Gospel. Nonetheless, the Franciscan ideal is potentially a revolutionary one. After St Francis' death offshoots of the Franciscan Order preached and practiced a more uncompromising spirituality. Like that turbulent, dissident priest, Brother Dolcino, about whom I once wrote a play. Inspired by the teachings of St Francis, Dolcino led an army of followers against feudal landlords. Execution at the stake was his rewards but his example lives on.

Should it not be the thorny matter of violence for the sake of justice postponed till the final Hour? The prelude to Judgment Day? Leave it all to God, in other words? Tempting move but...no! Eschatology is not simply a doctrine about the End. It is 'eternal life'. A mighty truth realised here and now. *'This is eternal life'*, says Jesus in St John's Gospel, *'That they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.'* The Creator is in control, but human agents are not mere puppets whose strings are pulled from on high. Human beings are endowed with mind and free will. St Paul states, most audaciously, that we work 'in synergy with God'. Like in a great war, the final victory may consist in a supreme conflagration but the road to that victory is punctuated with many previous battles. In a similar fashion, the V-Day which celebrated the victory of WWII was made possible by D-Day, the Normandy landing and other momentous battles. Imam Husayn fought at Karbala because it was God's will, sure, but the Imam's own will was not thereby obliterated but existed on, perfectly aligned with the Supreme Will. Moreover, the Qur'an is quite clear on the matter of uses of lethal force: *'If one slew a person – except for murder or for spreading corruption in the land – it would be as if he slew the whole people'*. 5:32

Corruption is indeed a great crime, the Book states. One which is indeed imperative to fight. Come what may. At all cost....

God wills it!

