

REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT: A CRITICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Redemptive suffering is one of the religious responses to the problem of evil and suffering within certain religious traditions such as Christian faith and an interpretation of Shi'i thought in Islamic faith. This paper firstly explores redemptive approach to human suffering, and critically evaluates its projection in Shi'i thought in contrast with the Christian doctrine. The issue discussed here is cosmic redemptive suffering rather than personal one. The assertion of the paper is that redemptive suffering in cosmic sense has no doctrinal basis in Islamic faith and is far from resolving the problem of evil and suffering in philosophical sense.

Key Words: The problem of evil, suffering, redemption, Islam, Twelver Shi'a.

İSLAM DÜŞÜNÇESİNDE KURTARICI ACI: ELEŞTİREL BİR YAKLAŞIM

ÖZET

Kurtarıcı acı, kötülük ve acı problemine Hıristiyan inancı ile İslam inancı içindeki Şi'i düşüncenin bir yorumu gibi belli dini gelenekler tarafından verilen dini cevaplardan biridir. Bu makale, öncelikle insan acısına kurtarıcı yaklaşımı açıklar, Şi'i düşüncedeki yansımaları Hıristiyan doktrini ile karşılaştırarak eleştirel olarak değerlendirir. Burada tartışılan sorun, kişisel değil kozmik kurtarıcı acıdır. Makalenin iddiası ise, kozmik anlamda kurtarıcı acının İslam inancında kuramsal bir dayanaktan yoksun olduğu, ve bunun kötülük-acı problemini felsefi anlamda çözmekten de uzak olduğudur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kötülük problem, acı, kurtarma, İslam, Oniki İmam Şi'ası.

One of the most existential realities in human life is the actuality of suffering. The inner feeling in one's conscious leaves no doubt that such suffering as disease, injury, distress and sorrow are as real as such enjoyments as love, happiness, and tranquillity. Sometimes this human tragedy is seen as a threat to the existence of God, who is believed to be the creator and sustainer of human beings in particular and the whole universe in general. If there is

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God, it is argued, either he is not powerful or not good enough to prevent or eliminate suffering. The more intense the experienced suffering is, the more serious the problem gets.

Religious traditions attempt to overcome this challenge by giving meaning and purpose to human life on earth. Since no religious thought presents a monolithic structure, the responses to this ancient problem vary with the religious point of view and the kind and amount of suffering faced. Retributive suffering, disciplinary suffering, redemptive suffering and free-will explanation are among those responses. Here I shall particularly explore a modern formulation of redemptive suffering within the framework of Twelver Shi'ah, which is one of the two major religious divisions of Islamic tradition that regards 'Ali b. Abi Talib (c. 598-661 CE), the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, as the legitimate successor of the prophet, and the Imams from 'Ali's descendants as the leaders of the Shi'i community, *Shi'ah*.

Before examining the Shi'i account of redemptive suffering closely, one needs to set forth the idea of redemption briefly. In literal sense, the word redemption (from the Latin *redemptio* derived from the verb *redemere*, "to buy back") signifies the process of obtaining something by paying the required sum, price or ransom. The doctrine of redemption in a number of religions denotes "the salvation from doom or perdition that is wrought by a saviour or by the individual himself."¹ Therefore, the process of redemption requires the human state of sinfulness, the redeemer, the redeeming act from the sinful state, and the deliverance or salvation as a result. The redeeming act may be a divine intervention or/and a human action. In either case, the sinful person or community restore an original blissful state; that is, if they are willing to take this opportunity.

The most distinctive concept of redemption may be found in Christian tradition among other religions. Here the doctrine of redemption is closely related with the central Christian dogmas of Trinity, Incarnation and Original Sin. Still it must be noted at the outset that while Jesus Christ, the second person in the Trinity, has always been regarded as the redeemer in the process of redemption, as J. N. D. Kelly points out, "no final and universally accepted definition of the manner of its achievement has been formulated to this day."² A number of theories of redemption have been developed throughout

¹ Ileana Marcoulesco, "Redemption," in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), vol. 12, 228.

² J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, fifth edition, (London: A & C Black, 1993), 163.

Christian era.³ However, the exposition of these theories does not concern us here for such an enterprise goes beyond the confines of this paper.

It suffices for our present purpose to state at this juncture that the Christian belief that God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world in order to save human beings through him, lies at the core of the doctrine of redemption. Accordingly, Jesus' suffering and death on the cross was the redemptive work of God for the sake of human beings.⁴ The God incarnate entered into human dimension and took sufferings and death of humanity upon himself in order to show that he cares and loves them. Marilyn McCord Adams, a contemporary Christian philosopher who has developed a modern version of redemptive suffering, affirms that the cross of Christ represents a manifestation of divine goodness and an ideal example of redemptive suffering. In her own words, "God was so eager to win our love that he became incarnate and volunteered for martyrdom himself."⁵ Therefore, the tragedy at Calvary was no accident, but it was for a purpose. That is, Jesus Christ died in order to redeem human beings and restore their original blissful state.

Moreover, suffering may also be redemptive for the believers who take up the responsibility to spread the Gospel, and follow the example of Jesus Christ. Here suffering is "a direct consequence of bringing the message of Christ to a sinful world."⁶ The mission of the spreading the Good News and "taking up the cross" after Jesus may cause the pious Christians to suffer as a result. This can be seen as a natural consequence of the socio-political fact that the establishment often resorts to violence to eliminate a threat to its authority. In this sense, suffering and persecution are not misfortunes to be shun, but they are prerogative to be rejoiced. Because it is a privilege for the sufferer to have the opportunity to suffer for Christ (*Phil.* 1:29-30), and is useful in helping others (*Phil.* 1:12-14). Consequently, the faithful is delivered from sin through suffering and death.

In contrast to Christianity, Islamic creed has no theory of redemption formulated as well as of Incarnation and original sin, which are closely

³ For early accounts of redemption, see Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 163-88, 375-99; and for a historical sketch including modern restatements of atonement, see Linwood Urban, *A Short History Of Christian Thought*, revised and expanded edition, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 101-124.

⁴ Brian Hebblethwaite, *Evil, Suffering and Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, 1976), 39.

⁵ Marilyn McCord Adams, "Redemptive Suffering: A Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil," in R. Audi and W. Wainwright, *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 259.

⁶ Daniel J. Simundson, *Faith under Fire: Biblical Interpretations of Suffering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), 131.

connected with the Christian notion of redemption. This is true for both the two main divisions of Islam; that is, Shi'i and Sunni traditions.⁷ However, the main sources of Islamic faith, namely, the Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition, contain some references implying a sense of redemption and redemptive suffering. Through bearing such suffering, the believer attains a certain blissful state, if not in this world, certainly in life after death. The Qur'anic story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son to God, which is very similar to the one in the Hebrew Bible (*Numbers* 3:45-6), is a very striking example.⁸ Abraham obeys God's order and attempts to sacrifice his son Ishmael.⁹ Pleased with Abraham's intention, God ransoms Ishmael replacing the sacrifice with a ram. The related Qur'anic passage reads, "And We ransomed him with a large sacrifice" (*al-Saffat*, 37:107). This event is still commemorated once a year at *Eid ul-Adha*. Additionally, in *Surah Al Imran* 3 verses 139-40, God proclaims that he "might purify the believers and annihilate the unbelievers" because of their response to suffering. If the sufferer holds fast to his or her faith in the face of afflictions, God forgives and rewards that person.

The prophetic tradition seems to contain more explicit references than the Qur'an. In response to a question asked by one of his companions Abû Waqqas, for instance, the Prophet Muhammad states, "the believer is inflicted with calamities until he is free from any sin clung to him."¹⁰ In another tradition, the Prophet says that whatever befalls a Muslim in terms of misfortune, even a single thorn that pricks his foot, is expiation for his sins.¹¹ Although these references give the impression that Islam has a notion of redemption similar to Christianity, the Islamic theology does not have any notion of redemption defined officially. In addition, Muslims have often understood these kinds of references in terms of retributive suffering or disciplinary suffering rather than redemptive one.¹² Accordingly, afflictions in similar instances are regarded as divine punishment or test of faith.

⁷ See, M. H. Siddiqi, "The Doctrine of Redemption: A Critical Study," K. Ahmad and Z. A. Ansari (eds.), *Islamic Perspectives* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1979), 99; and Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Ashû'ra' in Twelver Shi'ism* (The Hague, the Netherlands: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 15; and Riffat Hassan, "Messianism and Islam," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 22:2, (Spring 1985), 264.

⁸ Siddiqi, "The Doctrine of Redemption: A Critical Study," 100.

⁹ In Judaism, Abraham attempted to sacrifice his son Isaac (*Genesis* 22:9).

¹⁰ Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1966), 174. See, also, Muslim b. Haccac, *al-Jami' al-Sahih*, ed. M. F. Abd al-Baqi, (Egypt: 1955), *Birr wa al-Sila*, 14.

¹¹ Muslim, *al-Jami' al-Sahih*, *Birr wa al-Sila*, 14.

¹² Lütfullah Cebeci, *Kur'an'da Şer Problemi* (Ankara: Akçağ Yayınları, 1985), 273-277.

Here one ought to make distinction between the cosmic and personal redemptive suffering. While the former, in terms of Christian faith, emphasises Jesus' death on the cross in order to redeem the sins of humankind at "cosmic" level, the latter may not necessarily mean that. Hence redemptive suffering can be a "cosmic" event or/and a "personal" experience. While the suffering of Jesus Christ is, according to Christian creed, a redemptive suffering in cosmic sense, the suffering of the fellow Christians is a personal redemptive suffering. In the broadest sense of the word, while for the former a divine or semi-divine creature's involvement is necessary, for the latter any suffering of the believer can be redemptive. In this context, it is correct to say that Sunni Islam has no notion of redemptive suffering.¹³ For that, as 'Umar Austin points out,¹⁴ one needs to turn to Shi'i tradition where its champions can be found.

Mahmoud Ayoub, a contemporary Shi'i scholar of religion, attempts to formulate a version of redemptive suffering within the framework of the Twelver Shi'ism from the Shi'i hagiography, the idealised biographies of the Imams. He first outlines the argument in his article "the Problem of Suffering in Islam" and then elaborates it in his book *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*.¹⁵ Ayoub's argument embodies cosmic and personal redemptive suffering together. He argues that any suffering can be redemptive for the believer and for the society. His main concern is the suffering and martyrdom of Imam Husayn (4-61 AH/626-680 CE), the grandson of the Prophet and the third Imam of the Shi'ah. Ayoub argues, "the suffering of Imam Husayn has been taken by the Shi'i community to be a source of salvation through the interiorization and emulation of that suffering by the community and through the high favour of the Imam as an intercessor."¹⁶ Hence martyrdom, the suffering community of faith, and intercession of the martyr for the believer are the major themes of the Shi'i version of redemptive suffering. Here there are two different forms of redemptive suffering. One is the suffering and martyrdom of Imam Husayn as a cosmic redemptive suffering. The other is suffering of the Shi'i community as a consequence of their emulation of Husayn's afflictions. In our examination in later section of this essay this classification will be followed.

¹³ Siddiqi, "The Doctrine of Redemption: A Critical Study," 99-100; Hassan, "Messianism and Islam," 264.

¹⁴ 'Umar Austin, "Suffering in Muslim Religious Thought," *The Islamic Quarterly* 26 (1982), 35.

¹⁵ Mahmoud Ayoub's book titled *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspect of Ashû'ra in Twelver Shiism* is a revised version of his PhD thesis presented to the Faculty of Religious Studies of Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in 1975.

¹⁶ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 15.

Obviously, at the heart of the Shi'i notion of redemptive suffering lies the doctrine of Imams, "imamology," and the "People of the House" (*Ahl al-Bayt*), the Prophet's household. The Twelver Shi'i creed affirms that whoever denies the imamate, esoteric Shi'i leadership, of Ali b. Abi Talib and of the other eleven Imams is like the one who denies all the prophets.¹⁷ Hence, the doctrine of Imams has a central place in Shi'i faith. The Imams possess the qualities of the prophet and other righteous personalities. He is the perfect ruler of the community with "the actual power, wisdom and authority of Muhammad, the prophet and the ruler."¹⁸ The Imams are regarded as "the proofs" (*hujaj*) of God. They are, in the words of Ayoub, "the concrete embodiment of the Divine Word."¹⁹ Only through the Imams can human beings understand the true meaning of divine revelation (*wahy*). The eighth Imam 'Ali al-Rida (c. 148-203 AH/765-818 CE) is reported to have said, "Had it not been for us, God would not have been worshipped."²⁰ The Imams are not only the perfect men, but they are God's first and special creation. The Shi'i tradition presents the Imams as if they are semi-divine creatures or God's special creation at least. The sixth Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (83-148 AH/710-765 CE) is said to have described the process of their creation as follows:

"God created us (the Imams) from the light of His majesty. Then He formed us from a lump of clay, preserved and well guarded under His throne. He then made the light to dwell in the clay, thus we became luminous humans (*basbar nûraniyyûn*) giving no share of the stuff of which we were created to anyone."²¹

At the rest of this tradition, Ayoub informs, it is reported that the followers, *Shi'ah*, of the Imams were also created from a special clay "lower than that of the Imams but of which only prophets were made."²² In short, the Imams and their followers are regarded as special creation of God.

It is believed that suffering and persecution were the fate of all the Imams throughout their life. Shi'i creed clearly affirms that all the Imams died as a consequence of torture and persecution they were subjected to; 'Ali and

¹⁷ Ibn Babeveyh el-Kummi known as al-Shaykh al-Sadû'q, *Risaletu'l-'I'tikadati'l-Imamiyye* (*Şîh-İmâmîyye'nin İnanç Esasları*), translated to Turkish by Ethem Ruhi Fiğlalı, (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Basımevi, 1978), 124.

¹⁸ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 67.

¹⁹ Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Problem of Suffering in Islam," *Journal of Dharma* 2, no. 3, (July 1977), 287-8.

²⁰ al-Kulayni, *Kitab al-Ustû'l min al-Kafî* (Tehran: Dâr al-Kutub al-Islâmiyyah, 1374/1954), 1, 275 as quoted in Ayoub, "The Problem of Suffering in Islam," 288.

²¹ al-Kulayni, *Kitab al-Ustû'l min al-Kafî*, 1, 233 quoted in Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 57.

²² Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 264.

Husayn were martyred with sword and the others were poisoned.²³ And they knew that suffering and martyrdom were inseparable part of their earthly life. This is regarded as the natural result of the fact that the earth is "the House of Sorrows" and the sufferings of the Imams and of their household epitomise "the culmination of all suffering of the pious from the beginning of human history until its consummation."²⁴ Among others the Imam Husayn is *par excellence* of the pious suffering and martyrdom. Ayoub refuses to accept Husayn's martyrdom as a mere historical and political event. Instead, "the death of Husayn, at least for the Shi'i community, provides a focal point from which prior, as well as subsequent, history must be viewed. One can still hear from the pulpits of Shi'i mosques that 'Husayn was killed on the day of the *Saqifah*'."²⁵ What makes the tragedy at Karbala, an Iraqi city containing his tomb-shrine, a redemptive suffering is Husayn's sacrificial act that intended to establish justice and truth, which were, according to Shi'ah, lost on the day of the *Saqifah*. Therefore, it is believed that he has "redeemed the religion (*din*) of his grandfather with his soul, family and children."²⁶ As its consequence, the unjust ruling of the Umayyads collapsed once and for all.

In addition, it is argued that the Imams including Husayn were fully conscious of their mission. 'Ali Naqi Naqvi (1904-), an Iraqi Shi'i scholar, says that Husayn knew the sacrifices his ancestors such as Abraham, Muhammad, and his father 'Ali made. Naqvi writes, "He [Husayn] represented a stock which had an unbroken record of sacrifice."²⁷ And Husayn was certain that his martyrdom was one of these sacrifices long awaited. Along this line Ayoub also asserts that "all sufferings before are but a prelude to his, the final act in a long drama of tribulation."²⁸ The martyrdom of Husayn, as Mostafa Vaziri remarks, seems to have affected the Shi'i community even more than the martyrdom of the first Imam 'Ali.²⁹ Accordingly, the tragic death of Husayn at Karbala is the basis of the Shi'i notion of redemptive suffering. In this sense, the martyrdom of Husayn is regarded as the necessary consequence of the fulfilment of his imamate as the ruler of the Shi'i community. Because his role of imamate

²³ Ibn Babeveyh, *Risaletu'l-'I'tikadati'l-Imamiyye*, 115-7.

²⁴ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 24.

²⁵ Here the *Saqifah* refers to the meeting place where Abû' Bakr was selected as the first caliph subsequent to the prophet Muhammad's death. Shia contents that it was Ali's right to be designated as caliph. See, Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 93.

²⁶ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 141.

²⁷ 'Ali Naqi Naqvi, *The Martyr for Mankind (Shahid-e-Insaniyyat)*, an abridgement, trans and ed. S. 'Ali Akhtar, (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 1986), 4.

²⁸ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 27.

²⁹ Mostafa Vaziri, *The Emergence of Islam: Prophecy, Imamate, and Messianism in Perspective* (New York: Paragon House, 1992), 107.

requires him to become “the paradigm of selfless sacrifice, the measure of truth and falsehood, and the intercessor on the Day of Judgment for his followers.”³⁰ Therefore, redemption and intercession are closely connected to each other since intercession is understood as a divine gift for the sufferings of the Imams and of their family.

The second form of redemptive suffering connected with the suffering of the Imams, especially with that of Husayn, is the participation of the pious Shi'i community in the afflictions of the Imams, particularly Husayn.³¹ Those who emulate Husayn's struggle, suffering and martyrdom can expect his intercession on their behalf in life after death. The Shi'i community's participation into the sufferings of the Imams can be seen in the memorial services called *majalis al-ta'ziya* and in the pilgrimage to Karbala (*ziyarat*) ritual. On the tenth of Muharram, called the days of '*ashûra*', the pious Shi'i community participates in the afflictions of Husayn and of other Imams through mourning, weeping and sometimes inflicting pain upon themselves.³² The suffering of the community through such rituals is believed to redeem the sins of the community. The participants to these memorial services are promised forgiveness for their sins and high places in paradise. In fact, Husayn himself is reported in Shi'i tradition to have foretold that "Whoever sheds a tear from his eyes for us, or fills his eyes with tears for us, Allah will grant him for that an eternal place in Paradise."³³ In this sense, weeping, mourning and sorrow in these memorial services become a means of salvation for the believer.³⁴ The community is urged to remember and share the sufferings of Husayn and other Imams. The eighth Imam 'Ali Rida is reported to have said,

He who recalls our afflictions and weeps for all we have suffered will be with us in our high station on the day of resurrection. He who is reminded of our sufferings and weeps, and causes others to weep, his eyes shall not weep on the day when many eyes shall weep. He who sits in an assembly wherein our memory is kept alive, his heart will not die on the day when many hearts shall die.³⁵

³⁰ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 15.

³¹ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 27, 141.

³² Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 148-9.

³³ Sheikh al-Mufid, *Al Amaali: The Dictations of Sheikh al-Mufid*, trans. Mulla Asgharali M. M. Jaffer, (Middlesex: The World Federation of K S I Muslim Communities, 1998), 316.

³⁴ Ayoub, "The Problem of Suffering in Islam," 291.

³⁵ Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar* (Tehran: al-Maktabah al-Islamiyyah, 1384 AH), 44, 278 as quoted in Ayoub, "The Problem of Suffering in Islam," 292.

In addition, the whole area of Karbala, where the Imam Husayn and his followers were martyred, is regarded as the *haram*, the place of "sanctity and safety."³⁶ This is very significant because for all the Muslims the *haram* is the Ka'bah in Mecca. Along with the Ka'bah the Shi'i community regards Karbala as the place of sanctity and safety. The pilgrims visiting Karbala are promised reward in the hereafter. In this tradition Husayn asks the Prophet the rewards of the pilgrims. He is believed to have said,

These will be men and women of my community who would make pilgrimage to your grave seeking blessing by this act. It will be incumbent upon me to seek them out on the Day of Resurrection and save them from the awful fears of that hour and from all their transgressions: and God would cause them to dwell in paradise.³⁷

The ritual of pilgrimage seems to be an act of faithfulness and devotion to the Imam Husayn and the People of the House. As a result of this, the Shi'i community becomes the "faithful remnant" and the "elect community"³⁸ as the Imams are the elect friends (*awliya*) of God.

Moreover, the idea of the intercession of the Imams and the People of the House as the vicegerent of the Prophet plays a decisive role in salvation as well. The Twelver Shi'ah expects that the Imams, especially the Imam Husayn, will intercede for the faithful granting them high places in paradise. Not only Husayn but also a group of his followers will intercede. Ayoub draws attention to an early Shi'i tradition in support of this view, "...God revealed to me that he [Husayn] shall have degree [in paradise] unattained by any other of God's creatures. He shall have a group of followers (Shi'ah) who will intercede and their intercession will be accepted..."³⁹ Through intercession of the Imams and the pious Shi'ah, the Shi'i community will be saved and bestowed an eternal life in paradise.

To sum up, the Imams, and more strikingly Husayn, throughout history, struggled, suffered and sometimes died in conveying God's revelation to humankind. Through their relentless suffering and death, they earned a respected place in paradise. Among them, the suffering and martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala is especially significant as the third Imam of Shi'ah. He suffered, and was eventually martyred for God. Consequently, he was granted a

³⁶ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 180-1.

³⁷ Ibn Qawlawayh al-Qummi, *Kamil al-Ziyarat*, ed. Mirza Abdallah al-Husayn al-Amini al-Tabrizi, (Najaf: Murtadawiyah, 1356/1937), 52 as quoted in Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 184.

³⁸ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 210-2.

³⁹ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 204.

high place in heavens, and will intercede for the pious Shi'i individuals on the Day of Judgement. Therefore, the notion of intercession attained through "frustration, failure and, finally, the cup of martyrdom"⁴⁰ is crucial for the salvation of the pious Shi'i community in Ayoub's version of redemptive suffering. As Husayn earned his high place in the eyes of God through afflictions and martyrdom, the faithful may be granted with eternal rewards through emulating the suffering of the Imam.

As can be seen, Ayoub draws parallels between Shi'i Imamology and Christian Christology, namely, the doctrine of Jesus Christ. The Imams are represented as similar superhuman beings in a similar way with Christ. They are regarded as "the concrete embodiment of the Divine word" like Christ as the Logos. With the exception that unlike Christ the Imams are believed to be special creation of God. Moreover, the suffering and martyrdom were the fate of the Imams and Christ. The purpose of their suffering was to redeem the faithful individuals and community.⁴¹ In Ayoub's version of redemptive suffering, intercession of the Imams and the pious Shi'i community plays a central role.

There are a number of important problems with Ayoub's formulation of redemptive suffering. First, Ayoub's argument is heavily based on some supernatural stories in mythic character. We have no way of determining their truth. The reader has to assume the reliability of the authority by which these narratives came to this age; that we cannot do in an argument. Additionally, there are serious objections to these historical reports. Mostafa Vaziri, for instance, points out the fact that "these supernatural stories connected to the tragedy of Karbala formed part of the system of Arab belief, as well as part of the dogma promulgated by the aggrieved Iraqis known as Penitents (*tanmabun*)."⁴² In this sense, the stories of the superhuman Imams can be seen as a pre-Islamic Arab attitude to divinise their heroes or/and as a result of the influence of Persian elements living among Muslims.⁴³ Whatever the real historical reason is behind these supernatural stories, these traditions gradually seems to have developed in growing number in due course. Perhaps they were, as Vaziri suggests, elaborated firstly by "the exaggerators (*ghulat*) in Iraq (possibly it included Persians, too) before finding their way into the Shi'i literature."⁴⁴ Now I am very well aware that we have no knowledge in

⁴⁰ Ayoub, "The Problem of Suffering in Islam," 292.

⁴¹ Ayoub, "The Problem of Suffering in Islam," 288.

⁴² Vaziri, *The Emergence of Islam*, 107.

⁴³ See, also, Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 54.

⁴⁴ Vaziri, *The Emergence of Islam*, 108.

determining the correctness of this account as well. My aim here is to show the unsoundness of the ground that the Shi'î account of redemptive suffering is based.

A second difficulty with Ayoub's account is something to do with his account of Shi'î Imamology. Apart from marginal and transitory Shi'î groups and individuals, no Twelver Shi'î theologian believes that the Imams are even partly divine. They deny the assertion of the exaggerators that the Imams are the incarnations of God. Instead, they believe that the Imams are the most pious, knowledgeable human beings after the prophets.⁴⁵ Consequently, the idea of superhuman Imams has no place in the mainstream Shi'î thought. One can safely state that the portraits of the Imams in supernatural terms in the Shi'î hagiography, from which Ayoub develops his theory, do not represent the doctrinal position of the Twelver Shi'ism.

A third question requiring answer is that whether talking of cosmic redemptive suffering in Twelver Shi'ism makes sense if the Imams are not superhuman/semi-divine beings. Since the Imams were not supernatural beings, is their suffering and martyrdom, including Husayn's, any different from a pious believer's suffering and martyrdom in terms of redemptive suffering? I believe that there is not much difference between them in essence. Since they are human beings and obliged to follow divine revelation, the suffering and death of the faithful as well as other pious Muslims show only the personal submission to God's will. The only difference perhaps is the exemplary status of the prophets and the friends of God for the vast population of human beings.

The Shi'î notion of intercession on the Day of Judgement could be considered as a kind of redemption. The Imams and the household will intercede because the Shi'î community participates their suffering. Does this mean that weeping, sorrow and pain inflicted are a kind of worship to earn the contentment of Husayn? As another Shi'î scholar, Murtaza Mutahhari, affirms, in Islam there are no sovereign power but God. And there is no way of attaining God's contentment apart from the forms of worship described by him such as prayer, almsgiving, pilgrimage to Ka'ba and so on. In fact, to preserve prayer, almsgiving and other Islamic principles, not redemption, was the real reason behind the martyrdom of Husayn.⁴⁶ To assume a mediator between God and the individual is not an Islamic attitude. God is the only creator and

⁴⁵ S. Muhammad Riza, *Akaid el-Imamiyye*, 59-60 as quoted in Ebu'l-Vefa el-Taftazani, *Kelam İlminin Bellibaşlı Meseleleri*, translated to Turkish by Şerafeddin Gölcük, (İstanbul: Kayihan Yayınları 1980), 99.

⁴⁶ Murtaza Mutahhari, *Adl-i İlâhî*, translated to Turkish by H. Hatemî, (İstanbul: İşaret Yayınları, 1988), 290-3.

sustainer of the world and those in it. Islam has put a great emphasis on this central message. Muhammad Iqbal expresses this view well in the context of the Christian concept of redemption. He writes,

There is no mediator between God and man. God is the birthright of every man. The Qur'an therefore, while it looks upon Jesus Christ as the spirit of God, strongly protests against the Christian doctrine of Redemption, as well as the doctrine of an infallible visible head of the Church-doctrines which proceed upon the assumption of the insufficiency of human personality and tend to create in man a sense of dependence, which is regarded by Islam as a force obstructing the ethical progress of man.⁴⁷

In this sense, Islam, in contrast to Christianity, does not postulate an intermediary being between God and humanity through whose suffering and death human beings may be redeemed. Prophets are no mediators in this sense. They only convey the divine message to people and urge them to follow the divine will. Human individuals are responsible for their preferences. In this sense, human beings can attain salvation only through attaining God's contentment with true faith, and righteous actions defined in divine revelation help to expiate their sins and please God.

Finally, if we overlook these theological obstacles, does Mahmoud Ayoub's version of redemptive suffering solve the problem of human suffering? It is obvious that the scope of the solution is limited with the Shi'i community. And they constitute an insignificant amount of the world population in view of the vast number of suffering people around the world throughout history. Since those who are not Shi'i will not benefit from this redemption, an important part of the problem remains. Additionally, considering the suffering and sorrow we have undergone so far, we realise that few of them is related with our religious convictions. As far as we may know, a considerable amount of suffering in the world has nothing to do with our commitment of faith, and occur without our consent in unexpected and unmitigated ways. We are all familiar with the destructive impacts of such disasters as earthquakes, flood, fire, wars and the like. It seems that the Shi'i version of redemptive suffering has not much to say for them. This is true for the suffering of any human being regardless of their preference of faith.

⁴⁷ Muhammad Iqbal, *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, ed. S. A. Vahid (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1964), 38.

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