

Human Rights Observation and Scientific-Religious Stature of Imam Reza

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Abstract

The current essay seeks to assay the character of Eighth Imam of world Shia Muslims, i.e. Imam Reza (peace be upon him), from the point of view of human rights observation and his scientific and religious position. Imam Reza lived in an era that was known as the golden age, because Muslims in his time could be benefited a lot from the Imam's virtues. It was in this era that numerous scientific centers were established and a large number of groups were engaged in scientific career in various schools in all fields of knowledge and important languages of the time. Imam Reza was a leader who should have provided answers to the newly emerged religious and jurisprudential questions and defend Shia school, on the one hand, and contested the emerging deviations and heresies in Islam, on the other. This was not possible but through having a socially devoted, knowledgeable and pious character. The emergence of the aforementioned qualities in the personality of Imam Reza was so clear that many scholars from various religious creeds did endorse it and used to praise the Imam's character with such phrases as follows: the unique man of the time, having a heart full of piety, having innumerable virtues, unique among his contemporaries, knowledge mine, indescribable, a pious devout who does not care about the worldly wealth, position and the like. In the course of his compulsory immigration to Tus – a city in the east north of Iran – and during his stay in that land, it was through these unique personal qualities that Imam managed to preach the pure Islamic teachings and practically observe human rights and serve as an example for the believers in this regard.

Keywords: Human Rights, Imam Reza, Iran, Islam,

1. Introduction

Imam Reza (peace be upon him) was born in 726 A. D. and lived for 55 years. The era in which Imam Reza lived was not only the age of emergence of various religious and irreligious sects rather it coincided with the Caliphate tenures of three Abbasid Caliphs. Imam Reza succeeded to break the monopoly of deviated sects thanks to his powerful words that were all rooted in the pure principles of Islamic doctrines. Imam Reza's rational position not only uprooted the excommunicative creed rather it set the ground for a historical leap in freethinking, deliverance from the bondages of intellectual dogmatism and paying attention to Islamic moderation and rationality. The mission that was assigned to Imam Reza could not be handled but through having a character that was continuously praised by various religious sects. This character and personality despite numerous sabotages not only did not lose its luminosity rather it turned to a strong fund for guiding the public opinion, revealing the government's weaknesses, discrediting the newly emerged sects and finally explaining and consolidating true Islamic teachings. Discussion of Imam Reza's personal qualities turns more important because the scholars of various denominations are so unbending in describing key religious figures particularly because most of the scholars who have written on the character of Imam Reza are from other Islamic denominations.

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2. Observing the Rights of the Poverty People and Keeping Company with the Wretched

As to observing the rights of the poor people by Imam Reza it is quoted that whenever the food tray was brought to Imam Reza he would leave the best part of the food in the same tray, order the servants to take it to the poor, and then would say: the Lord God has put feeding the hungry men a path that could lead the believers to the paradise (Koleini 1959; Bargi 1908). Ibn Shahr Ashub is quoted to have said that Imam Reza in Khorasan – provincial northeast of Iran – endowed all his properties to the poor in Arafa Day – one of the Islamic holy days. When Imam faced the critique that you have suffered a huge loss, he did say: No, this was a very profitable work. You should never consider the work you have done for divine reward a loss or a damage (Ibn ShahrAshub 1954). One of the personal qualities of Imam Reza was keeping company with his guards and servants because in his eyes the criterion for one's nobility was always righteous action and moral virtues. Sheikh Sadouq quotes: Once Imam Reza pointed to one of his black servants and stated that it is not so that I could consider myself nobler than this servant due to my affiliation with the Holy Prophet of Islam unless I have done a good virtuous deed that would qualify me to be the nobler one (Sadouq 1982).

According to authentic documents, Imam Reza preferred to have an ordinary simple life like his predecessors despite his position as the crown prince though he avoided all types of demagogic actions. In this regard, Sheikh Sadouq quotes: Imam Reza used to sit on a straw mat in summer and he changed his mat with a woolen mat in winter. His cloths were simple but when he attended a gathering, he used to wear an adorned cloth (Sadouq 1982). In this regard, Ibn ShahrAshub says: SufyanThuri went to visit Imam Reza and the Imam had an adorned cloth. SufyanThuri told Imam that it was better if he had worn cheaper cloth. Imam Reza asked Sufyan to touch the cloth beneath the adorned garment that was woolen and after that addressed Sufyan in the following words: I wear the adorned cloth for people and this thick woolen garment for God (Ibn Shahr Ashub 1954). Mohaqeq Ardabili quotes: when Imam Reza arrived in Marv city – east north Iran – he was warmly received and welcomed by Mamoon – the Abbasid Caliph. Mamoon suggested Imam to accept the caliphate but Imam refused to accept the proposal (Arbli).

3. Scientific Character of Imam Reza

In a tradition that is quoted by Tabarsi the scientific supremacy of Imam Reza as compared to his contemporaries is noted. Tabarsi says that I did not see anyone superior to Imam Reza insofar as many scholar would take their questions to Imam and receive their answers and in complicated issues they suggested people to visit Imam Reza (Tabarsi 1995). Ibn Hajar Asqalani one the greatest scholars of his time endorses Imam Reza's scientific position and insists that Imam was one of the religious scholars who enjoyed a noble lineage (Asqalani 1982). Yafei who is one of the Yemeni historians and scholars writes in his book: Imam Reza is a respected Imam from a great and pure family and represents one of the Twelve Imams and is of numerous nobilities, which feature the very essence of Shia Islam (Yafei 1995). Zahabi one of the greatest scholars of Hadithology (science of tradition) speaks of Imam Reza's scientific position in his early youth time and mentions the names of great figures like Ahmad Ibn Hanbal who is among the four leading scholars of Sunni Islam as Imam's student and adds: Imam Reza was a noble personality in view of knowledge, religiosity and nobility. In his time, he was the most patient, gentle and respected one among Bani Hashem tribe. He was qualified to issue Fatwa when he was still young. Mamoon – Abbasid Caliph – invited him to Khorasan and did his best to honor him and chose Imam as the Crown Prince (Zahabi 1985). Ibn Hajar Asqalani endorses Imam's early qualification for issuing Fatwa in the Prophet's Mosque that was then the center of scientific debates and hosted seasoned arc religious scholars (Asqalani 1982). Mohsen Amin quotes virtues for Imam Reza from three persons: The first quotation is from Ibn Abbas Soli one of the renowned poets and historians. He says that no single question was asked from Imam Reza that would remain unanswered and I do not know anyone in the world more knowledgeable than him. Mamoon challenged the Imam with various questions all of which were answered by Imam and all answers were based on Quranic verses. He adds that I do not know a man more virtuous than Imam Reza and no one should accept the word of anyone who claims to be of equal status as compared to Imam Reza. The second quotation is from Ibn Majeh who says about Imam Reza: he is the lord of Bani Hashem. The third quotation is from Abi Zahak the man who was delegated by Mamoon to bring Imam Reza to Khorasan. He states: during our journey to Khorasan when we arrived in a city many people welcomed us and asked numerous religious questions all of which were answered by Imam and quoted many traditions by his elders (Amin).

Ibrahim Ibn Abbas describes Imam Reza's deep and broad knowledge as follows: whenever a question was asked from Imam Reza he did answer it and I know no one like him neither among the contemporaries nor from the past.

Mamoon challenged Imam with various questions and Imam answered them in a perfect and exact form (Sadouq 1982; Ibn Sabbagh 2000). It is due to this very reason that Mamoon confessed for several times that I do not know anyone wiser than Imam Reza on earth (Moufid 1984). Ibn Athir believes that Imam Reza's virtues are innumerable and he is like his father in this respect (Ibn Athir). Muhammad Ibn Talhah introduces Imam Reza as follows: the faith and dignity of Imam and his disciples forced Mamoon to share the government with him and choose the Imam as his Crown Prince (Mohammed ibn Talha 1997).

4. Religious Quality of Imam Reza

One of the most striking qualities of Imam Reza (peace be upon him) is his full attention to God and living as an obedient servant. Ghorashi believes that the most significant aspect of Imam Reza's character is submerging oneself in God that is reflected in Imam Reza's devoted servitude. Those who saw Imam Reza were reminded the verse of Quran that reads: believers are those who only sleep a small part of the night (Ghorashi 1993). Shabrawi states: Imam Reza was always with ablution and prayed. He did perform ablution every night, cited numerous prayers, slept for a short while, and continued this process until the dawn (Shabrawi 2001). Expression of Imam Reza's religious states by his guard Abi Zahak is of paramount importance. Abi Zahak describes Imam Reza's way of servitude as follows: I do not know anyone who is as pious as he is; he spends his time remembering his Lord God; he is of an exceptional God-wariness. Abi Zahak continues: Imam used to sleep just one third of the night and after that he woke up while he was praying and prepared himself for a long night prayer and continued this until the Morning Prayer and finally prostrated and kept this way until sunrise (Sadouq 1982). Two points regarding Imam Reza's servitude is of importance. Firstly, there are several traditions that endorse the Imam's continuous prayers both when he was away home and when he was home. Secondly, Imam worshiped his Lord this much when he was of such a high scientific stature and never let scientific occupations and lecture courses cause any interruption in his prayers. Ibn Sabbagh and Shabrawi argue that Imam Reza was of a noble morality that he had inherited it from his fathers (Ibn Sabbagh 2000; Shabrawi 2001).

Nabhati describes Imam Reza's moral virtues as follows: he is the mine of knowledge, mysticism and chivalry (Nabhati 1992). Sanhuty believes that God revealed himself through creation of Imam Reza. No one has the ability to understand Imam Reza (Sanhuty). Souidi describes Imam Reza in the following words: the pen fails to describe all dignities of Imam Reza (Souidi). Ayatollah Najafi Marashi quotes Shabrawi to have said that Imam Reza was benevolent, respected, solemn and gentle (Najafi 1984). Sheikh Sadouq quotes Ibrahim Ibn Abbas to have said that I neither see nor hear anyone to be superior to Abu Alhassan (Imam Reza). He did not oppress anyone; nor did he cut anyone's word; nor did he disappoint a poor; nor did he ever stretch his legs in a gathering; nor did he curse his servants. When he was laughing, he did not allow his voice to rise. He used to invite his servants for food. He slept for a short while and used to stay awake and pray at night. He treated people in good spirit and helped people anonymously mostly in dark nights (Sadouq 1982).

5. Conclusion

Imam Reza's character in view of human rights observation and his scientific-religious position was so brilliant that every famous scholar from various religious creeds confessed to it. Imam Reza was committed to human rights observation particularly helping and respecting the poverty and the needy because he believed that human dignity is not based on race, nationality and such things rather it is a function of one's God-wariness, avoiding oppression, violation, injustice and aggression. These all were to make a world that is more beautiful than what exists; a secure world based on justice, devotedness and sacrifice. According to the confessions of the Islamic scholars, Imam Reza was of a unique scientific stature insofar as he answered all complicated questions. Since Imam Reza lived in an era that information, knowledge and scholars were moving from one scientific center to another, his ideas and theories were disseminated outside the borders of Islamic state. One of the reasons of insistence of Mamoon – the Abbasid Caliph – on keeping companionship with Imam Reza was his efforts for bringing the Imam to scientific sessions that were attended by great scholars of the time in order to challenge Imam's scientific stature. This never turned to reality. Despite his high scientific stature, Imam Reza was honestly worshiping his Lord God and continuously prayed. Imam's religious and moral virtues were so notable that no one is expected to find similar virtues in any other scholar of the age. In other words, Imam Reza (peace be upon him) observed human rights and kept with moral codes and the same time he was a unique scholar and a competent pious devout.

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