

zwischen der Buße für die „fehlende Opferbereitschaft“ der Gläubigen 680 in Kerbela und dem Gebot der *taqiya*, des-

sen Ziel es gerade ist, Leiden für den Glauben zu vermeiden.

## Shiite Ashura ceremonies: Redemption through penitence and suffering

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Worthy of special note are the Ashura ceremonies, the most important Shiite feasts in the month of Muharram. Ashura stands for the Shiite belief in the sufferings of the righteous and his sacrifice, as he dies through the hands of his oppressors and brings about salvation, a concept foreign to Sunni Islam. Sunnis ascribe present suffering to inscrutable divine providence and see its value at best as a trial of faith. They explicitly reject the Christian view of Jesus' death on the cross as a sacrifice and deny the possibility of atonement through vicarious suffering.

A central feature of the Ashura ceremonies in the month of Muharram is the memory of the martyrdom in 680 AD of al-Husain, Muhammad's grandson and son of Ali, the fourth Caliph (successor to the prophet) and Muhammad's last direct male descendant. Al-Husain perished in battle against a superior Sunni force near Kerbela after Shiites from Kufa failed to come to his assistance. His death sealed the "illegitimate" seizure of the Caliphate by the Sunni majority for centuries.

### The Sense of suffering

The Battle of Kerbela 680 AD buried Shiite hopes of securing the Caliphate

and marked the erstwhile end of decades of Shiite attempts to exercise dominion over the Muslim community. In the Shiite view the Prophet's grandson al-Husain was the innocent, even sinless one, whose suffering and death permitted the "illegimates" to seize power. This is why the death of al-Husain, the designated ruler of the Shiites, continues to be of great importance for the Shiite community as expressed in the Ashura ceremonies.

Along with al-Husain's death the sufferings of the Imams are also remembered. „Imams“ in Shii theology do not mean those leading the community in prayer, but the religious leaders of the Shii communities which were considered to be called by Allah. In the Shiite view all Imams vicariously suffered martyrdom as the just for the unjust. They intercede for God and shorten believers' sufferings in the last judgement. When a Shiite weeps für the martyrs during the Ashura ceremonies, he demonstrates his willingness to follow al-Husain's example and assume a martyr's death.<sup>1</sup> Martyrdom is thus a vital part of Shiite belief.

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<sup>1</sup> Heinz Halm, *Die Schia*, Darmstadt, 1988, p. 177.

The Shiite lament over their community's present disadvantaged position as a religious minority suffering under "unjust" Sunni dominance also finds expression in the Passion dramas with their contemporary reference to the minority status of Shiites outside Iran.<sup>2</sup> They also speak of hope in a better future for Shiites when their community is no longer under the rule of "usurpers". Past and present suffering are an integral part of Shiite self-understanding, as Ignaz Goldziher put it: "*A genuine Shiite is persecuted and as miserable as the family for whose rights he struggles and suffers.*"<sup>3</sup>

### The Passion dramas

The ceremonies last for the first ten days of the month of Muharram and are characterized by the wearing of mourning-dress, recitations dealing with al-Husain's sufferings, laments, drama, street processions and often very bloody self-flagellation.<sup>4</sup> Some flagellants beat their bare shoulders with chains as a sign of mourning for the martyrdom of the imams and over their own pitiful situation as the oppressed.<sup>5</sup> A third group beat themselves on the head or forehead with

sabres<sup>6</sup> until they begin to bleed profusely and fall into ecstatic trance. Those who do not inflict wounds on themselves participate in the sufferings so portrayed by rhythmically beating their breasts or foreheads. Suffering to the point of letting blood is seen as an imitation of al-Husain's sufferings and participation in his redemption. Al-Husain suffered and sacrificed himself for God, the characters in the passion plays are portrayed as "corpses", the victims of murderous injustice, and the emotional pain of suffering and bloodshed play a prominent role. The actors playing the part of al-Husain's enemies are said sometimes to be attacked and beaten by spectators, and deaths continue to occur during the dramas. In places with mixed Sunni-Shiite population riots often occur when the Shiites curse the first three, in their eyes illegitimate, Caliphs during the ceremonies.

The Ashura ritual is also one of penitence for the incommensurable guilt of failing to participate in al-Husain's sacrifice at the battle of Kerbela in 680 AD.<sup>7</sup> The first penitents are supposed to have visited al-Husain's grave as early as 684 AD to seek atonement for their breach of loyalty.<sup>8</sup> The idea is still current today. After Ayatollah Khomeini's death Iranian television showed repatriated prisoners-of-war from the Iran-Iraq conflict crawling on their knees in tears to his

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<sup>2</sup> This was even the case in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, although the Shiis number appr. 60% of the inhabitants of Iraq.

<sup>3</sup> Ignaz Goldziher. *Vorlesungen über den Islam*. Heidelberg, 1910, pp. 200-201.

<sup>4</sup> See the detailed description of Hildegard Müller. *Studien zum persischen Passionspiel*. Freiburg, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Gustav Thaïss in regard to Iran: Gustav Thaïss, *Religious Symbolism and Social Change: The drama of Husain*, in: Nikki R. Keddie (Hg.), *Scholars, Saints and Sufis. Muslim Religious Institutions since 1500*. Berkeley, 1972/1978, pp. 349-366.

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<sup>6</sup> Werner Ende. *The Flagellations of Muharram and the Shi'ite 'Ulamâ'*. in: *Der Islam* 55/1978 (Berlin), pp. 19-36, esp. p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Heinz Halm. *Der schiitische Islam. Von der Religion zur Revolution*. München, 1994, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Wilfried Buchta. *Schiiten. Kreuzlingen /München*, 2004, p. 62.

grave to beg forgiveness for not having laid down their lives in battle.<sup>9</sup>

The passion dramas are regarded as works of merit in which the spectators are also actively involved, the tears they shed making them acceptable to God. *“The tears shed for them have a truly charismatic value. They constitute... the prerequisite of a Shiite’s personal salvation. Each sinner is supposed to shed at least one tear for al-Husain at some point in his life, and such tears are all the more meritorious for being accompanied by bloodshed.”*<sup>10</sup>

Both actors and spectators of the dramas portraying al-Husain’s suffering and death become ecstatic and strew dust on their heads in token of mourning and despair. Some tear their clothes, burst into tears and give themselves blows and injuries. They participate in al-Husain’s suffering and ask forgiveness for their own sins and those of the Shiite community. Al-Husain’s shrine in Kerbela, 60 miles south-west of Baghdad, is one of the most important Shiite places of pilgrimage and like Mecca and Medina is off-limits to non-Muslims.<sup>11</sup>

## **Suffering – a uniquely Christian concept?**

According to Shiite legends, only al-Husain and not Muhammad can intercede for the Muslim faithful at the Judgment, for al-Husain bore the greatest suffering. The Passion drama even portrays Muhammad requesting al-Husain’s intercession on the Day of Judgment.<sup>12</sup> Through his suffering al-Husain has

attained the status of eternal mediator and redeemer.

The attempt to enter into someone’s voluntary and bloody sacrifice for others might seem to recall Jesus’ crucifixion, but there are important differences to the biblical understanding of Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross. The cause of al-Husain’s death was not sin separating man from God but his defeat in battle by an enemy army fighting for hegemony of the Islamic Empire. He laid down his life neither voluntarily nor to obtain redemption. His role as a martyr whose shed blood mediates blessings to people today was only ascribed to him by succeeding generations. Finally, in the Biblical view, Christ offered himself as a sacrifice “once for all” and accomplished redemption, while the Shiite community’s suffering and penitence to obtain forgiveness for all Shiites still continue right up to the present. And there is also a contradiction between the desire to repent for the unwillingness to share al-Husain’s suffering in Kerbela 680 and the dictate of *taqiya* (secrecy) which aims at avoiding to suffer for the faith.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Hildegard Müller. Studien. p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 160.