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## RŪMĪ'S VIEW OF THE IMAM ḤUSAYN

William C. Chittick

*State University of New York at Stony Brook*

THE martyrdom of the Imam Ḥusayn can hardly be called a major theme of Rūmī's works; in over 50,000 couplets he refers to it less than twenty times. Nevertheless, these few lines are sufficient to suggest how the events of Karbalā' were viewed not only by Rūmī, this great representative of the Ṣūfī tradition, but also by his listeners, who constituted a pious cross-section of Islamic society.

The first thing one notes is that it was sufficient for Rūmī to mention one of three words to conjure up the image of Ḥusayn's martyrdom for his listeners: Ḥusayn, Karbalā', 'Āshūrā' Yazīd and Shimr had a similar evocative power. There was no need for Rūmī to describe the tragedy to a Muslim public, since everyone was already familiar with it; even among Sunnīs, it must have been part of the Islamic lore that was commonly called upon—especially in the context of popular preaching—to drive home points about good and evil, martyrdom, injustice, and similar themes. There is, of course, nothing surprising in this: scholars have often remarked on the indelible imprint left in the Muslim awareness by the Imam Ḥusayn's martyrdom. What should perhaps be noted is that the name Ḥusayn, along with the other words mentioned above, functioned to call up a whole set of images, just as, for example, it is sufficient for Rūmī to mention the name Abraham for his listeners to think of Nimrod and the fire that turned into a rosegarden; numerous other examples could also be cited.

One might ask about the sources of Rūmī's information concerning Ḥusayn, but this would be like asking where he learned about Islam. Nevertheless, one can say that among Ṣūfī poets that were known to have been read by Rūmī, Sanā'ī (d. 525/1131) employs the terms Ḥusayn and Karbalā' as poetic images in much the same manner that Rūmī does, while 'Aṭṭār (d. 618/1221) apparently does not refer to him except in the context of panegyrics on the Prophet and the first few caliphs (e.g., in his *Moṣibat-nāma*).

Sanā'ī invokes the name of the Imam Ḥusayn either to stress the necessity of suffering and tribulation in the practice of one's religion,<sup>1</sup> or to point out that the saints—the men of God—are those who have experienced the death of their individual selves.<sup>2</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> For example:

Until they turn away from happiness,  
men of purity will not be able to step onto Muṣṭafā's carpet.  
How should there be joy in religion's lane when,  
for the sake of empire, blood ran down Ḥusayn's throat  
at Karbalā'?

For the sake of a single 'Yes'  
spoken by the spirit in eternity-without-beginning (7: 172),  
The men of Yes (*bala*) must submit themselves to affliction (*balā*)  
until eternity-without-end.

[*Dīwān*, ed. Mudarris Raḍawī (Tehran, 1341/1962), pp. 40–41.]

Once you set out in this way,  
your only provision will be annihilation,  
even if you are an Abū Dharr or a Salmān.  
If you are Ḥusayn,  
you will see naught of the beauty of the bride's face  
but daggers and arrows.

[*Dīwān*, p. 97]

This world is full of martyrs,  
but where is a martyr like Ḥusayn at Karbalā'?

[*Dīwān*, p. 571.]

<sup>2</sup> For example:

Lift up your head in the garden of Verification,  
so that in religion's lane you may see alive, group by group,  
those who have been killed.  
In one row you will see those killed with a blade like Ḥusayn,  
in another those stricken with poison like Ḥasan.

[*Dīwān*, p. 485.]

Sanā'ī, since you have not been cut off from your own self,  
how can you tell tales of Ḥusayn?

[*Dīwān*, p. 552.]

one instance he compares Ḥusayn, Yazīd, and Shimr to contrary forces working within the souls of men,<sup>3</sup> and here, as in the first two instances, parallels are found in Rūmī's poetry.

For Rūmī, love for God is the heart and soul of Islam.<sup>4</sup> Certainly the 'forms' (*sūrat*) of our acts and religious practices are important, but they are given values by the 'meanings' (*ma'nā*) which animate them. Thus, for example, when asked if anything is more important for Islamic practice than the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*), Rūmī replies that the animating spirit (*jān*) of the prayer is better, just as faith (*īmān*) is more excellent. Faith must be continuous, whereas the prayer is performed at five different times during the day. The prayer can be omitted for a valid excuse, but faith can never be omitted. Faith without prayer has certain benefits, whereas prayer without faith is hypocritical and useless. Finally, faith is the same in all religions, while the form of prayer in each is different.<sup>5</sup>

Were Rūmī to be asked this question in more general terms, i.e., 'Is anything more important than the religion of Islam itself?', I think he would answer that love for God is so, since all these outward forms of ritual and devotion, all the teachings and practices that make up Islam, exist for the sake of that love. This is not to suggest that the 'forms' are without importance—far from it; the 'meaning'—love—cannot exist without its outward supports. But one must not fall into the error of thinking that the doctrines, practices, and outward forms are their own *raison d'être*, for 'prayer without faith is useless'. As Rūmī remarks:

If the exposition of meanings were sufficient,  
the creation of the world would be vain and useless.

<sup>3</sup> Religion is your Ḥusayn,  
while desires and hopes are pigs and dogs—  
yet you kill the first through thirst and feed these two.  
How can you keep on cursing the wicked Yazīd and Shimr?  
You are a Shimr and a Yazīd for your own Ḥusayn!

[*Dīwān*, p. 655.]

<sup>4</sup> See W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rūmī* (Albany N.Y., 1983), esp. pp. 194ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Fīhi mā fīhi*, ed. B. Furūzānfar (Tehran, 1348/1969), pp. 11, 32; cf. A. J. Arberry (trans.), *Discourses of Rūmī* (London, 1961), pp. 24–43.

If love for God were only thought and meaning,  
the form of fasting and prayer would not exist.

The gifts that lovers exchange  
are naught in relation to love except forms,

So that the gifts may give witness to the love hidden within.<sup>6</sup>

The forms of religion, then, are the necessary concomitants of the  
meaning of religion, which, for Rūmī, is love:

My religion is to live through love—  
life through this spirit and body is my shame.<sup>7</sup>

The distinguishing feature of Rūmī's 'Religion of Love' is that it  
negates the reality of 'everything other than God' (*aghyār*) with the  
sword of the *shahāda*: 'There is no god but God.'

The joy and heartache of the lovers is He,  
the wages and salary for their service He.

Were aught to be contemplated other than the Beloved,  
how would that be Love? That would be idle infatuation.

Love is that flame which, when it blazes up,  
burns away everything except the Beloved.

It drives home the sword of 'no god'  
in order to slay other than God.

Consider carefully: after 'no god', what remains?

There remains 'but God'; the rest has gone.  
Bravo, oh great, idol-burning Love!<sup>8</sup>

The chief 'idol' or 'other' that must be negated on the Path of  
Love is the seeker's own self: 'The mother of all idols is your own  
ego.'<sup>9</sup>

You are God's lover, and God is such that when He comes,  
not a single hair of you will remain.

Before His glance a hundred like you are annihilated.  
Is it that you are in love with your own negation, sir?

<sup>6</sup> *Mathnawī*, ed. and trans. R. J. Nicholson, 8 vols. (London, 1925-40), Bk I, vss. 2624-27 (all translations are my own).

<sup>7</sup> *Mathnawī*, VI, 4059.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*, V, 586-590.

<sup>9</sup> *Idem*, I, 772.

You are a shadow in love with the sun.  
The sun comes, and the shadow is quickly naughted.<sup>10</sup>

The first attribute of the true lover, then, is that he must be ready to  
sacrifice himself for God.

O Love, pass the bitter judgement!

Cut me off from other than Thyself!

O torrent, you are roaring.

Roar! You take me to the Ocean.<sup>11</sup>

But most men fear the torrent and flee the sword. They refuse to  
enter into the way of self-sacrifice, even though they are promised  
every manner of joy and felicity. Their faith is not strong enough to  
allow them to surrender their own wills and existences to God.  
Total readiness for martyrdom is the first quality of God's lover.

What does it mean to be Love's familiar?  
Only to separate oneself from the heart's desire,  
To become blood, to swallow down one's own blood,  
and to wait at fidelity's door with the dogs.

The lover sacrifices himself—  
for him death and removal are no different from staying.

On your way, O Moslem!

Be shielded by safety and strive at your piety,  
For these martyrs have no patience without death—  
they are in love with their own annihilation.

Flee if you want from affliction and fate—  
their fear is to be without affliction.

Perform the fast on the recommended days and on 'Āshūrā'—  
you cannot go to Karbalā'<sup>12</sup>

To be a human being in the true sense means to undertake the  
struggle against one's own ego.

The prophets and saints do not avoid spiritual combat. The first spiritual  
combat they undertake in their quest is the killing of the ego and the

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*, III, 4621-23.

<sup>11</sup> *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i kabīr*, ed. B. Furūzānfar, 10 vols. (Tehran, 1336-46/1957-67), v. 35823.

<sup>12</sup> *Idem*, ghazal no. 2102.

abandonment of personal wishes and sensual desires. This is the Greater Holy War (*jihād-i akbar*).<sup>13</sup>

If Husayn is a model worthy to be emulated, it is not because he was killed by villains—this goes without saying. What is truly noteworthy about his life was his victory in the Greater Holy War; only by virtue of his spiritual greatness do the events that led to his physical martyrdom have meaning. The emulation of him that is incumbent upon his followers is then engagement in the Greater Holy War.

Why do you sit there with your own thoughts?  
If you are a man, go to the Beloved!

Do not say, 'Perhaps He does not want me.'  
What business has a thirsty man with such words?

Does the moth think about the flames?  
For Love's spirit, thinking is a disgrace.

When the warrior hears the sound of the drum,  
at once he is worth ten thousand men!

You have heard the drum, so draw your sword without delay!  
Your spirit is the sheath of the all-conquering Dhu'l-Faqār!

You are Husayn at Karbalā', think not of water!

The only 'water' you will see today is a sword of the first water!<sup>14</sup>

But in order to attain the Kingdom of Love a man must first suffer the pain of separation from his Beloved. For the more he understands the nature of his goal, the more he will understand the depth of his own inadequacy.

Whoever is more awake has greater pain,  
whoever is more aware has a yellower face.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the pain that the lover suffers always attracts him toward the object of his love.

Every heartache and suffering that enters your body and heart  
pulls you by the ear to the Promised Abode.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Fīhi mā fīhi*, p. 130; *Discourses*, pp. 140–41.

<sup>14</sup> *Kullīyyāt*, vss. 3656–62.

<sup>15</sup> *Mathnawī*, I, 629.

<sup>16</sup> *Kullīyyāt*, vs. 35487.

The reason for this is clear:

Your inward nature is full of dust from the veil of 'I-ness',  
and that dust will not leave you all at once.

With every cruelty and every blow,  
it departs little by little from the heart's face,  
sometimes in sleep and sometimes in wakefulness.<sup>17</sup>

Eventually the pain and suffering of love will lead to the death of  
the ego and rebirth in God.

Night died and came to life, for there is life after death:  
O heartache, kill me! For I am Ḥusayn, you are Yazīd.<sup>18</sup>

Or again,

O Murtaḍā of Love! Shams al-Dīn of Tabrīz—look at me!  
I am like Ḥusayn, sitting in my own blood,  
or like Ḥasan, drinking down poison.<sup>19</sup>

Again:

Whoever has my fire wears my robe—  
he has a wound like Ḥusayn, a cup like Ḥasan.<sup>20</sup>

In short, it is only through the suffering and tribulation of the spiritual journey as exemplified in the outward world by the trials of the Imam Ḥusayn and his family that man can attain the perfection for which he was created. Then, however, he has every right to speak of the joy and felicity of union with God. If Rūmī, in one passage of the *Mathnawī* (VI 777–805), is able to poke fun at the Shī'a of Aleppo for their celebration of 'Āshūrā',<sup>21</sup> it is precisely

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*, vss. 12078–79.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem*, vs. 9206.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem*, vs. 20517.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*, vs. 6358.

<sup>21</sup> On the day of 'Āshūrā'  
all the people of Aleppo gather at the Antioch gate  
until nightfall.

Men and women—  
a great congregation—  
mourn the family of the Prophet.

On 'Āshūrā'  
the Shī'a wail and lament  
with tears for Karbalā' . . . .

because here he is looking at the good news of joy and union which are announced by the Imam's spiritual victory and which are the meaning beyond the form of his outward suffering:

The spirit of a sultan has escaped from a prison.  
Why should we tear our clothes and bite our fingers?

Since he was the king of religion,  
his breaking of the bonds was a time of joy,

For he sped toward the pavilions of good fortune  
and threw off his fetters and chains.<sup>22</sup>

In conclusion, let me quote two more of Rūmī's ghazals, which can serve to summarize the Imam Ḥusayn's significance as pictured in Rūmī's works:

Where are you, martyrs of God,  
you who have sought affliction  
on the plain of Karbalā'?

A stranger, a poet,  
arrived at Aleppo on the day of 'Āshūrā'  
and heard all that lamentation. . . .  
He went along asking questions in his search:  
'What is this sorrow?  
For whom are you mourning? . . .'  
Someone said to him,  
'Hey, are you mad? Are you not a Shī'ite?  
Are you an enemy of the Family?  
'Don't you know that it is the day of 'Āshūrā',  
a day of mourning  
for a soul who was greater than a generation? . . .'

The poet replied,  
'True, but where are the days of Yazīd?  
When did this tragedy occur!  
How long the news has taken to reach you here!  
The eyes of the blind have seen that loss!  
The ears of the deaf have heard that story!  
Have you been asleep until now  
that you have just begun to tear your clothes in mourning?  
Then mourn for yourselves, oh sleepers,  
for this heavy sleep of yours is a terrible death!  
The spirit of a sultan . . .'

<sup>22</sup> *Mathnawī*, VI, 797-99.

Where are you, light-spirited lovers,  
you who fly better  
than the birds in the sky?

Where are you, kings of the heavens,  
you who have found the door  
that leads outside the circling spheres?

Where are you,  
you who have been delivered from spirit and place?  
Indeed, does anyone ask of the intellect, 'Where are you?'

Where are you,  
you who have broken the door of the prison  
and given freedom to the debtors?

Where are you,  
you who have opened the door to the treasury,  
you who possess the wealth of poverty?

For some time now all of you have been swimming  
in that Ocean of which this world is but the foam.

The forms of the universe are but the Ocean's foam—  
if you, oh listener, are a man of purity,  
pass beyond these bubbles!

These words are but the picture of my heart's bubbling—  
if you are one of us,

leave aside the picture and go to the heart.

Rise from the east, O Sun of Tabrīz,  
for you are the root  
of the root  
of the root of every radiance.<sup>23</sup>

In the fire of its yearning, my heart keeps up its cries,  
hoping that a welcoming call will come to it  
from the direction of union.

My heart is Ḥusayn and separation Yazīd—  
my heart has been martyred two hundred times  
in the desert of torment and affliction (*karb-o-balā*).

<sup>23</sup> *Kulliyāt*, ghazal no. 2707.

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Outwardly made a martyr, in the unseen world it has gained life—  
in the eyes of the enemy it is a prisoner,  
in the Void, a king.

Dwelling in the paradise of union with the Friend,  
it has been delivered from the depths of hunger's prison  
and freed from the cheap and the dear.

Were the root of its tree not well nourished in the Unseen,  
why are the blossoms of its union open for all to see?

Silence! Speak from the direction of your awareness.  
For the Universal Intellect is asking you,  
'Will you not understand?' (2: 44, etc.).<sup>24</sup>

ELEGY (*MARTHĪYA*) ON ḤUSAYN:  
ARABIC AND PERSIAN

L. Clarke  
*University of Toronto*

I propose to give here an account neither of the development, nor of the themes, of the elegy on Ḥusayn—in Arabic or Persian—nor of the outstanding poets of elegy—the literature in both these languages is too vast for that, and spread out over too great a period. Rather, I would like to give some idea of the place of these *marāthī* in literary and religious tradition, while giving in translation some examples of elegy on Ḥusayn which should serve for those unfamiliar with these languages to form an idea of the beauty and effectiveness of this type of poetry.

I should warn English-speakers that my translations, in one essential respect, do not bear much resemblance to the originals. The Arabic and Persian poetical traditions, at least until very recently (only a few decades ago), required adherence to strict rhyme patterns—often monorhyme—and strict quantitative metre. These things are not only nearly impossible to reproduce in our English language, but also undesirable. It is necessary to imagine that the examples I give had in their original a very regular rhythm, a rhythm which could also be important for ritual purposes, for instance, in religious processions. If the conceits used are sometimes also a little difficult for us to understand immediately, the ideas expressed, and the effect, are, I think, universal.

The tradition of elegiac poetry known in Arabic as *marthīya* had its roots, as regards themes as well as form, in pre-Islamic times.

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*, ghazal no. 230.