Islam's Sacred Story: A Contemporary Retelling-Part 1

This is the first installment in a two-part article on the historical thought of Sayyid al-ʿulamā', Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi. The article explores the attempts of Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi to revive South Asian Shi'i Islam in the 20th century through the ethical and mytho-theological example of Imam Husayn. In this installment, the author first presents Sayyid Naqvi's lifelong goal of "illuminating Islam" for his South Asian Muslim audience. Then he examines the historical thought of Sayyid Naqvi, wherein the ultimate goal of history is not simply knowing the past, but rather to present ethical lessons that must inform our lives today, and to manifest the ultimate sacred story of Islam. The second installment of this article is available here.

Introduction

> Yes, yes, it is true that in "illuminating Islam", [in answering] "What is it?" I am unable to find a better [historical] reference than the person of Ḥusayn (ʿa). If I were to clarify the real practical meaning of Islam, then in world history only one person can be found: His name is Ḥusayn (ʿa).((*La Tufsidū fī al-Arḍ* (1935), p. 115.))

"Illuminating Islam" underlies Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi's((In communal memory, known with his honorific titles "sayyid al-ʿulamā'" and "naqqan sāḥib", Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi (1905–1988), is arguably the most prolific (we are looking at over 250 works in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic), widely popular, and revered Indian Shiʿi scholar of the twentieth century. Justin Jones describes him as "one of the subcontinent's most prominent '*ulamā*' in the 1930s-1940s," "the final great mujtahid of South Asia," and that "after independence he would remain the most well-known, widely published and widely quoted Shiʿa ʿalim in the country for four decades." (*Shia Islam in Colonial India*, p. 247) Decades earlier,

S. A. A. Rizvi had called him "a very impressive and lucid orator." (*A Socio-Intellectual History of Shiʿi South Asia*, vol. II, p. 152) One must also mention Simon Fuchs' recent study of Shiʿism in Pakistan, where the influence of Sayyid al-ʿulamāʾ on the Shiʿi intellectual and religious landscape of Pakistan have been observed on several occasions. See his *In a Pure Muslim Land: Shiʿism between Pakistan and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2019).)) entire intellectual corpus. He strove to illuminate Islam for his South Asian Muslim audience—especially the Shiʿi—so that they may successfully survive, even thrive. But survive what? Various attacks and critique from without, and doubts from within regarding the worth of a seemingly declining if not altogether obsolete religious tradition; simply put, a deep "crisis of religion"((For a fuller account of this "crisis of religion" and its reception and articulation by Sayyid Naqvi, see chapter 1 of Syed Rizwan Zamir, "Rethinking, Reconfiguring and Popularizing Islamic Tradition: Religious Thought of a Contemporary Indian Scholar" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2011). See also footnote 4.)) for South Asian Muslims. This was during what many have called the "modern age" of Islam, an era defined by not only the prevailing conditions of modernity, but more importantly, the dominance of a modern Western worldview.((Given the complexity of the subject, it is extremely inconvenient to attempt here a robust description of modernity and modernism, i.e., the underlying worldview of modernity. The best that can be offered is a general sense of their relevance to our purposes. Through the direct rule of Western colonial powers in the 18th, 19th, and the first half of the 20th centuries, Muslim thought and cultures came into serious contact with Enlightenment-inspired modern Western thought and institutions. Throughout these centuries—and the trend continues to this day—Muslims have grappled with these ideas and institutions, and have continuously assessed their viability for Muslim thought and culture. It is this grappling with modern Western ideas, values, and institutions in colonial times that scholars and Muslim thinkers like Sayyid Naqvi deemed modernity and modernism as significantly new challenges for contemporary Islamic civilization.)) This "crisis of religion" was articulated clearly quite early in his intellectual career, especially in his 1935 speeches titled *La Tufsidu fī al-Arḍ*; in fact, beginning in the early 1930s and lasting until

his death in 1988, Sayyid Naqvi's writings and preaching from the venue of Muharram-commemoration gatherings was his partial response to what he saw as a grave "crisis of religion" faced by his Shiʿi community, the larger Muslim population of India, and in fact, all religious communities. This crisis of religion according to Sayyid Naqvi was a result of two broader intellectual and social currents:

1. The undermining of Islam by Christian and Hindu missionaries;
2. The undermining of Islamic or religious foundations of any religion through rationalistic, scientistic, and materialistic philosophies.

While the missionaries undermined the religion of Islam, the new philosophies inspired by post-Christian modern Western thought had begun to reduce "religion"—not any religion in particular (Islam or Christianity), but "religion" as such (*madhhab*)—to an outdated "thing" of a bygone era, with no relevance whatsoever to the modern world. According to Sayyid Naqvi, these new attacks on religion-as-such had made it extremely difficult for the lay piety—whether Sunni, Shiʿi, or of any other religion for that matter—to uphold its basic religious commitments, therefore drawing its adherents often to an "indifference toward religion", even atheism (*lā dīnīyat*). Although Sayyid Naqvi acknowledges various other serious crises Muslims faced during the British Raj—i.e., economic, political, social, and cultural—for him this "crisis of religion" was by far the most formidable challenge for the well being of Indian society, a challenge which again was not simply confined to Muslims.

But how does Ḥusayn (ʿa) and the battle of Karbala help him illuminate Islam? Was he simply paying lip service to pious Shiʿi sensibilities? Not really. If his seven-volume Qurʾanic commentary is excluded, almost one-third of his writings relate to the theme of Husaynology((I borrow this term from Justin Jones, "Shiʿism, Humanity and Revolution in Twentieth Century India: Selfhood and Politics in the Husainology of ʻAli Naqi Naqvi," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24 (3) 2014, pp. 415-34.)) directly. Even those writings whose main subject-matter is not Husaynology contain ample allusions to and reflections on it.((It must be noted, for example, that the quote that opens this essay comes

from one such text, namely, *La Tufsidū fī al-Arḍ*.)) If one surveys his entire corpus, it becomes clear that he meant what he said. A few other facts corroborate this point: 1) The theme of Karbala is with Sayyid Naqvi from the beginning of his intellectual career.((The earliest work was written in Arabic during his seminary studies in Najaf, Iraq, to defend what were seen as extreme forms of Shiʿi mourning against criticisms from certain *ʿulamāʾ*, especially Ayatullah Muḥsin al-Amīn, the author of the well-known *Aʿyān al-Shīʿa*. See "The Flagellations of Muharram and the Shiʿite Ulama'" in *Der Islam*, 55 (1978), p. 19-36. Upon his return from Iraq, the first book he authored was again related to the subject of Ḥusayn (ʿa) and Karbala. Coincidentally it is also Imamia Mission Publication House's first publication. *Qātilān-i Ḥusayn kā madhhab* (Lucknow: Manshurah Imamiyah Mission and Sarfaraz Qawmi Press, 1932).)) 2) From among the first hundred volumes of his work that were published by Imamia Mission Publication House (the idea of it was Sayyid Naqvi's inspiration), thirty-four dealt with Husaynology, and only Husaynology-related texts were translated into languages other than Urdu.((For example, *Ḥusayn awr Islām* (1935) was immediately translated into Hindi and English. This work was followed by *Ḥusayn kā Atam Balaydān* and *The Martyrdom of Ḥusayn* (1936) in the same year.)) 3) There are ample occasional allusions to this theme in texts that do not deal with it in any direct way.((*La Tufsidū fī al-Arḍ*, for example, includes the theme of Karbala and martyrdom of Ḥusayn (ʿa). It occurs in the context of a discussion on how a *muṣliḥ* is often accused by people of being a *mufsid*: "Earlier I had said that religion and state, even if separate from one another, could cause a [complete] destruction of the world. But if religion is subsumed by power, there will be no limits to corruption (*fasādāt*). The greatest example of this is the sultanates of Umayyads; here religion and political power—the two things that can be great sources of corruption in the world (*fasād fī al-ʿarḍ*)—were merged. What was the result of this? Could there be an illustration of *fasād fī al-ʿarḍ* greater than [what happened in] the event of Karbala?... Was there anyone more *muṣliḥ* of the world than Ḥusayn ibn ʿAli? Absolutely not...Imam Ḥusayn and his followers are blamed for *fasād fī al-ʿarḍ*. Ḥusayn presents his defense by action, and through this action the result is made clear [regarding whether he was a mufsid or a *muṣliḥ*?]" (86-88))) 4)

Sayyid Naqvi was somewhat unique for someone of his stature in his willingness to speak from the pulpit during Muharram and throughout the year, a forum generally attributed to preachers of limited scholarly training. And finally, 5) Sayyid Naqvi continued writing on this subject throughout his life without any noticeable gap, extending his reflections and analysis in both depth and breadth. His reflections on the Karbala narrative were thus not simply an inevitable burden carried by a Shiʿi *ʿālim* and religious leader. Rather, they were crucial to Sayyid Naqvi's lifelong struggle to revive Islam in 20th-century South Asia for his modern audience, restoring it to its once-privileged societal status.

Yet a consistent interpretive pattern underlies all of Sayyid Naqvi's intellectual engagements with the Karbala narrative((For example, see: *Mujāhidah-i Karbala* (1933); *Ḥusayn awr Islām* (1932); *Maʿrakah-i Karbalā* (1935); *Maḥārabah-i Karbalā* (1936); *Banī Umayyah kī ʿAdāwat-i Islām kī Mukhtaṣar Tārīkh* (1928/1963); and *Khilāfat-i Yazīd kay Mutaʿalli Āzād Ārāʾīn* (1953).)) and wider Islamic sacred history:((Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi, *Tarīkh-i Islām*, 4 vols (Islamabad:

Imāmīya Dar al-Tablīgh, 2000).)) First, grounding historical details within historical sources to set the historical record straight; and second, drawing out and explicating the ethical meaning both from the broader historical narrative and its very concrete moments. In other words, though historical accuracy is a huge concern for Sayyid Naqvi, the goal of history is not history itself. Rather, it is the lessons learned therein. Generally, these lessons are ethical and are drawn out to edify his religious audience. For Sayyid Naqvi, accuracy of the historical narrative, though quite crucial in its own right, would be incomplete if it does not tend toward the ethical.

This paper illumines how in engaging narratives of Karbala—and by extension, Islam's sacred (read: prophetic) *mytho-history*—Sayyid Naqvi was drawing on the Islamic tradition's symbolic and mythical sources. Use of the term "myth" here needs to be contrasted clearly from its popular conceptions as a "false, fictional, fantasy story". Myth as used in the academic study of religion (and utilized here) refers to an "orienting tale", that is, a sacred story which is at the heart of a religious tradition. It provides to its believers an overarching account of life and the world, their origins (i.e., "In the beginning was…"), the arc and flow of history through time—and significant historical events within—and finally an account of the end of it all. These myths are "orientational" because they orient for those inhabiting the myth almost every aspect of human life, its purpose and day-to-day religious rituals, ethical principles, and practices. It is in view of these observations that one notices that Sayyid Naqvi's telling of Islam's sacred origins and unfolding of prophetic history through the ages has both mythical and historical character.

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Just as Sayyid Naqvi draws on the *uṣūlī*-intellectual framework to "re-imagine", "translate", and "re-present" Islamic theology and praxis for his 20th-century Muslim audience,((See chapter 3 of Syed Rizwan Zamir, "Rethinking, Reconfiguring and Popularizing Islamic Tradition: Religious Thought of a

Contemporary Indian Scholar" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2011).)) he also draws on Islam's symbolic and *mytho-theological*((Akin to "mytho-history" discussed earlier, the term "mytho-theology" highlights the intertwining of mythic and theological underpinnings of the narrative. The ensuing discussion should make this point clearer.)) sources for the same purpose. If the former represents reviving Islam through its intellectual tradition, then the latter represents this revival through Islam's mythological tradition.((Though not the subject of this essay, it is also pertinent to note that in taking up the pulpit (and the impactful preacher-scholar role for which Sayyid Naqvi became so popular) was also for the task of religious preservation and revival. And in doing that he also revolutionized Shiʿi preaching. Put simply, Sayyid Naqvi's Husaynology and preaching in its various dimensions was his simultaneous act of "preaching Shiʿi revival" and "reviving Shiʿi preaching".)) Together and complementing one another, they complete Sayyid Naqvi's religio-intellectual project. This paper discusses Sayyid Naqvi's engagement with the foremost mythological source of the Shiʿi Islamic tradition, the figure of Ḥusayn (ʿa) and his heroic act on the plains of Karbala. Discussing at length first Sayyid Naqvi's Husaynology, I will proceed to show how in Sayyid Naqvi's Husaynology, the historical continually meets the ethical, without collapsing the integrity of either.

Yet, to stop our analysis at the purely ethical is to miss an even more crucial aspect of Sayyid Naqvi's Husaynology and his presentation of Islam's sacred history: the mytho-theological worldview that underlies—and inevitably configures—the historical narrative. We can only appreciate his statement that opens this essay by, first, appreciating the close connections between the historical, ethical, and the mytho-theological; and second, by understanding how they all inform and together play out in Sayyid Naqvi's Husaynology and mytho-theology—within which Ḥusayn (ʿa) becomes the ultimate hero of Islam and humanity. Finally, the essay will also note that Sayyid Naqvi is a "contemporary Muslim historian", who on the one hand, enacted the long-standing tradition of Muslim histories through the hermeneutic of his mytho-theology, while on the other, was responsive to the intellectual challenges of the twentieth century by highlighting an ethical framework.

PART I: THE HERMENEUTICS OF HISTORY

The Overlap of the Historical and the Ethical in Sayyid Naqvi's Husaynology

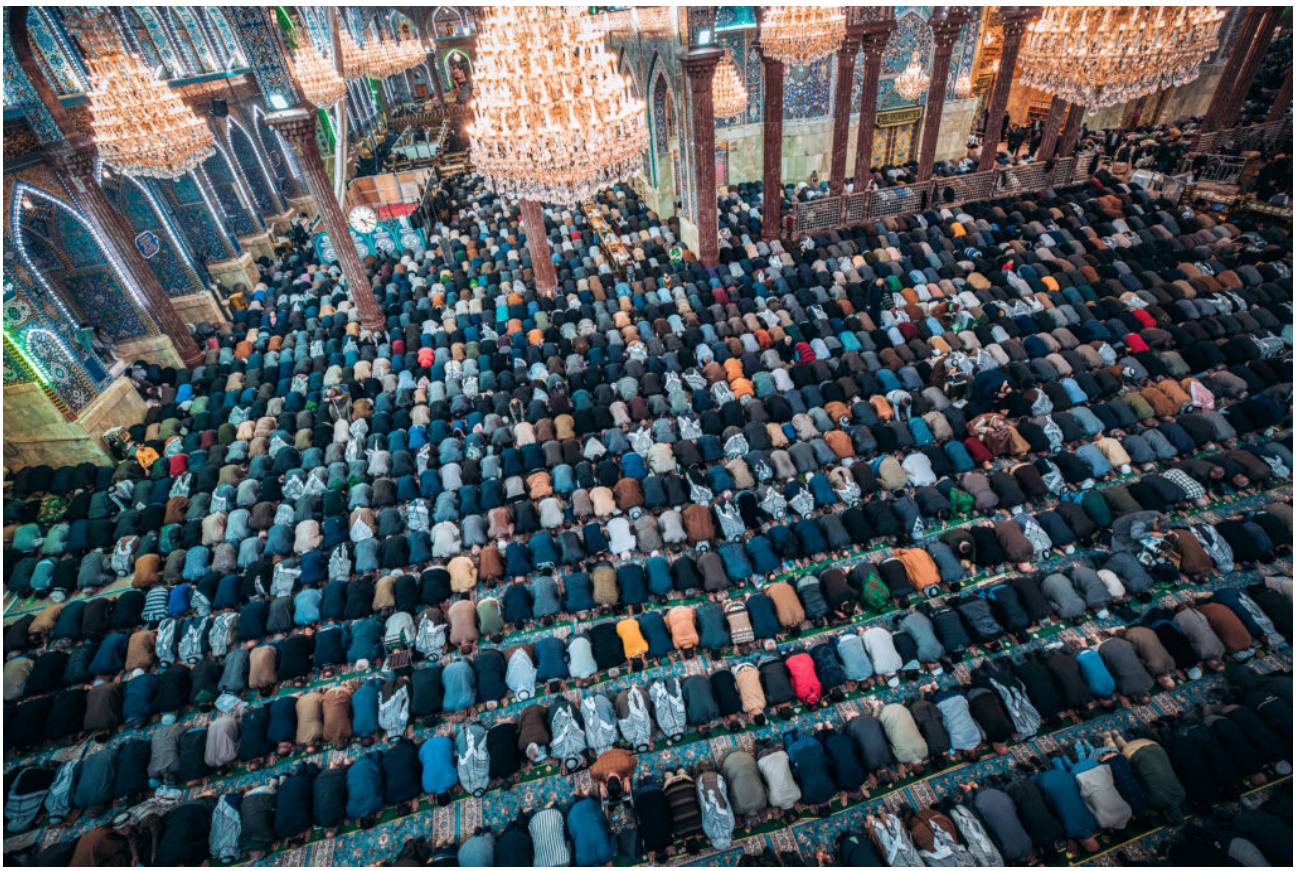
A clear statement regarding this close connection between the historical account and its ethical implications is found in *Uswa-i Ḥusaynī*, where Sayyid Naqvi notes the following:

> The event of Karbala and its practical results is a topic that deserves a lengthy commentary. Every sub-event of this incident is a fountain of ethical, social, and religious teachings. Imam Ḥusayn had patched together all human perfections (*kamālāt-i insānī*). In fact, the incident of Karbala unveils all the characteristics of truth and falsehood (*ḥaqq wa bāṭil*)…The numerous valuable lessons taught by Ḥusayn at Karbala should not be viewed through a wrong lens, and then lost to forgetfulness. *These lessons should be made into the plan of life and the constitution for a practical communal life* (*dastūr-i ʿamal-i ḥayāt-i millī*) (129, italics added).((*Uswah-i Ḥusaynī*. Whenever the word *millī* is used in his writings and in this essay, even when translated as "nation" it means community. Though *millī* can be rendered as "national", but since Sayyid Naqvi hardly ever spoke of "nation" in the sense of nationalism, "community" and "communal" seem more appropriate for *millat* and *millī*, especially in this context.))

A few pages later, he states:

> The incident of Karbala is not simply about heartrending afflictions (*maṣāʾib*) that invite human nature to shed tears. It is also a didactic institution (*madrasah-i tarbīyat*) where the world is taught the principles of virtue, etiquette (*adab)*, and a sense of duty. Blessed are those who—just as they are affected by the mourning aspect [of this incident]—also gain from

its didactic dimension, and apply and demonstrate these teachings in a manner akin to what Ḥusayn envisaged for the world. (142)



The ethical thrust of Husaynology is even more clearly illumined by *Shahīd-i Insāniyat*, a 584-page volume published in 1942 upon the 1300th anniversary of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn (ʿa), and still the most comprehensive work on Husaynology in the Urdu language.((Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi, *Shahīd-i Insānīyat* (Lahore: Imāmīya Mission Pakistan Trust, 2006).)) The text is dedicated to a historical reconstruction of the complete life of Ḥusayn (ʿa) from his birth leading up to his martyrdom and its immediate impact afterward. The historical sources are drawn from both Sunni and Shiʿi sources among which Tabari's history was overwhelmingly given the foremost status.((In *La Tufsidū fī al-Arḍ*, while discussing Ḥusayn's (ʿa) mission as *muṣliḥ*, Sayyid Naqvi notes: "I will present to you proofs (*shawāhid*) in which Imam Ḥusayn has rebutted this misunderstanding, and shows how [historical] outcomes have supported Ḥusayn…I have only this book in my hand, called Tarīkh-i Ṭabarī. On such an

occasion, I do not use any work other than this. That is why I will present proofs only from this [work], ones that are relevant to my subject." (87-88) This special status accorded to al-Ṭabari's history by Sayyid Naqvi is due to its authoritativeness for the wider Muslim community.)) This engagement with historical sources was intended to provide an historical account that would be acceptable to most Muslims, regardless of their sectarian affiliations. After devoting over five hundred pages to a rigorous historical reconstruction of events leading up to Karbala, its implications, and the historical aftermath—in other words, the historicizing of the Karbala mythology—he turns to the various ethical implications of this event for contemporary Muslims. Without delving into too much detail, I list here the various lessons Sayyid Naqvi cites under sub-headings that capture in a summary fashion the wide range of his many ethical reflections in the context of Husaynology:

1. Change of mindset (*tabdīl-i dhahnīyyat*) (536);
2. demonstration of the power of religion and spirituality (539);
3. affirmation and propagation of Islam's veracity (540);
4. moral and cultural teachings such as freedom (543);
5. perseverance (544);
6. collective discipline (546);
7. dignity (*'izzat-i nafs)* (548);
8. patience (550);
9. sacrifice for others (553);
10. empathy (555);
11. good dealings with others (555);
12. sympathy for human beings (558);
13. truthfulness (559);
14. peacemaking and tolerance (564);
15. and sacrifice (573).

The section concludes with "miscellaneous" other teachings that included: veiling (574), arranging for a will before death (578), reverence for Divine laws (581), and remembering forefathers and nobility (581).

The list provided in *Shahīd-i Insānīyat* is far from being exhaustive of the various lessons Sayyid Naqvi derived from his reflections. Interspersed in all his writings, be those on the Karbala-narrative explicitly or on another subject, are found numerous other lessons. Unsurprisingly again, in closing the book, Sayyid Naqvi reiterates how the true purpose of mourning is neither to seek intercession, nor to simply lament Ḥusayn's (ʿa) death, but to apply his teachings to one's life. A clear proof that the true intent of telling the narrative is ethical is the fact that the long historical narrative itself converges onto the various "lessons learned" from that narrative.((In passing, it should be mentioned that Sayyid Naqvi's historicizing of the Karbala mythology obviously did not occur without controversy and pushback from pious Shiʿis. These controversies have been discussed at length in Justin Jones's article cited earlier.))

The Overlap of the Historical and the Ethical in Sayyid Naqvi's Study of Islamic Sacred Prophetic History

The strong connection between the historical and the ethical is also evident in Sayyid Naqvi's presentation of Islamic history from his later years, in his well-known four-volume *Tārīkh-i Islām* [*History of Islam*].((Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi, *Tarīkh-i Islām*, 4 vols (Islamabad: Imāmīya Dār al-Tablīgh, 2000).)) Again, *History of Islam* is not history for history's sake. It is not intended as a text that would simply lay out a detailed account of "what happened". Akin to his Husaynology, moral and spiritual lessons are intricately woven into the historical narrative. Let me illustrate this through Sayyid Naqvi's discussion of the prophetic career of Abraham.

In Sayyid Naqvi's telling, the story of Islam begins with trials, suffering, patience, and sacrifice. Commenting upon the Qurʾanic verse of *Sūrat al-Anbiyāʾ* (21):68,((“They said, 'Burn him [Abraham], and help your gods, if you would do aught.'” Qurʾan, Sūrat al-Anbiyāʾ (21):68.)) which describes Nimrod's tyranny

toward Abraham that ultimately led to his emigration, Sayyid Naqvi remarks that Divine Wisdom did not intervene at this stage. It waited until the brutality of the oppressor and the patience of the oppressed both reached their final limit. Divine Wisdom lets events take their course, to a point where the oppressor could not argue that "we did not intend to burn, we were simply threatening," and where the oppressed Abraham's patience and loyalty to God in the face of threats of fire are also tested to their utmost limit. Human choices were not obstructed; rather, they were allowed freedom to be exercised fully so there is neither confusion nor doubt as to the brutality of the oppressor and the trial of the oppressed. It is only after Abraham was thrown into fire that the Divine Will intervened and saved Abraham. Since God had other aims for Abraham, he did not become a martyr. A perfect embodiment of "the sacrificing ethos" of Islam's foremost guides and exemplars, Abraham in this exposition becomes the first person to have made sacrifices for Islam. With Lot and Sarah, he also becomes the first emigrant of Islamic history. (12-13) This telling of the historical account begins to reveal its ethical thrust, and also brings to light a hierarchic view of virtues, whereby *sacrifice* and *patience* in the face of trials to emerge as the crowning virtues a human being can achieve.((We will turn to the discussion of the "hierarchy of virtues" again later in the essay. It must be pointed out here though that the intertwining of ethics, history, and sacred mytho-theology in the telling of the episode of Abraham is quite emblematic of the general trend in Sayyid Naqvi's writings and speeches.))

> *…a hierarchic view of virtues, whereby sacrifice and patience in the face of trials to emerge as the crowning virtues a human being can achieve.*

The Islamic history of affliction, suffering, and sacrifice continued with prophets that succeeded Abraham. For example, Lot suffered at the hands of his community, which had refused to follow divine injunctions and eventually drove him out of the area. He writes: "These are the earlier traces (*nuqūsh*) of Islamic history that have turned events of affliction (*maṣā'ib*), pain (*takālīf*), torment [from others], homelessness, and exile into a treasure. That is why the Prophet of Islam said, 'Islam began with exile.'" ((*Tarīkh-i Islām*, p. 14. The hadith reads

as follows: “Islam began with exile, and returns to being with exile. So there are glad tidings to those in exile.” (badā al-islāmu gharīban wa sayaʿūdu gharīban fa-ṭūbā li-l-ghurabāʾ). See al-Ṣadūq, Kamāl al-Dīn wa-Tamām al-Niʿmah, vol. 1, p. 200.)) But there is clear contemporary import to these lessons; they come as ethical injunctions to his community, reminding them that as a prophetic community, suffering is destined for them. And faced with suffering, the community should not lose heart: “How then could it be apt for Muslims that they are troubled, or lose hope with the occurrence of afflictions (*maṣāʾib*) or extreme difficulties (*shadāʾid*)? They should understand these things as part of their communal character and should always be prepared to bear them,” he added.((*Tarīkh-i Islām*, p. 14.)) In other words, Sayyid Naqvi is responding to the anxieties and deep angst that the turbulences of the colonial era had afflicted upon his Muslim audience. His reading of history thus becomes an exercise in finding inspiration and igniting hope for the anxious South Asian Muslims of the modern colonial period.

An even more interesting hermeneutical move presents itself at this juncture. One observes Sayyid Naqvi plotting the ethical side-by-side with the historical. The occasion is Abraham’s pleading with God in the context of Lot’s story. Yes, the prophet-guides of Islam had always suffered in the hands of their community; the community rebelled and disobeyed them, yet the prophets never cursed them nor took revenge. They, in reality, went beyond simply being patient with their communities. They went out of their way to protect their communities, through prayers, through intercession with God, and at times, even by arguing with Him. Abraham’s efforts to protect Lot’s community is presented as a key example in this regard. Through Qurʾanic references, Sayyid Naqvi notes how when the Divine Wisdom found no room for rehabilitating Lot’s community (and it sent angels to punish them) Abraham argued with them and with God to protect them (14).((Here, he is making reference to the following Qurʾanic verses: Hūd (11):74, al-Sharḥ (94):6, and Āl-i ʿImrān (3):19. Making sure that the incident is not read as Abraham’s disobedience toward God’s Will, Sayyid Naqvi notes that Abraham’s act of dissent is his special privilege as the intimate friend of God, and therefore a friendly and frank quarrelling that only

friends could do. (14-15)))

> *They, in reality, went beyond simply being patient with their communities. They went out of their way to protect their communities, through prayers, through intercession with God, and at times, even by arguing with Him.*

One final instance of the edification of his audiences should suffice. The context is Abraham's building of the House of God in Mecca:

> This building of the *Kaʿbah* was in fact the building of a center for the Islamic religion, which is a source of success and salvation for the whole world. Both father and son were busy erecting it: the father was constructing it, while the son was doing the hard labor. Though the tribe of Jarham had already settled in Mecca, the Creator desired that the house be built by father and son alone. In this way, this concept that there is no harm in labor and hard work was established forever for the followers of Islam. It is so because our great religious and spiritual ancestors were [themselves] employed by the Creator for this task. (22)

In pointing out the *centrality* of Mecca to the story of Islam, the opportunity for highlighting the significance of hard work was not neglected either.

One more point needs to be made regarding the theological underpinnings of this intertwining of the historical and the ethical: the overarching theological vision that provides the parameters and criteria by which particular events of history are assessed and commented upon exhibits an unmistakable Shiʿi coloring. Sayyid Naqvi's subtle and repeated stress that "Islam is a religion of the oppressed" in these early pages is, in orientation, quite clearly Shiʿi: The history of Islam—which includes all previous prophets—is the history of an oppressed and suffering community. If the message of the various prophets is one with the message of the Prophet of Islam, they also share a common fate: that they will be misunderstood, their teachings will be forgotten by most, and the prophets will always suffer at the hands of their communities. It is obvious how this particular lens through which Sayyid Naqvi looked upon history could

easily be extended to the life of the Prophet on the one hand, and to the household of the Prophet on the other. It is also clear how Sayyid Naqvi would tie this view of history to the sufferings of Ḥusayn (ʿa) and his companions on the planes of Karbala. Like the episode of Abraham, the events of Karbala revealed the extent of Umayyad oppression and Ḥusayn's forbearance in the face of that oppression. This view of history is clearly distinct from the usual Sunni version of a triumphant and victorious Islam.

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