

ALI 453 - Readings #2

Understanding Zuhd?

'Zuhd' means indifference and avoidance. The Zahid is someone whose interest transcends the sphere of material existence, and whose object of aspiration lies beyond material things. Zuhd in Islam, though it requires a simple and unaffected life-style and is based on abstention from luxuries and love of comforts and pleasures, operates in the very midst of life and social relations and is sociable. It draws inspiration, and proceeds, from the goal of better fulfilment of social responsibilities and duties.

From the viewpoint of Islam, this world and the next are not separable, not alien to each other. The relation of this world to the other is similar to that between the inward and outward sides of a single reality. They are like the warp and woof of a single fabric. They are to each other as the soul to the body. Their relation-ship can be assumed to be something midway between unity and duality. The works of this world and those of the next are interrelated similarly. Their difference is that of quality, without being essential. Accordingly, that which is harmful for the other world is also to one's detriment in the present world, and everything which is beneficial for the life in this world is also beneficial for life in the next world.

Zuhd and Monasticism

Islam encourages zuhd but condemns monasticism. Both the zahid and the ascetic monk seek abstinence from pleasures and enjoyments. But the monk evades life in society and the responsibilities and the duties it entails, regarding them as the low and mean facets of worldly existence, and takes refuge in mountains or monasteries.

On the other hand, the zahid accepts society with its norms, ideals, duties, and commitments. Both the zahid and the monk are otherworldly, but the zahid is a social otherworldly. The difference between the zahid and the monk arises from two different world-outlooks. From the viewpoint of the monk, this world and the next are two different spheres, separate from and unrelated to each other. To him, happiness in this world is not only independent of happiness in the next but is incompatible with it.

But in the world-view of the zahid, the world and the Hereafter are interconnected. The world is a preamble to the Hereafter. It is a farm of which the Hereafter is the harvest. From the zahid's viewpoint, that which gives order, security, uprightness,

prosperity, and flourish to life is application of other-worldly criteria to the life of this world. The essence of felicity and happiness in the other world lies in successful accomplishment of commitments and responsibilities of this world, performed with faith, piety, purity, and taqwa.

Zuhd and Altruism

One of the ingredients of zuhd is altruism. Ithar (altruism) and atharah (egoism) are derived from the same root. Atharah means giving precedence to one's interests over those of others. In other words it implies monopolizing everything for oneself and depriving others. But Ithar means preferring others over oneself and bearing hardship for the comfort and good of others. The zahid, by virtue of his simple, humble, and content living, is hard upon himself so that others may live in ease. He derives greater satisfaction by feeding and clothing others and working for their ease than if he did those things for himself. Ithar represents the most majestic and sublime manifestation of human greatness, and only very great human beings climb to its noble heights.

Zuhd and Sympathy for others

The sympathy and the willingness to share the suffering of the needy and the deprived is another ingredient of zuhd. When the destitute witness the luxuries and comforts of the richer classes, their anguish is multiplied. To the hardships of poverty and destitution is added the stinging feeling of deprivation and backwardness in relation to others. Man, by nature, cannot tolerate to remain a silent spectator while others who have no merit over him eat, drink, enjoy and relish freely at the cost of his deprivation. When society is divided into haves and have-nots, the man of God considers himself responsible.

In the first place, he should strive to change the situation which permits the gluttony of the rich oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed, in accordance with the covenant of God with the learned men of the Ummah. In the second place, he strives to ameliorate the state of affairs through altruism and self-sacrifice, by sharing whatever he possesses with the needy and the deprived. But when he sees that the situation has deteriorated it is practically impossible to alleviate the misery of the poor through sympathy, he practically shares their deprivation by adopting a life-style similar to that of the poor. Sympathy with others and sharing their suffering is of essential importance especially in the case of the leaders of the Ummah.

From: <https://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/general-al-tawhid/selection-glimpses-nahj-al-balaghah-mutahhari>