“SELF-HONOR” AND “OTHER-ESTEEM”

IN SHI’ITE SACRIFICE

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ABSTRACT

This article is going to resolve the contradiction between self-denying in self-sacrifice, and self-proving in self-honor on the one hand, and the contradiction between self-honor and other-esteem on the other. In order to do this, I will emphasize on two types of self in Islamic theology: the figurative-self that is inferior and individual, and the real-self that is superior and societal. At the end, I will refer to the expression of self-sacrifice in Karbala case in Islamic history to demonstrate the possibility of being self-sacrificed, self-honored, and other-esteeming at the same time.

INTRODUCTION

This article is going to grapple with two difficult questions, namely: a) how is it conceivable to be sacrificed and honored simultaneously? If self-sacrifice is a kind of self-denying, then how is it possible to be honored (that is proving the self) through self-sacrifice? The second question follows as a corollary: b) suppose there is no contradiction between “self-denying” (in self-sacrifice) and “self-proving” (in being honored), does this honor require—as some believe—exclusiveness and superiority? Basically, is it
feasible to uphold the respect of others whilst affirming self-honor at the same time, and then proceed to foster a community based on the precept of common human honor?

The answer to these questions are very complicated but of fundamental importance. By considering these questions, my goal in writing this article is to illustrate two possibilities: a) possibility of self-honoring through self-sacrifice, and b) the possibility of other-esteem through honoring the self. By so doing, I will show that self-sacrifice for the sake of inclusive human honor, contrary to the self-sacrifice for the exclusive body-self, does not lead to a constricted-self, but rather leads to the relational and embracing self. Expanding the spiritual aspects of the self through honor and dignity ultimately ends in association with others those who appreciate human dignity and honor.

THE METHOD

The method adopted for this paper will neither be philosophical nor ethical, but will instead be theological. I think of self-sacrifice in theological perspective in regard to social and practical issues. Thus, the methodology for this work can be referred to as a ‘practical theology’ that considers social problems on the one hand, and proposes theological solutions on the other. In sum, I will consider the “self and other” issue, which is the very heart of our everyday problems, and I will then look to identify the theological bases and solutions for such a dilemma.

Hence, I will illustrate that “human honor” consists of crucial factors and decisive functions in the association of “self” with “other.” Further, in order to indicate how it is possible to be honored by self-sacrifice, or by the memory of such a sacrifice, I will consider the nature of “honor” according to Islamic theology. The consideration of
Islamic theology in regard to the \textit{self} (\textit{nafs}) will pave the way to imagine consistency between \textit{self} and \textit{others}.

\section*{HONOR AND DIGNITY}

Both dignity (\textit{al’karāmah}) and honor (\textit{al’e’zzah}) are the state of being worthy and self-esteemed,\textsuperscript{1} however they differ from each other in certain respects. In fact, honor incorporates dignity with further conceptual elements. Dignity means a self-esteem that is a consequence of being human (minimum self-worth), whereas honor implies self-esteem with additional factors including a) standing (not subordinated) in the face of any kind of dishonoring factors, and b) ascendancy above any factor that invades one’s dignity, (maximum self-worth).\textsuperscript{2} These additional components in honor are decisive and imperative with view to generating a new social order based on inclusive human honor. Consideration of human dignity on the one hand, as well as standing against every kind of degrading factor, and supremacy over denigrating agents on the other, would constitute a suitable ground for the creation of a perfect community in which people enjoy minimum and maximum dignity simultaneously.

Nevertheless, some scholars have specified two types of dignity that differ from what I have mentioned above. Michael J. Mayer declares that dignity, which is attributed to human beings through valuable actions or worthy characteristics, could be used about human beings in two connotations: a) “occupying a high rank in a social hierarchy;” and

\textsuperscript{1} See Oxford and Webster Dictionaries.

\textsuperscript{2} Hasan Mustafavi, \textit{al’Tahqiq fi Kalemāte al’Quran al’Karim} (Iran, Tehran, Administration of Culture Press, 1365 H. Sh) Volume. 8, 10.
b) “characteristic moral feature of human beings.”\(^3\) The first case of dignity that emerges from possessing a high rank in a social hierarchy depends on human choice and action. Conversely, the second signification is an internal characteristic of human beings regardless of one’s social position and place. According to this concept, all human beings, as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) asserts, possess dignity—dignity as an individual phenomenon.\(^4\)

I want to differentiate between dignity and honor in a more precise manner than Mayer. Although the first meaning of “dignity” in Mayer’s understanding is similar to the meaning of “honor” in my usage, nevertheless it differs widely from what I meant by “honor”. Furthermore, despite the apparent similarity between the second meaning of “dignity” in Mayer’s understanding and the meaning of “dignity” in my usage, Mayer’s definition is dissimilar from the meaning of “dignity” that I intend in this article. Dignity, in my usage, is not confined to the essential quality of human nature, regardless of who one is and what choices one selects. Contrary to Mayer’s definition, the conception of dignity herein is an optional issue that is contingent on human will and work. Therefore, this kind of dignity is not only an outcome of human nature, rather it emerges from human effort and choice. Also, honor, in my usage, involves high self-esteem,\(^5\) in regards


\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Oxford Online dictionary.
to, not necessarily against, “others” (social phenomenon), and in encounter with its antithesis (standing against whatever contradicts or undermines self-esteem). It is obvious that this concept of honor varies from the former meaning of dignity in Mayer’s essay. According to my perspective, resistance against dishonoring factors in order to safeguard the worth of human dignity constitutes the cornerstone of human honor. But this is far from what is noted by Hobbes’ saying: “Human drive to seek esteem is one of the factors which preserve the natural condition of war.” As I stated earlier, to seek self-esteem does not necessarily imply the rejection of others’ esteem. Conversely, self-esteem necessarily generates other-esteem. More will be said regarding this in the following sections.

Although honor has been ignored by both Christianity (because it contests humility) and modernity (because it is not democratic), it is very crucial, in my view, to bring the phenomenon of neo-honor into more explicit focus in our world of today. Honor according to my perspective can assemble “self-humility” (that might be embodied through self-sacrifice) with self-magnanimity on the one hand, and self-magnanimity with other-admiration on the other. This could form the quintessence of a new society based on human honor (an honor-based society) including self and others at a time when selfishness and narcissism have been in the ascendancy. Placing emphasis on an honor-based society does not connote ignorance of the role of law in the establishment

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6. “honor must always be given by someone to someone else, it is inescapably social – and thus depends on NORMS which are socially acknowledged.” Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker (editors), *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, p 789.


of order and justice, rather it serves to highlight the theological bases of law and justice, which must be considered in the organization of human diversity, be it gender, race, socioeconomic status and so on.

**SELF-HONOR IN ISLAM**

Although honor is mentioned in the Qurán in a number of verses, it implies one meaning, namely *supremacy* (*ascendancy*), and to be not subjugated. In order to explain this precept in the Qurán, it is essential to consider a few statements contained in Islamic traditions narrated from Prophet Muhammad and the Imams. Those traditions point out the essence of honor according to the Quránic viewpoint. For instance, take the following words by Imam Ali into account that concern the meaning of honor: “do not bring down your self-respect, do not be mean and submissive and do not subjugate yourself through these vile and base traits though they may appear to make it possible for you to secure your heart’s desires because nothing in this world can compensate for the loss of self-respect, nobility and honor;”

> “Real death is in the life of subjugation while real life in dying as subjugators”

> “Death in honor is better than life in ignominy.”

> “Keep your *poverty* to the people with *sufficiency* from them at the same time. Your poverty to the

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9. See following verses about honor (*alézzat*) in the Qurán: (3:26), (9:128), (2: 206), (14:20), (38:23), (41:41).


people should be in leniency in your words and your cheerfulness; and your sufficiency
should be in the purity of your dignity and the persistence of your honor.”

In addition, it is important to consider Imam Hussein’s emotive words: how
impossible is humiliation from us! And he said: death is better than life in dishonor.

Based on the Qurán and the above mentioned traditions, self-honor and self-
supremacy neither imply the exaltation of the self nor the denigration of others. In fact,
supremacy does not mean opposing or oppressing others, rather, it means self-protection
from destructive factors including both internal and external factors. Therefore, the
supremacy that exists in honor is not individual superiority per se, but it entails human
superiority that envelops not only the self, but is also inclusive of others.

In fact, honor emanates from internal authority of the self, and culminates in standing
against every individual or system that degrades human beings. Therefore, human
superiority over others happens not by denigration of others, but by the denigration of

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13. (Arabic: ليجتمع في قلبك الافترار إلى الناس و الاستغناء عنهم فيكون افتقارك عليهم في لين كلامك و حسن بشرك و
p. 204; Koleini, Abi Jaafar Muhammad ibn Yaagoob ibn Eshagh, Al’Osool al’Kāfi (Iran, Dāral’Kotob al’Eslami, 1365 H. Sh). Volumm.2, p. 149.

14. (Arabic: الا ان الدعاء ابن الدعاء قد ركزني بين الاتنين، بين السلكة و الاله، و هيهات منا الاله، و ما أخذ الاله).
Muhammad Bāqir Majlisi, Bihārul’anvār, Volume 45, p 9.

corrupting agents. Based on Islamic thought and logic, the rejection of others’ “spiritual-self” results in the rejection of the same self within oneself. Likewise, confirming others’ spiritual-self results in the affirmation of one’s own spiritual-self. Indeed, oppressing others’ rights in reality represses our own human rights, and ignoring our own human rights represses our humanity.

A very crucial question arises at this point: ‘what kind of supremacy can generate honor?’ According to the Islamic outlook, honor emerges from strength and impregnability; not from assault and oppression. In order to make it fully clear, it is essential to highlight the central elements of self-honor and dignity in Islamic philosophy and theology.

In my view, as with that of many Muslim scholars, self-honoring is not contingent on conflict with others, but rather, it is to be found in honoring the humanity that is common between self and others. In other words, esteeming others would be a way to improve self-honor. Thus, self-sacrifice for the sake of the honor of others would be productive not only for others, but also for the self.

The soundness and strength of this theory depends on clarifying the nature of the human being according to Islamic philosophy. Based on the view of Islamic philosophers, every individual has two selves; one of which must be controlled, and the other developed. According to Mutahhari’s formulation there exists: a) a figurative-self that is unreal (ةَلْوُود مَجَازِی) from which egoism emerges; and b) a real-self (ةَلْوُود حَقِیقی) by which human spirit blossoms. According to this perspective, the real-self, in contrary to the figurative-self, must be protected and promoted. Based on this categorization of the ‘self’, it can be understood why we, as Muslims, are

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advised to stand against the self, when Prophet Muhammad says: “put yourself as an enemy that you must fight him”\(^\text{17}\) whilst at the same time, we are urged and recommended to know, respect, and honor the self.\(^\text{18}\)

These two selves have been mentioned in the Qurān too when it states on the one hand: "who forbade the soul its caprice" (79-41), "surely the soul of man incites to evil" (12: 53), whereas on the other hand it also declares: "O believers, look after your own souls, He who is astray cannot hurt you, if you are rightly guided" (5: 105), "And when thy Lord said to the angels, See, I am creating a mortal of a clay of mud moulded. When I have shaped him, and breathed My spirit in him, fall you down, bowing before him!" (15:28-29).\(^\text{19}\)

The phrase “\textit{I not you}” sprouts from the unreal self, and not from the real one that is common between \textit{I} and \textit{you}. Therefore, because of the figurative-self that acts as a dividing wall between \textit{I} and \textit{you}, I see myself as an isolated object from you. In contrast, sympathizing and empathizing with others emerges from the inclusive real-self.\(^\text{20}\)

Mutahhari asserts that the \textit{figurative -self}—the self that has been confined to the physical aspect of the self—cannot be in association with others. Conversely, the \textit{real-self}, which includes both the physical and spiritual self, is inclusive and related to others’. According to this view, release from the limited-self requires emancipation from the physical boundaries of the self. This is because of the essential limitations of the terrestrial body in its ability to sympathize, empathize, and sacrifice for others. In fact, the \textit{figurative-self}, which I regard as the superficial and imperfect self, is confined to the physical aspects that cannot associate

\(^{17}\) Muhammad Bāqir Majlisi, \textit{Bihārol’ anvār}, Volume, 67, p 64.

\(^{18}\) Murtazā Mutahhari, \textit{Taālim va Tarbiat dar Islam}, (Iran, Qom, Sadrā, 1379 H.Sh), p 223-224.

\(^{19}\) Also see the Qur’ān 38:71-72.

\(^{20}\) Murtazā Mutahhari, \textit{Taālim va Tarbiat dar Islam}, P. 223.
with others without commonality and unity.\textsuperscript{21} Conversely, the real-self that is common between self and others can associate with others and make sacrifices for the sake of other who looks beyond the self. Self-sacrifice, in this view, would be an expanding factor that makes one-self relational and related to others. This could be the fundamental foundation for sympathy, empathy, and social solidarity.

To be sure, this form of sacrifice is not an expression of altruistic ethics that “holds that, morally, the beneficiary of an action should be someone other than the person who acts.”\textsuperscript{22} Rather, it is inclusive sacrificial ethics that embraces both the self and others in equal. In other words, self-sacrifice such as this means that just as morality begins from the self and ends in others, so too it starts for the sake of others and reflects within our own self. In fact, moral action involves the self and others simultaneously; the human does not ignore him/her-self when s/he serves others, and equally s/he does not neglect others when s/he serves him/her-self.

Now, it should be recalled that the real-self of humans, which embraces the spiritual and celestial aspects of the human that is common between self and others, can serve as a strong and sufficient basis for self-sacrifice—to sacrifice the figurative-self for the sake of the real-self. Through this kind of sacrifice, just as s/he reaches his own real-self that is common with others, so too s/he attains closeness to his/her God (in accordance with the practical and theoretical rule in Islam that states ‘whosoever knows him/her-self, s/he will know her/his God’). As knowing the self is a path for knowing God, knowing God is

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, p. 221-222.

also a way for knowing the self. Based on this existential and ontological relationship between self and God, it is comprehensible how honoring of the self is, in fact, honoring God, and on the other hand honoring God is in reality honoring the self.  

Although it seems paradoxical to develop the self (or life) through sacrifice (death), it would be justifiable to imagine two versions of the self (low and high self), by which the low self sacrifices itself to gain the high self—life through death. Consequently, it could be right, somehow, to say “If one gives up that which one does not value in order to obtain that which one does value – or if one gives up a lesser value in order to obtain a greater one – this is not a sacrifice, but a gain.” Thus, this could be counted as a rational selfishness that includes self and others together.

Based on this view, self-sacrifice is not self-losing, rather it is self-improvement and self-empowerment. The improvement of the self derives not only from the relationship between self and others or self and God, but also from the cognitive nature of human beings that is capable of contraction and expansion in relation to others. In fact, the self alone has limited cognition in

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its own exclusive self and cage. Conversely, the self that respects others, and respects their humanity and dignity, develops an individual’s cognition into an inclusive one. The inclusive self, which is a new self, results in a tranquil status in which the disturbing features of suffering and death are erased.

Accordingly, I do not agree with the view that morality is the enemy, nor do I agree with the view that claims that we have nothing to gain from it, and that we can only lose through morality. Conversely, I believe that self-sacrifice is an exemplary manifestation of moral action which paves the way to deliverance from pain, subjugation, and humiliation, and to gain power, energy, and identity.

This is the cardinal point that distinguishes between self-sacrifice and self-suicide on the one hand, and self-honor and narcissism or egoism on the other. In sum, self-sacrifice usually occurs to gain something or to protect the self, in contrast to self-suicide which happens to escape from the self.

Now, the most important question arises: who is to be sacrificed for whom? In succinct terms, to whom much is given much is expected. The more power we possess, the more we are expected to give. And the more intelligence we have, the more teaching we should do, and so forth. This rule is the essence of donation (Zakāt) in Islam.

According to the Zakātian view and culture of Zakāt in Islam, the expected donation from one who knows is knowledge; the expected donation from the powerful is power; and of course, the expected donation (Zakāt) from the self is the self itself. I think donating the self would be effective in fostering social solidarity, particularly in a selfish and egoistic world such as ours.

Also, a key point that must be made is that great honor results from great sacrifice. The higher sacrifice (sacrifice of the self and everything or everybody who belongs to the self) we offer for the sake of human dignity, the higher honor and glory we attain. For instance, the martyr of Karbalā (Hussein) sacrificed his own physical self, his offspring and family—including his spouse (Rubāb), his sister (Zeinab) and his daughters—to protect inclusive human dignity and honor. In recompense, he achieved exclusive honor for himself and his family, not only in his own time (in 61 AH), but also in subsequent Muslim generations throughout history.

COMPATIBILITY BETWEEN SACRIFICE AND HEROISM

Based on self-sacrifice and its existential aspects, it would be comprehensible to draw a correspondence between self-sacrifice and heroism. I think that based on the distinction between the two selves (real and figurative), and as a result of the compatibility between self-sacrifice and self-honor, the apparent inconsistency between self-sacrifice and heroism will be nullified. In fact, there are two types of sacrifice; one that emerges out of submission i.e. non-heroism, and the other emerges from resistance and heroism. That is to say, some people sacrifice because of courage and resistance, whereas others sacrifice because of fear and submission. Without the slightest doubt, these two types of sacrifice differ from one another. Accordingly, self-sacrifice that sprouts from bravery can be reconciled with heroism.

Reconciling the concepts of self-sacrifice and heroism paves the way to deal with both Eastern and Western nihilism. According to Western nihilism, although the world lacks meaning, it should be enjoyed in the ‘here and now’. On the contrary, according to Eastern nihilism, the world must be ignored and eliminated because of its
meaninglessness. Based on this nihilism, death is a means of redemption from this worthless world.\textsuperscript{27}

Now, I believe that by emphasizing on self-sacrifice, we will give up rather than enjoy the world when it threatens and undermines our human dignity and honor. In addition, by highlighting the role of heroism we preserve the world when death and evil threaten our respect and admiration.

Shiites believe that the quintessential example of this type of sacrificial heroism is witnessed in the Karbala self-sacrifice. Some scholars consider these dual aspects—sacrifice and heroism—in Imam Hussein’s movement, they try to identify the reason why Imam was not subjugated despite certainty of his imminent death at the hands of the enemy. According to his translated book by Zabihollah Mansūri, Frishler points out that Hussein assembled struggle (in his heroism) and suffering (in his sacrifice) simultaneously. Hussein, like other heroes throughout history, knew that submission to despisers is self-murder (suicide), which is far from heroic demeanor.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

The central point to be made here is that self-honoring contains both self-humility and self- magnanimity on the one hand, and self-esteem and other-esteem on the other. In other words, this kind of self-honoring provides honor not only for the self, but also for others. Accordingly, it would be comprehensible how it is possible to be wronged (ma\r{a}lūm) and honored (azīz) simultaneously.

\textsuperscript{27} Shāhrokh Haqīqī, Gozār az Modernīteh, (Tehran, Āgāh Press, 1383 H.S), p. 150.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, p 461.
In this light, self-sacrifice for the sake of inclusive human dignity and honor does not lead to self-destruction, but leads to self-improvement. Self-improvement that stems from self-sacrifice is a powerful means for dealing with human conflicts and controversies. In addition, it can be a great factor in the creation of solidarity, peace, and a love-centered community through which “we pursue each other, identify with each other, and direct our lives toward the flourishing of each other through sacrificial love.”

This kind of sacrifice leads to resistance against every despiser, and affirms human dignity and blocks the doors of evil and wickedness.

Finally, I think a practical approach to revive such a culture of self-sacrifice would be through remembrance of an exemplary paradigm of sacrifice from the past, which ensures that this form of self-sacrifice is not aloof from contemporary life of here and now. Memory of tragic sacrifices pave the way for the reawakening of human dignity and honor. Remembrance of self-sacrifice, which is a form of re-experiencing self-sacrifice, can result in new emotion and powerful passion. By emphasizing remembrance, one can appropriate the positive features while avoiding its negative aspects of suffering and sacrifice.

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29 James Hunter, “Toward a Theological of Faithful Presence” (that is not published yet), 2010, p 7.

creating or justifying suffering and sacrifice, memory of sacrifice revives past sacrifices in order to offer instruction and power to prevent secular suffering in the modern world.  

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31 See Ibid; and Habibollāh Bābāi, “A Shiite Theology of Solidarity through the Remembrance of Liberative Suffering.
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