Universalization of the Husayni Values as Broadening the Scope of Husayni Minbar in Today World: Requisites, Problems, and Prospects

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Abstract

Lexically, the originally Arabic word "minbar" received its earliest recorded written use in English in 1816. [1, 2, and 3] Muslim communities usually keep a minbar for their preachers, whether in mosques or in other places where Islamic rituals are supposed to be led by a person qualified for such purposes.

Functioning as a place for delivering speeches, the phenomenon of a certain place for such a function must be a religious universal, for it is hard to find any well-established religion, whether essentially Divine or otherwise, to have remained or survived without preaching. Needless to say, the spread of Islam owes a great deal to preaching for which minbar is its marker. [4]

Keywords : minbar , preaching , universalization, Husayni Minbar

Minbar Spectrum

As a type of media, minbar has functioned in a various ways in both olden and modern times. More specifically, it has manifested its impressive role as a Husayni minbar, that is, a minbar that functions as a loudspeaker for Husayni ritual gatherings. The latter function shows itself up in Shiite communities over the globe. As such it has had a multitude of functions. It has been used to promulgate and elucidate religious statements, conveying to the public the revelations that the Prophet Muḥammad used to receive, explicating policies, delivering harangues, as used by Imam al-Ḥusayn's sister Zaynab and his son, the fourth Infallible Imam ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sajjād in both Kufa and Damascus to disclose the real and disgusting face and character of the Umayyad tyrants, offering Quran exegeses as lectures, updating people of the latest news and developments, expressing and announcing political points and even threatening people, as done by ʿUbayd Allāh b. Zīyād, [5] and finally as a place for offering lessons in educational settings and madrasas, or when and where a mosque is used as a place for teaching purposes, mainly for Islamic religious lessons. It follows that minbar has received various functions the hardcore of which remains conveying materials to the audience.

Apart from the above general functions of the minbar, the present paper attempts to concentrate on the Husayni minbar. At the outset, the very designation demands a certain degree of semantic clarification and disambiguation. The adjective Husayni may convey that a certain minbar belongs to a Husayniyah, or is one which is commonly, but not exclusively, used for commemorative rituals held in the name of the third Infallible Imam al-Ḥusayn. Apart from this conventional, and generally accepted usage, it has an extended and metaphorical use: the minbar which functions and/or is used for the purposes that pertain to the values endorsed by Imam al-Ḥusayn. This second metaphorical use is very much value-laden such that it makes the devout Muslims regard the minbar with reverence. It

is obvious that in this second, wider metaphorical sense, minbar cannot remain a wooden structure situated in mosques and/or Husayniyahs. In this sense, minbar can virtually be used for making reference to any platform, podium, or medium whereat the values endorsed by Imam al-Ḥusayn can be preached. In this sense, not only traditional minibars in Muslim communities, but any handout, book, magazine, journal, a radio or TV channel, Internet website, or any poster may function as a Husayni minbar. Viewed from this perspective, any reminder and/or reminiscent of Imam al-Ḥusayn can function as a minbar in his service. Here, it can be suggested that even "water" and the habitual act of "drinking water" can function as a virtual minbar-like position to remind a devout Muslim of the intense thirst imposed on Imam al-Ḥusayn; it is here that after each and every instance of drinking "water" devout Muslims remember Imam al-Ḥusayn and invoke sincere salaams unto him for which whoever performs thus shall receive abundant reward. [6]

Based on the aforementioned remarks, it is our duty to do our utmost to change our classes into Husayni minbars. This is because it is one of the tasks expected of any sensible teacher to educate the youths for the improvement of the future, hence our students must be familiarized with the noble Islamic teachings, in general, and with the teachings of Imam al-Ḥusayn, in particular. To accomplish such a task, we have to consider the following requisites. Our preachers/ teachers must receive sound, formal, and academic training and education for disseminating the Islamic religious ideas and ideals. While this is essential, care must be taken not to make them puppets or clowns of the ruling classes. They are expected to maintain the dignity and status of being associated with the Husayni minbar. People respect preachers and the holders of Husayni minibars chiefly because of the devout service they render in favor of the Husayni school of thought. In return, they, i.e., the preachers, must be prudent not to do anything that might lower the religio-popular status in the public.

Minbar and Translation

There are other points that must be borne in mind. Preachers and those who make use of the Husayni minbar must realize that the value of the Husayni minar as a medium is sublimer by far than changing it into a trumpet for the transitory political propaganda of this or that political party. Also, where a political clarification is going to be made, it must not turn into the major theme of the minbar time; better to devote a few minutes to it.

The Husayni-minbar preachers are well expected to be aware of the real needs of the audience, nor should they talk of their own charismatic or party-leader merits. Being really aware of people's needs must lead the preacher to speak with the audience not only linguistically but also culturally in their language. This makes people to find the preacher is really sympathetic with them. We must know that Allah is thus explicit in the Holy Quran: "And We have never sent a messenger, save in the language of his people […]." [7] This is one of the reasons that why prophets proved so influential, while philosophers were not.

Connected with, and to reinforce the linguistic aspects of the Husayni minbar, there are certain considerations that must be taken into account. In the first place, some translated texts need being updated. This is true in the case of non-Arabic Islamicate languages, e.g., Persian, Urdu, and so on. Instead of repeating and quoting passages that were translated from the Arabic into Persian several centuries ago, these translations must be updated to be understandable for modern users of the language. The rationale of translation is just conveying the thoughts, not just mirroring the first language's lexical and syntactic arrangements. In Persian, improper and seemingly loyal translations may deter the audience from grasping the gist of the message, hence the translation proves utterly ineffective. It follows that it proves necessary to produce modern translations preferable in the form of team projects. [8] As various age and education groups of people come to need such texts in translation, it is ideally necessary to produce various modern translations of reli-

giously seminal texts. Likewise, those preachers who go to higher-education institutions are expected to approach the religious issues and explain the points according to the educational level of their audience. [9]

In addition to the aforementioned points, there remain some problems that might harm or hinder the communication process of making use of this wider application of the Husayni minbar. In the first place, the audience may not be educationally homogeneous. With the exception of mosques located in universities and research institutes, there is no guarantee for a preacher to address a homogeneous group of audience in public addresses and lectures. This conglomeration of various types of audience may harm the quality of the sermons or discussions offered, hence this common problem might minimize the intellectual effects of the Husayni minbar.

Another problem is that sometimes the audience may be new to the subject. In such cases, the Husayni minbar may shift its function as a place for communicating and discussing intermediate and almost advanced topics to just an open class for delivering some basic and introductory lessons, especially for the neophytes.

The preacher's educational background and specialist experience make another point worthy of attention. Although the hardcore of the materials expected to be offered might be the same, the preacher must be capable of having good and effective presentations. Contrary to the common myth that Muslim preachers can easily offer an address almost anywhere and for any type of audience, the preachers that go to talk for workers in a factory, for peasants and farmers in a remote village, for medical students and doctors in a hospital, and for graduate students in a university or advanced research institute, for troops and officers in a garrison, it is essential for any conscientious preacher to come up with a rough estimation of the expected educational background of each type of audience so as to shape and present the materials according to their level of understanding and expectation. [10]

Language background is another concern that may affect the efficacy of the materials discussed by means of making use of the Husayni minbar. Contrary to the practices of typical Christian missionaries who try to have learned the language of their expected target community for dissemination of their Christian teachings, Muslim clerical orders have historically shown almost little attention to this important principle of having had a good command of the language (and at times the literature and social custom) of the prospective target community. The publication activities of the British and United Bible Societies indicate the scope and effects of such linguistic background. This linguistic-cum-cultural principle has seriously been taken into account by Christian missionaries; [11] with the exception of a number of successful Muslim preachers, [12] the rest have seldom shown much interest in this principle, until quite recent post-revolutionary Iranian experience. [13]

Besides the above points, poorly supported statements should not be uttered from the top of Husayni minbars. Such points may be mentioned by a preacher or a mourner, who leads a communal mourning gathering. Based on such considerations, it is necessary for a preacher or proclaimer to mention historical facts, all based on carefully written or edited books and sources. [14] On a par with this, some preachers might be inclined to make use of the Husayni minbars for transitory political ends and aims. While the main intent of the public who go to mosques and husayniyahs is to receive informal religious education, the preacher or mourner should not drag the audience toward this or that political camp, nor should the general atmosphere of a religious gathering be overly hyper-politicized. Rather the preacher should provide the audience with the right religious education and by upgrading their knowledge, people will be enabled to take the right decisions.

In view of the points highlighted above, there are some prospects that are suggested and elaborated here. In the first place, in view of the modern technological developments, there is a pressing need for having and/or developing web- or satellite-based Husayni mini-

bars on the condition that the preacher has the right qualifications for utilizing it on an international scale. In a similar way, Husayni literature [15] can act as a written version of a type of Husayni minbar. For sure, this type of Husayni literature, as a written manifestation and mode of the Husayni minbar features as a type of Islamic literature of commitment, [16] a literature that manifests and mirrors the producer's ardent belief in the charismatic character of Imam al-Husayn and his martyred companions.

In addition to paying rapt attention to the content of various genres of Husayni literature for the sake of attaining global expansion of Husayni minbar and its audience (both Muslims and non-Muslims), special care must be taken of non-Muslims' accounts of the Ashura episode. In this connection, the works of Europeans, whether Orientalists or otherwise, prove of special significance. [17, 18]

A movement of simplification of the contents of Husayni minbar discourses is a necessity. This is because nobody can expect all those who have come to attend a Husayni minbar lecture to have already gained a good, specialist background knowledge, prior to paying attention to the lecture. This need is felt more acute in the cases of those people who were neither raised in Muslim communities nor their parents or peers were careful to give them such basic knowledge.

Another proposal is to select, translate, simplify, and annotate the talks of leading Shiite preachers of the Husayni minibars throughout Shiite Islamic history. This proposal, though may take several years of hard work and much labor of love, can be carried out on the output of famous Husayni minbar preachers.

Minbar as a Genre

Husayni arts can also function as an intermediary step for inviting the uninitiated audience to this Husayni open auditorium. Modes and manifestations of the Husayni arts can represent a continuum, ranging from simple objects, e.g., cups for distributing water amongst mourners, to elaborate objects, e.g., standards (ʿalams)

that are carried usually in Ashura processions. [19]

To recapitulate, the above hints can function just as some initial suggestions for exploring some ways as pertaining to how to augment, enhance, and maximize the scope and impact of the Husayni minbar for the sake of attaining the globalization of the eternal messages of Imam al-Husayn for mankind.

Notes:

[1] The original Arabic word is "minbar", not "minbar", as recorded as the headword in The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edn (1989). It also lists the following forms "mambar, monbar, and minbar" as its variant spellings. Interestingly, the variant form "minbar" is followed by such a parenthetical remark: "(the best form)". Therefore, throughout the present paper, the form "minbar" will be used, not the other variant spellings.

[2] Contrary to the practice of the aforementioned Oxford English Dictionary, Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 6th edn (2007) records it as "minbar". It deserves mention that while The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 4th edn (1993) recorded "minbar" as the headword, from the fifth edition (2002) of the same Dictionary on, the form "minbar" has been indicated as the headword. Neither "minbar" nor "minbar" was recorded in The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd edn (1944, rev. 1975). It is mentioned in as "minbar" in Oxford Dictionary of English, 3rd edn. (2010), and as "minbar" in The Oxford English Reference Dictionary, 2nd edn. (1996). It is not dealt with in Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 12th edn. (2011), nor in The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary, 2nd edn. (1975).

[3] Throughout the present paper, only the word "minbar" is used, not its rough, and rather inexpressive and imprecise, English equivalent "pulpit". While "pulpit" is associated with Christianity, "minbar" is chiefly associated with Islam. Needless to say, the word "pulpit" has received fifteen synonyms in Oxford Thesaurus of English, 3rd edn. (2009) out of which only "minbar" is preceded by the label

"Islam".

[4] In this regard, mention must be made of Sir Thomas W. Arnold, The Preaching of Islam, 2nd edn. (1913).

[5] It is recorded in authoritative Islamic history books that the fourth Infallible Imam ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sajjād noticed that the minbar in the mosque was used for the purposes favored by the Umayyad tyrant ruler Yazīd, he referred to it as "a pile of some pieces of wood". This account suggests that minbar per se must be entitled to attract some sort of reverence, hence when is used for non- or anti-Islamic purposes, it no longer deserves to be regarded as a minbar.

[6] This is understood from a recommendation that the sixth Infallible Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq gave to Dāwūd b. Kathīr al-Riqqī, one of his companions. This account is available in Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad b. Qūlawayh al-Qummī, ed., Kāmil al-zīyārāt, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn al-Amīnī (Najaf, 1356 AH/ 1937), Ch. 34, No. 1, pp. 106-107.

[7] The Holy Quran, Sura Ibrāhīm (Abraham) [14]: 4.

[8] While team translation is a well-established mode of undertaking translation of religious texts, especially the Bible, in the Western world, it has seldom been institutionalized and practiced in Iran.

[9] In present-day Iranian universities and colleges, students, and sometimes some newly-employed university instructors, are strongly required to take certain courses that pertain to Islamic and revolutionary themes and topics, chiefly offered by Shiite Muslim clerics. In such cases, qualified clerics can function better and prove more effective provided that the contents of the courses sound interesting.

[10] In recent decades, there have appeared certain post-revolutionary Iranian universities and institutes where clerics are trained for both teaching Islamic and revolutionary subjects and preaching (as well as leading religious and ritual services and ceremonies) in universities. Such cleric graduates are expected to feature and

function according to the precise and stated requirements so as to islamize or retain the Islamic level of the academic atmosphere of the nation.

[11] Christian examples abound. For instance, Kieran Flynn in his Communities for the Kingdom (2007) presents important notions related to Christian missionary experience. He also developed certain works .related to the local indigenous language of Izon in Nigeria. One should take note well that several good grammar books and dictionaries, developed mostly by Europeans, have appeared during, or for the purpose of, Christian missionary activities. Some of such sources are indicated in the bibliography.

It is of equal importance to note that a considerable number of leading theorists in the realm of translation studies were originally Christian priests (e.g., Eugene Nida) who developed interests in translation studies and developed books in the field of translation studies with examples from the Bible. Nida's books are exemplary in this respect, and a listing of his relevant works appear in the bibliography of this paper.

On the connection between Christian missionary activities and translation (and specifically Bible translation), see the following works: Lynell Zogbo, "Bible, Jewish and Christian," in Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies, 2nd edn., ed. Mona Baker, and Saldanha (London, 2009), pp. 21-27; Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth, eds., Translators Through History, rev. edn., ed. Judith Woodsworth (Amsterdam, 2012), Chs. 6 and 7; Robert Barnes, "Translating the Sacred," in Kirsten Malmkjær, and Kevin Windle, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies (Oxford, 2011; online vers., 2012); Theodore Savory, The Art of Translation, new and enl. edn. (London,1968), Ch. 8. For Christian missionary translation activities in the Indian pluralist and multi-faith cultural context, see Chaudhuri, Translation and Understanding (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 66-69; Harishankar, Krishnan, and Shivakumar, eds., Words, Texts, and Meanings (New Delhi, 2013), pp. 9-10; and Harishankar, Krishnan, and Jayasree, Word Worlds: Translation and Communica-

tion (New Delhi, 2013), pp. 7-8. For a global perspective, insightful hints can be gained from Lefevere, ed., Translation/ History/ Culture: A Sourcebook (London, 1992); Sawyer, Sacred Languages and Sacred Texts (London, 1999), Ch. 6; and the relevant articles in the following sources: Mona Baker, ed., Critical Readings in Translation Studies (London, 2010); Sawyer, Simpson, and Asher, eds., Concise Encyclopedia of Language and Religion (Amsterdam, 2001); Lawrence Venuti, ed., The Translation Studies Reader, 3rd edn. (London, 2012); and Daniel Weissbort, and Astradur Eysteinsson, ed., Translation – Theory and Practice: A Historical Reader (Oxford, 2006).

[12] Amongst successful Muslim clerics who either translated fine Islamic texts from Arabic, Persian, and Urdu languages into, or wrote directly in English, the following persons can be mentioned: Hamid Mavani of Canada, Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi of Tanzania, and Muhammad Khalfan of Kenya. However, the Muslim world is still in dire need of a global Islamic translation movement.

[13] It has been several years that some young clerics show interest in learning English and some institutions have been established for this purpose in Qom. However, the world of scholarship must still wait to observe the translation outcomes of such places. It seems that such clerics seldom show any serious interest in learning academic writing which is a quintessential requisite for translating the works that belong to the Islamic heritage, rather they seem to favor speaking and delivering lectures.

[14] A common pitfall of such Islamic gatherings is that preachers sometimes resort to recounting dreams. This practice is commonly noticed at least in Iranian Muslim religious gatherings. As a dream of a religious person can hardly prove anything, its recounting by someone else cannot convince those people who believe in acting rationally in their decisions.

[15] Husayni literature is a major and serious theme that deserves serious attention. Like all literatures, it has certainly a history; however, it has had its own special features, e. g., it has since been pro-

ductive, it can be produced in virtually any language, its producers and readers may be followers of any religion, and its geographical distribution can be global.

[16] The notion of "the literature of commitment" is a Sartrean notion, as elaborated in Jean-Paul Sartre's What is Literature? (1948/ 1950), presumably connected with Theodore Adorno's notion of "commitment". Yet, there are stark differences between the senses and functions of the type of commitment observable in the Husayni literature in contrast to the largely ex-leftist commitment intended by Sartre, Adorno, and their proponents.

Although Eagleton in his book The Event of Literature (New Haven, 2012) holds that "There is no such a thing as an exact definition of literature." (p. 32), and that "Literature […] is a quality of attention." (p. 65), there are certainly many "marks of literary greatness" (Eagleton, How to Read Literature, p. 175) in Husayni literature that have seldom been elaborated and globally presented.

In a like manner, there are ample signs of classicality (or classicness [?]) in several instances of Husayni literature that have not been elaborated on for universal presentation. Granted that some important features of classicality can be found in Calvino, "Why Read the Classics?" (1981/ 1986), pp. 125-134; and T. S. Eliot, "What is a Classic?" (1945/ 1957), Husayni literature, which includes several genres, feature many more characteristics that deserve global introduction.

[17] The significance of the unique sacrifice and the triumphant martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn has since proved an impetus for both Muslims and non-Muslims. Apart from Muslims whose devotion to Imam al-Husayn proves self-evident and expected, certain non-Muslim figures have penned markworthy pieces in this regard, ranging from their reflections to book-length treatment of the subject, with various degrees of acceptability. The following works can be mentioned to give examples of a few 18th-century accounts of the Ashura episode: Simon Ockley, The History of the Saracens, vol.

2 (1718; Cambridge, 1757), pp. 138-189; and Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, (6 vols., London, 1776-1789; 2 vols., Chicago, 1952), vol. 2, pp. 250-251. Of a nineteenth-century short account, the following can be mentioned: Garcin de Tassy, Muslim Festivals in India and Other Essays, tr. M. Waseem (Oxford, 1995; New Delhi, 1997), pp. 50-57.

[18] Since not all non-Muslims, and particularly Western specialists, were well-versed in the Husayni history and literature, despite being time-consuming and highly demanding, it can prove academically a suitable project for Muslim, and particularly Shiite, scholars to produce critical editions of non-Muslims', and especially Western scholars', writings and reflections on Islamic themes in general, and Husayni themes in specific.

[20] For a good study on the standards (ʻalams) in Indian context, see Sadiq Naqvi, Muslim Religious Institutions and Their Role under the Qutb Shahs (2006), and The Ashur Khanas of Hyderabad City (2006).

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