

THE MUSLIM REBEL
By
Abu Dharr al –Ghaffari

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Abu Dharr is known for his awareness, righteousness, honesty, sincerity, passionate commitment to truth and his concern for truth and justice. He was the first social reformer in the history of Islam. He was a member of the masses. Abu Dharr was a simple man, a man of the people. Abu Dharr's Islam was no mere collection of dogmas and rituals somehow divorced from daily affairs; rather with his profound vision he regarded it as a perfect system of guidance that frees man of all forms of superstition, eliminating their causes from society.

His powerful protests against accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few, and his demands for expropriation of lands and distribution amongst the community shook the whole of Madina.

Islam turns him literally overnight into the loudest, sincerest voice of truth and justice, a spokesman of the human conscience who cries out loudly what people will not allow themselves to think. Awake, he strives to awaken. Alert, he strives to alert society. Courageous with the true courage born of love, he boldly condemns the *status quo* of favouritism and corruption. Not for him an Islam that tolerates injustice, a cruel parody of Islam that overlooks the rights of the weak and the poor, that like the worst forms of tyranny allows the rich to become richer and the poor to remain poor, or become even poorer. Not for him an Islam that gives a voice and a right to the rich and powerful while depriving the meek and helpless. Not for him an Islam that allows a ruling class to make a mockery of the teachings of the Prophet, who pretend to respect the outward forms of the Prophet's teachings but strive to obliterate his magnetic spirit, the spirit of Islam itself., the spirit of the sacred Qura'n.

The Islam that Abu Dharr had learnt from Prophet Muhammad had taught him that '*in the wealth of the rich there is a right for the poor*', and that '*one who sleeps with a full stomach while his*

*neighbour is hungry is not a Muslim'. It had taught him 'command to the right (*amr b'il maruf*) and protest against the wrong (*nahi an al munkar*), for if you do it not God will place over you the evil amongst you and then the good amongst you will supplicate but to no avail', and that 'the best jihad is a word of truth to a tyrant'.*

Abu Dharr could not forget the Qur'an's verse, '*the best of you in the sight of Allah is the most virtuous*', and it pained him to see Muslim society place considerations of tribe, house, class and position before those of virtue and knowledge.

A Heart Summoned

When a person aspires to this lofty ideal, his life becomes enthused with the Divine purpose, and each of his otherwise commonplace acts is charged with spiritual significance. His thoughts become crisp, subtle and profound. and is able to penetrate the external form of each phenomenon to embrace the wide spectrum of its causes. Free of the stagnation of false worship, he becomes one of God's servants on the earth, and walks the earth as an agent of the Divine will. He inherits the mantle of the prophets, and strives to raise the awareness and righteousness of his fellow man. He has no fear but the fear of failing hid Lord, and in the freedom of his devotion to Allah he stands amongst the people as if alone, a nation in himself. He is a constant enemy of ignorance, and where he sees its chains being laid he speaks out boldly to break them. If necessary, and if people are ready to accept him, he will lead them against injustice and oppression.

The 'flowering of man' comes as a result of sincere endeavour in the three fields of human activity: intellectual, to understand the reality; spiritual, to seek nearness to God and the vision of the reality, through ethical purification; and physical, to bring the Divine order into life and to cultivate the Divine blessings in society. Failure to seek perfection in anyone area can only lead to an imperfection and imbalance in man's character.

Whenever Abu Dharr looked our over the desert horizon, the thought came clearly to his mind: 'This is my Prophet ... and through him the weak shall inherit the earth'.

"Islam', said the Prophet, is that you declare there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is His Messenger, and that you perform the prayer'.

A Cry of Truth

Abu Dharr was only the fourth or fifth man to accept Islam. Before accepting Islam he had always sensed the Divine presence within him and all around him. The Prophet had given him a task of preaching to his tribe. It was his responsibility to bring them the message of the oneness and unity of God, and of the brotherhood of man. In the final analysis it would be for the people themselves to believe or reject.

The Long Struggle

The prophet died and passed away, and the Muslim community fell into confusion. The leadership of the Islamic state passed to Abu Bakr. He ruled over the Muslims and governed their social affairs for two years, and when Abu Bakr died his appointed successor, Umar, took over this responsibility, Umar's rule lasted for twelve years, during which time the Muslim armies made the bulk of the conquests. Umar was cut short by the dagger of a disaffected Persian slave, and again the Muslim community, especially the capital, Madina, was thrown into confusion

Uthman bin al-Affan was selected by a *shura*, a panel of six men appointed in the will of the second khalifa, Umar for the specific purpose of appointing a successor from amongst themselves. All the members of the panel were known not for their merit but for their prosperity and wealth, and, with the recent conquests of Persia and Byzantine, they were amongst the class that sought the tremendous opportunities these conquests opened up. The selection of Uthman, therefore, reflects nothing more than it does the feeling of the aristocratic class that Uthman was the candidate who offered the most freedom to exploit those opportunities. History confirms this for, with the exception of Ali they all amassed fortune running into millions. At the time of the *shura* the leading candidates in society as a whole were Uthman and Ali. Behind Uthman was

the dominant aristocracy of the Quraish, especially the Bani Umayyah who saw in Uthman a weak man of some piety whom they

could manipulate to serve their interests. It seems safe to assume that the dissension which Umar sought to prevent – if only for the time being - through his idea of a *shura*, was exactly this clash of interests in society between the poor and the wealthy, as represented in the persons of Uthman and Ali. Abd al-Rehman Awf first offered the khilafat to Ali on two conditions: that he should rule in accordance to the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and that he should follow the precedents of the two former Khalifas, Abu Bakr and Umar. Ali accepted the first condition but declined the second, saying that wherever he found no clear ruling of the Quran and Sunnah, he would rely on his own judgment. At this Abd al-Rehman then turned to Uthman and made him the same offer. Uthman accepted, whereupon Abd al-Rehman declared him Khalifa. A few years later, when the discontent at Uthman's policies and his patronage of even the most corrupt elements of Bani Umayyah was widespread, Abd al Rehman admitted that he considered the policies of Uthman's administration to be in serious breach of this understanding.

The policies pursued by both Abu Bakr and Umar accorded to the general precepts of Islam and the Islamic emphasis on justice, and it is clear that they actively sought the welfare of the Muslim community, and not the interests of any particular group, tribe or class. The system that quickly prevailed under Uthman was one of favoritism and partisanship supported by measures of tyranny. Those who surrounded Uthman and formed the backbone of his administration were amongst the worst and most dubious members of the entire community, and that many of them had been shown to be such by the Prophet himself.

The dissenters, however, were amongst the most influential of the Prophet's companions and the most religiously minded of the whole community.

The Islamic, under such circumstances, enjoins us to stand against injustice and tyranny and condemn it through the use of not arms but of tongues, by appeals to reason and to the lofty sentiments of the heart, and to strive to enlighten the general populace until they find their natural abhorrence towards injustice and oppression, and withdraw from the regime all forms of cooperation and consent, without which even the most well-entrenched regimes cannot endure for very long, until the people do

become ready and sophisticated enough to implant Islam at the level of government.

Abu Dharr and Bani Umayyah

Amongst the companions who objected to the policies of Uthman and the ruling Umayyad clique, none was as prominent and as outspoken as Abu Dharr. Abu Dharr was not a man to mince his words, and whenever he felt that a truth needed to be said he would be the first to shout it out in the most public places. History shows him as a man who lived for Islam, who cared little for the world of shadows and illusions, but cared only for the real world of goodness and light that belongs to Allah. His life for him was a vehicle to serve Islam for he knew that the pinnacle of service to God is service to Islam and the Muslims. He realized better than most that much of Islam's appeal to the common man is in its being an instrument and system of perfect justice.

Abu Dharr's Islam was no mere collection of dogmas and rituals somehow divorced from daily affairs, rather with his profound vision he regarded it as a perfect system of guidance frees man of all forms of superstition, eliminating their causes from society.

For Abu Dharr the Prophet was a man who had practiced Islam in the most perfect way, so that he was able to destroy injustice and oppression and establish in its place the Guidance of Allah both as a personal system of ethical refinement effected through worship, and as a complete and perfect social and political system effected through *jihad*.

For Abu Dharr, Allah was the Beneficent and Merciful, who felt no desire to be worshipped and praised, but had sent Islam as a blessing for humanity, to end all their miseries and doubts.

For Abu Dharr, one of the peaks of spirituality is a concern for justice. His prayers, his jihad, his spiritual improvement, his boundless love for Allah and His Prophet all were to make him just a lover of truth and a warrior of justice. For him the whole of the magnificent edifice of *shariah* was to facilitate man's struggle for justice and to enable mankind to overcome oppression.

Abu Dharr was also concerned for the future generations. He was aware that the common members of society are susceptible to the values and attitudes of the ruling body. Now that the Prophet's

chair had been filled by Uthman and the depraved and worldly Umayyids, the danger was evident that if things were allowed to continue it would be not be long before the young and the impressionable would model themselves on the corrupt and perverse, and the spirit of Islam would wither and become all but lost to the world.

For all these reasons, Abu Dharr felt himself obliged to issue a challenge to the new ruling class. He chose the middle path of verbal denunciations of the ruling clique. His powerful protests against the accumulation of public wealth in the hands of a few, and his demand for expropriated lands to be distributed amongst the community, shook the whole of Medina.

Abu Dharr denounced the evils of favouritism and valuing wealth above virtue and good deeds, and contrasted Uthman's life style and that of his court to that of the Prophet when he had been head of state, and of the Prophet's officials. He publicly rebuked Uthman, counseled him to mend his ways, and warned him of a painful chastisement were he to fail to do so.

Uthman exiled Abu Dharr to Damascus. Syria had become the personal fief of its Umayyid governor Mu'awiya. Mu'awiya had built a grand palace for himself, in which he was attended by thousands of guards and servants.

Even in Syria he maintained his stance. Upon a complaint from a group of people he said 'O people', By God, it is not in the Book or the Sunnah of His messenger. I see by God that truth is vanquished and falsehood is alive, and that the truthful is called a liar, and that corruption has raised its head'. Then he said 'O wealthy, be fair with the poor, for ... as for those who hoard gold and silver, and do not spend in Allah's way, announce to them a painful chastisement.' He said 'O men of wealth, spend out of what God has given you. Do not allow the life of this world to deceive you. Maintain in your wealth a right for the poor.' He said, "The public treasury must be divided justly amongst the people, as it was in the time of the Prophet, Abu Bakr and Umar' He told ' My beloved Muhammad bequeathed me the instruction to always speak the truth no matter how bitter, and not to fear the censure of any one. I recite the prayer that he always recited: O Allah, I seek refuge with you from cowardice, miserliness, life's humiliations the world's deceptions and the torment of death."

One turning to those present Uthman asked them 'in your view, when a person has paid *zakat*, do others still have a right to what remains? Ka'ab al-Ahbar spoke up, 'No, once he has paid the *zakat* then even if he builds a house from silver or gold, there are no rights upon him'. At this Abu Dharr got enraged and struck Ka'ab with his stick 'You lie, son of a jew... 'A person usurps the people's property and unlawfully takes their rights from them, and then he gives them *zakat*, and in your view he is a Muslim who has carried out his duties?' He said gently to Uthman, 'did you not see the Prophet and Abu Bakr and Umar before you. Do you act like them? No, you treat me like a tyrant!'

Rabza and the Death of Abu Dharr

Usman turned angrily to Abu Dharr and said 'I exile you to the desert'. Uthman charged Marwan with the duty of accompanying Abu Dharr to Ranza. Ali and his party accompanied Abu Dharr to Rabza. Ali said to Abu Dharr, 'you were angry fir the sake of God, so have hope in Him for whom you were angry These people were afraid of you for the sake of the world.'

The news of Abu Dharr's cruel exile spread through the rest of the Muslim world like wildfire. Abu Darda, one of the Prophet's most respected companions, was often heard to say that he heard the Prophet say, 'The sky has not covered nor the earth supported a man more truthful than Abu Dhar.' Another prominent companion who felt strongly about Abu Dharr's death was Abd Allah b. Mas'ud, who was at that time living in Kufa, Iraq.

After more long and bitter days in the clutches of famine and destitution, the cold hand of death finally made its way to Abu Dharr. He lay crumpled up in a heap as if he was a broken toy Abu Dharr died on the 8th of Zil-Hajjah, 32 A.H. at the age of eighty-five.

The Legacy of Abu Dharr

Abu Dharr died alone in poverty and considerable misery. He left to succeeding generations a legacy vast enough to enrich and enoble all who wish to benefit from him.

He was an example of a truth-loving man at his best. It is the example of a man hungry for truth, raised and refined at the right hand of the Prophet himself, left the task of remaining true to truth

in a world careering towards falsehood, hypocrisy and confusion, who performs his task so successfully that for the whole of mankind he becomes an inspiration.

Abu Dharr was among the first of the Prophet's companions and one of his closest intimates. He played an important and notable historical role both in the time of the Prophet and afterwards, during the Khilafat of Uthman. Moreover, he was the narrator of many important sayings of the Prophet. His life is a whole course of lessons in the crucial topic of the Islamic response to tyranny; no other companion has given us these lessons so forcibly. A set of sayings, over the authencity of which there is no dispute, and which are clear in exhorting us to combat injustice and oppression with as much force and drive as we can muster, such as the saying, 'the greatest *jihad* is a word of truth to a tyrannical ruler', and also: 'He who sees evil should act against it boldly, and if not then with his tongue, and if not then he should detest it in his heart and this is the lowest level of faith.'

The Qur'an is firm in its condemnation of all forms of social injustice.

By definition no Muslim can doubt the veracity of the Qur'an, and therefore for the Muslim there can be no better measure by which to discern the true intent of traditions from the false. They should reject those traditions that contradict the spirit of the Qur'an.

The obligation of protecting the society through raising the awareness of the people is essential to the spirit of Islam, and is not to be cast aside under pretence or a misconception of piety. The Qur'an relates how Qarun made a special show of his wealth and finery before the common people, possibly to win over supporters, and that many of the common people were indeed impressed by his finery, envious of him and openly admired what they saw as his blessings. This lead the learned to speak out against him, but because he ignored their warning he was destroyed along with all his wealth in a sudden earthquake. This story teaches several points. First, that hoarding and exulting in wealth is a terrible sin. Second, that it is a sin with grave social consequences abhorrent to God, Third, that God commands the learned who speak out for the people against those who hoard the wealth of society and exalt in their possession.

There can be no doubt that the legacy of Abu Dharr represents the true teachings of the Prophet concerning proper reaction to social and political deviation and his life is a great and sublime instance of those teachings in practice. Moreover, in reality his legacy is awaiting in the shadows ready to manifest itself when the people are aware and committed enough to firmly grasp it, guard it and implement it. And Islam is in need of such people, because for as long as Muslims limit their Islam to a set of devotions without seeking the deep meanings behind these acts, and without perceiving the lofty goals these devotions are designed to serve, they will never solve the pressing problems in their societies and their youth will continue to turn to foreign ideologies.

The present age is witness to a general and powerful resolve – particularly amongst the youth – to see Islam implemented at all levels and the Islamic teachings applied to the social and political problems with which our societies are beset. For Muslims to solve their problems and to progress to the full potential promised them by Islam, it is necessary for them to again take hold of Islam as it was originally presented by the Prophet. And it is in this context that the legacy of Abu Dharr gives to this movement not only legitimacy, it gives it shape; it gives it direction; it gives it guidance and inspiration; and it gives it strength and solidity

Moreover, because the legacy of Abu Dharr reveals the deviation and qualitative decline of Muslim society to have been in full swing at a far earlier date than most reformers would suppose, it shows that in order for Muslims to lift themselves from their plight of stagnation and decay it is not enough to imitate ancient ancestors: a fundamental rethink of Islam and of the Islamic ethos and even of the status of many of the Prophet's companions is required..

Islam places the mandate upon its followers to enter into the world and worldly affairs in order to effect a total reform in accordance to the teachings of truth and teachings of justice which Islam encompasses. Unlike other religions this mandate does not rest upon the accidental vanity of clerics or the hunger for power of those who rule in Islam's name, but is fundamental to the Islamic ethos. The Qur'an declares: 'He it is who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, to make it prevail over all religions, though the polytheists be averse'. (28 : 48)

We each one of us owe it to that great companion, to revive his illustrious name, to seek of the Abu Dharr amongst us and to support and encourage them, and, above all, to become like Abu Dharr ourselves; until in every town, every village, every street and alleyway, there is at least one Abu Dharr, and the Muslim world will be able to lift its head once more and feel the admiration of the good-seeking people of the earth.

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