

RELIGION FOR REVOLUTION

Shifting Perceptions of Bodily Ritual in the Lebanese Shi'a Community

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Abstract

This paper applies Cartesian and Weberian theories of rationalization and Leslie Sharp's concept of bodily commodification to the transition in the observance of Ashura from practices of bodily mortification to blood donation among the Shi'a community in Lebanon. The author argues that this shift politicizes salvation and sacralises revolution through a process of rationalization, made possible through the invocation of the Karbala Paradigm, in order to facilitate the commodification of blood for political activism. This shift in ritual practice for the commodification of blood has occurred as a result of three key transitions: (i) from body/self-unity to body/self-dualism; (ii) from salvation in the next world to salvation in this world; and (iii) from personal salvation to societal salvation.

[Dengan merujuk teori rasionalisasi model Descartes dan Weber serta konsep komodifikasi tubuh dari Leslie Sharp, tulisan ini menelusur pergeseran yang terjadi pada ritual Ashura dari praktik melukai diri menjadi kegiatan donor darah di kalangan Syiah di Lebanon. Proses ini, menurut penulis, telah mengubah konsep penyelamatan dan revolusi sakral melalui proses rasionalisasi. Hal ini terjadi dengan memakai Paradigma Karbala sebagai media komodifikasi darah untuk aktivisme politik. Pergeseran komodifikasi darah dalam praktik ritual ini terjadi melalui tiga transisi utama: (i) dari kesatuan diri menjadi dualisme diri; (ii) dari keselamatan akhirat menjadi keselamatan dunia; dan (iii) dari penyelamatan pribadi menjadi penyelamatan sosial].

Keyword: Twelver Shi'a, Karbala, Ashura, Husayn ibn Ali, salvation

A. Introduction

Across history, many religions have experienced periods in which they were plagued by conflicts over power. Similarly, religions of the modern world are not immune to such power struggles. This paper applies Cartesian and Weberian theories of rationalization and concepts of bodily commodification taken from Leslie Sharp to the transition in the observance of Ashura from practices of bodily mortification to blood donation in Shi'a Islamic communities in Lebanon.

I begin by introducing the historical background of Ashura and the Karbala Paradigm and by describing the shift in modern Ashura practices among Shi'a Muslim communities in Lebanon. I then situate my argument among existing scholarship, introducing Haggay Ram's work on Ashura in Iran, Lara Deeb's work on Ashura in Lebanon, and Edith Szanto's critique of the aforementioned scholars' conclusions. Finally, I present a new interpretation of this shift in ritual practice based on three key transitions: (i) from body/self-unity to body/self-dualism; (ii) from salvation in the next world to salvation in this world; and (iii) from personal salvation to societal salvation. These shifts in ideology surrounding the ritual have instrumentalized Islam in the reappropriation of ownership of the body from the self to the society, allowing for the commodification of blood for political activism.

B. History of Ashura

Ashura is a day of remembrance observed by Shi'a Muslims on the tenth day of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. It commemorates the martyrdom of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the son of Ali. Upon the murder of Ali in 661 AD during his reign as the fourth caliph, his opponent Muawiya took his place and was shortly thereafter succeeded by his son, Yazid. However, Husayn did not accept Muawiya's, nor Yazid's, legitimacy as caliph, and he led the "party of Ali" into battle against Yazid in 680 AD. Husayn and all his followers were brutally slain at the Battle of Karbala, resulting in the schism between Sunni and Shi'a sects.¹ Thus, the martyrdom of Husayn is central to Shi'a identity, and the observance of Ashura is perceived as

¹ "What Is Ashura?", *BBC News* (12 Jun 2011), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16047713>, accessed 9 Feb 2014.

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vital to the group's cohesion.²

The injustice experienced by the Shi'a community at Karbala led to the creation of a common worldview among Shi'a Muslims called the "Karbala Paradigm." According to Michael Fischer, the academic who coined the phrase, the Karbala Paradigm "provides models for living and a mnemonic for thinking about how to live."³ The Karbala Paradigm reflects the struggle between Husayn and Yazid across space and time. "In every age there is an oppressed Husayn, a man who fights on the side of God, and a tyrannical Yazid, who fights against God. The Karbala Paradigm thus made the struggle between the injured Self and the oppressive."

Other a perpetual reality in the Shi'a collective self-consciousness; hence the well-known Shi'ite motto: "every place is Karbala and every day is Ashura".⁴ This paradigm supports the Shi'a community by creating a sense of solidarity in banding together to defend a present-day Husayn against a present-day Yazid.

Shi'a Muslims commemorate the defeat at Karbala on Ashura through three main practices: (i) mourning gatherings grieving for Husayn (*Majalis Taziyeh*); (ii) dramatic reenactments of the Battle of Karbala (*Tashbih*); and (iii) lamentation processions (*Masirat*). I will centre my argument here on an investigation of the third component, the lamentation processions, in order to understand the socio-political factors that contributed to the changes that these processions have undergone over the past two decades.

In addition to reinforcing solidarity among the community of Shi'a Muslims, expressions of grief in Ashura lamentation processions give space for practitioners to express their remorse for Husayn's death and their regret for not having been there to stand with him against Yazid.⁵ Practices of lamentation vary greatly from community to community, and from person to person. In Nabatiyya, Lebanon, the traditional form of Ashura observance is to perform *haydar*. The ritual practice of *haydar*

² Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism* (The Hague: Netherlands, 1978), p. 10.

³ Edith Szanto, "Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi'a Mourning Rituals", *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2013), p. 7.

⁴ Haggay Ram, "Mythology of Rage: Representations of the 'Self' and the 'Other' in Revolutionary Iran", *History and Memory*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1996), p. 70.

⁵ L. Deeb, "Living Ashura in Lebanon: Mourning Transformed to Sacrifice", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2005), p. 129.

involves cutting the skin of the forehead of participants with knives or swords and then continuously and rhythmically beating the wound until it bleeds severely, while crying out *haydar, haydar*, it being one of the names of Imam ‘Ali, the father of Imam Husayn.⁶

The annual event has created good conditions for the establishment and reinforcement of social linkages in the Shi‘a community, and an “Ashura economy” has developed due to the large crowds drawn to Nabatiyya for the performance.⁷

However, the last twenty years have seen a shift away from such practices of bloody bodily mortification. In 1994 Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran issued a fatwa against self-mutilation,⁸ and several key Lebanese figures, including Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah and Hezbollah,⁹ quickly followed suit by vocally disapproving of this practice. They cite two key reasons for opposing practices of bodily mortification: it is “un-Islamic,” since Islam forbids self-injury,¹⁰ and it portrays a negative image of Shi‘a Islam to the outside world.¹¹ Edith Szanto explains that this variance in Ashura practice and in attitudes toward forms of bodily mortification is “not a nationalist or ethnic one, but rather a question of which *maraja al-taqlid* (pl. of *marja’ al-taqlid*) [religious authority]¹² are most influential in a particular area and what views they hold.”¹³

⁶ Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, *Shi‘ite Lebanon: Transnational Religion and the Making of National Identities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 132.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ J. Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann (eds.), *Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2010), p. 1122.

⁹ “Lebanon Shia in Bloody Ritual on Ashoura: Thousands of Shia Muslims Injured Themselves in A Ceremony of Self-Harm and Mourning”, *Al Jazeera* (27 Nov 2012), <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2012/11/201211271842890427.html>, accessed 9 Feb 2014.

¹⁰ Augustus Richard Norton, “Ritual, Blood, and Shi‘ite Identity: Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon”, *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 49, no. 4 (2005), p. 147.

¹¹ Edith Szanto, “Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi‘a Mourning Rituals”, *Journal of Shi‘a Islamic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2013), p. 81.

¹² John L. Esposito, “Marja Al-Taqlid”, *Oxford Islamic Student Online*, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1437?_hi=0&_pos=13, accessed 7 Jan 2014.

¹³ Edith Szanto, “Contesting Fragile Sainly Traditions: Miraculous Healing among Twelver Shi‘is in Contemporary Syria”, in *Politics of Worship in the Contemporary Middle East: Sainthood in Fragile States*, ed. by Andreas Bandak and Mikkel Bille (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 34.

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Instead of bodily mortification, Lebanese religious and political leaders have begun to encourage Ashura participants to turn the futile loss of blood into a movement of social action by donating blood. Hezbollah's Islamic Health Committee (IHC) and the Lebanese Red Cross now set up blood donation tents along side the paths of lamentation processions.¹⁴

However, this transition toward blood donation is by no means a unanimous decision. Some practitioners find themselves caught between the transition, participating in both bodily mortification and blood donation; sometimes even those volunteering at the blood donor stations participate in rituals of mortification.¹⁵

Moreover, Amal, another Lebanese Shi'a Islamic movement, has opposed the transition to blood donation, claiming that it is unpatriotic because the motivation for the transition came from Iran. Although there had been many calls for the abandonment of the practice of bodily mutilation on Ashura within Lebanon since the 1960s, Hezbollah only began to campaign against it following Ayatollah Khamenei's issuing of the fatwa. Whereas Hezbollah views Ayatollah Khamenei as their *marja* and, therefore, accepted his declaration of fatwa on bodily mortification in 1994, Amal does not recognize his authority. Instead, Amal asserts that they are the "bearers of a local tradition that is culturally Lebanese" and that Hezbollah is "foreign-oriented because it practices a new form of ritual that is outside authentic Lebanese traditions."¹⁶ This division within the Lebanese Shi'a community led to several violent clashes on Ashura between the two political parties in the 1980s and 90s.

Today, some practitioners affiliated with Amal continue the practice of *haydar*, even though the leader of the Amal Movement, Nabih Berri, officially condemned the practice in the late 1990s. Berri and Nasrallah, Secretary General of Hezbollah, denounced the donning of headbands representing an affiliation to either political party, and they even moved to create joint Amal and Hezbollah processions in Nabatiyya, thus bringing the two parties into alignment.¹⁷

Internal clashes have not been the only form of politically charged violence displayed on Ashura in Nabatiyya; the 1980s saw violent clashes

¹⁴ Mohammed Zaatari, "Ashura Sees Many Shunning Slicing Ritual to Donate Blood Instead", *The Daily Star* (18 Dec 2013), <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2010/Dec-18/61543-ashura-sees-many-shunning-slicing-ritual-to-donate-blood-instead.ashx>, accessed 7 Jan 2014.

¹⁵ Norton, "Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity", p. 149.

¹⁶ Shaery-Eisenlohr, *Shi'ite Lebanon*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

between Shi'a practitioners and Israeli soldiers. Clashes with Israel on Ashura made the day "an occasion for the expression of resistance to Israeli attacks and occupation in Lebanon."¹⁸ The association of Ashura with an expression of resistance against an oppressive regime is fitting as it exemplifies the Karbala Paradigm, setting up the Lebanese Shi'a Muslim community as the figure of Husayn and Israel as the figure of Yazid.

While several scholars address the transition that Ashura observance has undergone, from bodily mortification to blood donation, they explain it in different ways. Although he focuses on the Iranian Shi'a community, Haggay Ram's explanation provides a solid foundation on which to ground an understanding of this transition in Shi'a ritual practice. Ram describes the transition as a shift from *passive* to *active* practice, rejecting the fatalism of the past in favor of "an activist-revolutionary approach."¹⁹ He argues that this shift occurs through the application of the Karbala Paradigm to present day conflicts. Instead of lamenting the death of the original Husayn, Ram argues that the Karbala Paradigm presents the possibility of actively standing with the current "Husayn" in the modern age by supporting "him," who is embodied in a modern armed struggle, with a tangible asset: blood.²⁰

Ram's division of ritual observance between passive and active forms of practice is supported by Fadlallah's encouragement of "a conscious form of 'Ashura instead of a passive form."²¹ He aims to propagate conscious forms of Ashura observance by focusing his annual sermons on "themes of moral guidance and admonition" that he has extracted "in an objective, scientific manner" from the many myths surrounding the holiday of Ashura, suggesting his desire to rationalize the holiday.²²

Alternatively, in her work on Lebanon, Lara Deeb explains this shift as one from *traditional* to *authenticated* practice. She describes the process of authentication as "a continual process of labeling particular practices and beliefs 'traditional' (*taqlidī*), and distancing from them, embracing instead practices and beliefs that are considered 'true' (*haqiqi*) or 'correct' (*sahib*)."²³ In this case, bodily mortification is labeled "traditional" and

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Haggay Ram, "Mythology of Rage: Representations of the 'Self' and the 'Other' in Revolutionary Iran", *History and Memory*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1996), p. 74.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Shaery-Eisenlohr, *Shi'ite Lebanon*.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Deeb, "Living Ashura in Lebanon", p. 124.

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blood donation is labeled “correct.”

Deeb also notes the perceived passivity of bodily mortification, quoting Fadlallah's perspective that the passivity of shedding blood and tears is akin to emotionality:

Too much crying leads to personalities who cry—the Shi'a will become equated with crying, the Shi'a will take on crying as a cultural trait, and this is not a good thing, it is wrong. Emotions are necessary, but they should be understood as a way of arriving at learning the lesson of Husayn. The heart should be used to reach the head, not as an endpoint in and of itself.²⁴

However, unlike Ram, Deeb does not go any further with the concept of passivity, and she does not contrast passivity of bodily mortification with activism in blood donation.

Edith Szanto (2013) rejects both of these scholars' interpretations of this shift in ritual practice:

My caveat with... the aforementioned academics is that the dichotomous interpretation of the Karbala Paradigm posits two mutually exclusive options. Muharram rituals and symbols are either traditional or modern, salvific or revolutionary. My objection to this binary is that it simultaneously depoliticizes salvation and desacralizes revolution.²⁵

C. Transitions in Ashura Ritual

In my research I have found the inverse of Szanto's critique: I have found that this shift is, in fact, a dichotomous one, which politicizes salvation and sacralizes revolution. This shift has instrumentalized Shi'a Islam to enable the commodification of blood for political activism through a process of rationalization and through the invocation of the Karbala Paradigm. These processes triggered three main transitions, leading ultimately to commodification of blood: (i) from body/self-unity to body/self-dualism; (ii) from salvation in the next world to salvation in this world; and (iii) from personal salvation to societal salvation.

1. *Toward Body/Self Dualism*

Rituals of bloody bodily mortification in Ashura lamentation processions use the body as a tool for spiritual cleansing: practitioners

²⁴ Ayatollah Fadlallah as quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁵ Szanto, “Beyond the Karbala Paradigm”, p. 34.

“claim that [*haydar*] is a form of ‘cupping’²⁶ that draws *damm fasid*, rotten or corrupt blood, out of the body, thereby healing it.”²⁷ The idea of ridding the body of spiritually “rotten or corrupt blood” in order to heal the self signifies a perceived connection of the body to one’s spiritual health, connoting a unity of body and self.

Descartes, a philosopher of the rationalist school, rejected the idea of unity of body and self, suggesting instead a dualism between body and self. Today Cartesian dualism is broadly accepted in modern medicine and in popular rhetoric as a rational conceptualization of the person. Yet within this notion of a dualistic separation between body and self, the idea of any intimate connection between the body and spiritual health is lost; the body is considered to be only a physical vessel for the self.

By adopting an ideological shift toward the rational philosophy of Cartesian dualism, Shi’a religious and political elites have stigmatized bodily mortification as irrational and “backward.”²⁸ Within the worldview of Cartesian dualism of body and self, where the body is not connected to spiritual health, bodily mortification for spiritual betterment does indeed appear to be a futile action.

Deeb’s description of the shift from bodily mortification to blood donation as one from traditional to authenticated practice highlights this stigmatization through the labeling of certain practices as “traditional” and others as “authenticated,” and, thereby, rational.²⁹ Through a Cartesian rationalization of the conception of the body within the Shi’a community, practitioners are encouraged to distance themselves from the “traditional” form of practice, which stipulates a view of unity between body and self, in favor of the “authenticated” form of practice, which stipulates a dualism of body and self.

²⁶ Cupping in Islam refers to *hijāma*: “the process of using a vacuum at different points on the body but with incisions in order to remove ‘harmful’ blood which lies just beneath the surface of the skin.” See further: “Cupping Therapy (Al-Hijama) A Cure For Every Disease, Pain and Ailment (By Allah’s Permission)”, *Mission Islam*, <http://www.missionislam.com/health/cuppingtherapy.html>, accessed 9 Feb 2014.

²⁷ Szanto, “Beyond the Karbala Paradigm”, p. 81.

²⁸ Edith Szanto, “Following Sayyida Zaynab: Twelver Shi’ism in Contemporary Syria”, Thesis (Canada: University of Toronto, 2012), p. 8, <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/34935>, accessed 19 Jan 2014.

²⁹ Deeb, “Living Ashura in Lebanon”, p. 124.

2. *Toward Salvation in this World*

In addition to Cartesian rationalization, Weberian rationalization plays a role in the transition in ritual practice. In his article, "The Rationalization of Action in Max Weber's Sociology of Religion," Kalberg explains the Weberian perspective on the rise of rationalism in religion, stating: "[S]alvation religions, as well as world views, prove indispensable for the shattering of magic and the rise of methodical rational ways of life."³⁰ In Shi'a Islam, we find the necessary grounds for this transition in that it is, in fact, a salvation religion.

However, being a salvation religion is not enough in and of itself to trigger a transition from magical to rational action; there also must be "ethical deities" with "*permanent and universal features*."³¹ Such ethical deities are, too, found in Shi'a Islam in the Karbala Paradigm: Husayn's ethical struggle against the unethical figure, Yazid, is portrayed as constantly repeating throughout history in the Karbala Paradigm, making Husayn an ideal model for an ethical figure with permanent and universal features.

This transference of Husayn's struggle across history to the present day creates a shift in objective from salvation in the next world to salvation in this world.³² The Karbala Paradigm has been the mechanism through which Shi'a Islamic doctrine has responded to "the tension between supernatural 'meaningfulness' and earthly injustice,"³³ by bringing the historical religious battle into parallel with modern day politics to create a modern day, rational, objective that is still inline with religious doctrine. Salvation is then achieved by supporting the modern Husayn against the modern Yazid; for example, by standing with Hezbollah against Israel.

The shift toward present day salvation echoes Ram's interpretation of the transition as one from passive to active practice, especially when he writes of how the "fluidity of the Karbala paradigm [has been] shaped and reshaped by the Shi'ite community in response to changing historical circumstances."³⁴ Hereby the views of Deeb and Ram come into alignment: while the "traditional" practice is one which laments the death of the original Husayn, the "authenticated" practice is one which actively fights for the modern Husayn.

³⁰ Stephen Kalberg, "The Rationalization of Action in Max Weber's Sociology of Religion", *Sociological Theory*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1990), p. 61.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³² Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1982), p. 748.

³³ Kalberg, "The Rationalization of Action", p. 66.

³⁴ Ram, "Mythology of Rage", p. 82.

The concept of salvation through authenticated practice appears in Kalberg's, article, as well, when he asserts: "Only salvation paths place direct psychological premiums upon the 'correct' action that promises redemption."³⁵ The Shi'a elites who oppose bloody forms of lamentation invoke Islamic doctrine to dissuade practitioners from implementing bodily mortification by stating that it is against Islam to practice self-harm. Instead, the "correct" form of lamentation that "promises redemption" is blood donation.

3. *Toward Societal Salvation*

Rationalization of action to present day salvation through the invocation of the Karbala Paradigm triggers a third component of change: from salvation for the individual to salvation for the society. Whereas bodily mortification is an action directed at a personal salvation through divine or magical means, blood donation is an action directed at a collective salvation through rational means. Deeb describes this shift in her work on Ashura in Lebanon:

The emphasis during Ashura was on individual religious experiences of mourning and regret, embodied through tears and blood, as well as on the reinforcement of a sense of community identity built around collective mourning and suffering rather than political activism...the shedding of blood is directed at the self, rather than outward, implying a personal expression of grief, an internal struggle with regret, and the potential for individual salvation, rather than collective political or social action.³⁶

While the element of community is a factor in "traditional" forms of lamentation, the potential for salvation is reserved for the individual. The invocation of the Karbala Paradigm changes the nature of the lamentation processions from processions of grief and mourning to processions of political activism, and changes the goals of the processions from goals personal redemption to goals of collective redemption.

The Karbala Paradigm presents a dualistic worldview, where there exist metaphorical modern Husayns and Yazids that become indicators of present day oppressed and dominant groups, respectively (as in the example of Hezbollah against Israel). Through the Karbala Paradigm, Shi'a elites, Hezbollah in particular, have harnessed the emotive power of Ashura to generate support for the group who, according to this dualistic

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

Shifting Perceptions of Bodily Ritual in the Lebanese Shi'a worldview, is the oppressed Husayn of the age. By rationalizing ritual action in the observance of Ashura, the objective of the processions shift from benefiting the individual through a cathartic experience or from magically healing the individual's spirit through the shedding of blood, to benefiting the group in a political cause through rational and tangible support in the form of blood donation.

D. The Commodification of Blood

Through the combination of the three transitions (toward a dualistic perception of body/self-separation, toward salvation in this world rather than in the next, and toward societal salvation rather than personal salvation), the body becomes a tool for social activism. Further, the body becomes property of the society rather than property of the self, as the individual's blood taken on Ashura becomes social property and blood donation becomes a social duty as part of the group on the side of Husayn.

Cartesian dualism of body and self, or conceiving of the body as nothing more than a vessel for the self, facilitates the commodification of the body for social use by eradicating the significance of the body to the self. Lesley Sharp warns of bodily commodification as an effect of body/self-dualism when she writes: "This dualism, so rampant in medical practice, facilitates the depersonalization - and, thus, dehumanization - of persons-as-bodies, a process that ultimately allows for the commodification of the body and its parts."³⁷

Moreover, in Sharp's description of organ donation in medical practice, she writes about the way in which body parts are portrayed as social property because they are considered "wasted" if not donated post-mortem: "Authors commonly assert that the demand for organs far outnumbers the supply, and human organs are openly described as 'scarce' and 'precious' goods that frequently 'go to waste' when, in fact, they should be 'recycled' for social reuse."³⁸

The same coercive vocabulary is utilized by Hezbollah, who assume "that *talbir* **wastes** blood and that the blood from self-flagellation is always at least potentially healthy and **life saving**. It can **give life** to the

³⁷ Lesley A. Sharp, "The Commodification of the Body and Its Parts", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2000), p. 290.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

community of other Shi'is."³⁹ In conjunction with the stigmatization of self-flagellation and other forms of bodily mortification as "backward," such practices also come to be considered selfish. Thus, if someone chooses to participate in bodily mortification instead of donating blood, he is viewed as being archaic in his religious beliefs and selfish for not contributing to the "greater good," the Husayn of the age.

E. Concluding Remarks: The Politics of Transition

Of course, groups like Hezbollah are not necessarily altruistic in their encouragement of this shift in practice. Not only does Hezbollah benefit directly from the blood donations upon the serious injury of their militants, but also, as Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr writes:

These new practices are part of the construction of a specific Lebanese Shi'ite nationalism rooted in Hizbullah's vision of a future Lebanon. In fact, refraining from a practice that causes such an outcry among many non-Shi'ites in Lebanon can be viewed as one of the most successful strategies of Hizbullah positioning itself as respectable, organized, rational, and thus capable of participation in and, in the view of Hizbullah members, of eventually leading the Lebanese nation.⁴⁰

Therefore, Hezbollah's support for the transition toward blood donation serves two purposes for the group: (i) it provides donor blood for injured militants, and (ii) it strategically places them in a positive light among the non-Shi'a majority in Lebanon.

Thus, the transition of Ashura practice from bloody forms to pro-social forms can be viewed as an instrumentalization of religion for political gain. The shift toward body/self dualism undermines any connection between the body and spiritual health, allowing the body to become social property, and paves the way for the rationalization of Ashura ritual, stigmatizing bodily mortification as an unacceptable practice. Through rationalization and the invocation of the Karbala Paradigm, the ritual becomes infused with goals of societal salvation through political activism. Ritual blood donation becomes the only "correct" ritual action because it is perceived as the rational form of practice and it is contrasted against "backward" forms of bloody lamentation. In this way political and religious elites are able to manipulate the ritual practice in a way that benefits the political aims of the supporting

³⁹ Szanto, "Contesting Fragile Sainly Traditions"; italic emphasis in the original, bold emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Shaery-Eisenlohr, *Shi'ite Lebanon*.

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While I have endeavored here to provide a coherent theoretical explanation for the transition in the ritual observance of Ashura in Lebanon, there are still gaps that must be addressed in order to fully understand this transition. Specifically, further research could be undertaken to elucidate the catalyst for this shift in ritual practice. While I have found that it began in the early 1990s,⁴¹ it is unclear if it is a direct result of the ending of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990, or if it is due to other socio-political factors. Additionally, it should be investigated as to whether explanation for the transition provided here holds true in other contexts that have undergone similar transitions in Ashura ritual practice, such as Iran or India. Perhaps it could be explored further as to whether this shift in ritual practice is indicative of a greater trend in the political instrumentalization of religion worldwide.

⁴¹ See further Deeb, "Living Ashura in Lebanon", p. 75.

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