

Imam Khomeini: more than just an *'alim*, an intellectual or a revolutionary

This month, as in every June since 1989, Muslims around the world will hold prayer meetings, lectures and other events to mark the anniversary of the death of Imam Khomeini, who died in Tehran on June 4, 1989, a decade after the Islamic Revolution in Iran with which he will always be associated. The usual speakers -- such as this writer -- will give the usual speeches, focusing on the usual aspects of his life and character. Little new will be said; and there is little particularly wrong with that, for there is undoubted value in the repetition or reiteration of key points of learning and wisdom in order that the listeners ponder on them. However, there is a risk of the memory and standing of the man diminishing over time as people tend to focus on particular aspects of his life and character, usually those that have greatest resonance for them, to the exclusion of all others. In many cases, unfortunately, the effect of this narrow approach is not only to limit, but to distort and misrepresent the Imam's real teachings and historical significance.

For example: naturally and inevitably, many of the centres where memorials for the Imam are held each year are Shi'a in character. They tend to see the Imam as a Shi'a 'alim first and foremost, taking pride in the fact that the greatest Islamic leader of modern times emerged from a Shi'a environment and from the traditional Shi'i Islamic scholarly institutions. Because of the central place that 'ulama hold in Shi'a communities, many of the talks and lectures on the Imam and his life will be given by other 'ulama. While they recognise and give due prominence to his political leadership, the emphasis, even in explaining his political achievements, is inevitably on his Shi'i background and his embodiment of many of the characteristics that are held dear in the Shi'i tradition, from his humility and piety to his scholasticism and spirituality. Although this is entirely reasonable, there is a tendency to overplay this aspect; all too often, at Shi'i gatherings, one gets the impression that the very reason for the Imam's success is that he was a Shi'a; and many commemorations of his life become festivals of sectarian self-congratulation, with the implication that the reason that other Muslims have not yet succeeded in emulating the Islamic Revolution is that they are not Shi'i. This is clearly a misrepresentation of the Imam and his model, and one that alienates non-Shi'is instead of enlightening them. It also minimises other important aspects of his life that are either not directly linked to his Shi'i roots, such as his profound and inclusive understanding of Muslim history, or less palatable to some Shi'is, such as his criticisms of many Shi'i institutions, some of which he shared with lay intellectuals such as Ali Shari'ati.

Conversely, many non-Shi'i and non-Iranian Muslims who admire the Imam err in the opposite direction. For them, the Imam's Shi'i roots were incidental to his political vision and revolutionary credentials. They see him, quite rightly, as part of an Islamic trajectory that includes such figures as Jamaluddin Afghani, Hasan al-Banna and Maulana Maududi, and in seeking to minimise his Shi'i character, to make him more relevant to non-Shi'i audiences (many of them alienated by Shi'i representations of him), they underplay his Islamic scholarly roots and the tradition from which he emerged. This too is to misrepresent the Imam and, even more seriously, to isolate themselves and their audiences from many of the lessons that we can take from his life and example.

In his paper *Processes of Error, Deviation, Correction and Convergence in Muslim Political Thought* (1989), the late Dr Kalim Siddiqui placed the thought and achievement of Imam Khomeini in the contexts of both the Sunni and Shi'i historical trajectories. In this and his other writings on the Imam, he provided, in broad historical terms rather than narrow biographical ones, an analysis of the Imam's achievement as an 'alim in the Islamic tradition, an intellectual in the broadest sense (working in the Islamic context, as all intellectuals work in some context or another), and a revolutionary political leader who transformed a post-colonial Muslim society and laid the foundations for the first Islamic State of the modern era.

Dr Kalim was perhaps particularly well-placed to achieve and convey this understanding, himself having a profound understanding in all three of these areas; but this is the level of understanding we must all aspire to, if our remembrance of the Imam's life is to reflect his life and character truly, and provide the fullest possible benefit to those of us striving still to emulate him.