

A Meeting with the Ulama of Najaf

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My friend took me to a mosque next to the mausoleum, where the floors were covered by carpets, and around its Mihrab there were some Qur'anic verses, engraved in beautiful calligraphy. I noticed a few turbaned youngsters sitting near the Mihrab studying, and each one of them had a book in his hand.

I was impressed by the scene, since I had never seen Shaykhs aged between thirteen and sixteen, and what made them look so cute was their costumes. My friend asked them about the Master "al-Sayyid", so they told him that he was leading the prayer. I did not know what he meant by "al- Sayyid", and thought he might be one of the Ulama, but later I realized it was "al-Sayyid al-Khu'i" the leader of the Shiite community.

It was worth noting here that the title "Sayyid" - master for the Shia is given to those who are the descendants of the family of the Prophet (saw), and the "Sayyid", whether he is a student or an Alim [learned man], wears a black turban, but other Ulama usually wear white turbans and bear the title of "Shaykh". There are other notables [al-Ashraf] who are not Ulama and wear a green turban.

My friend asked them if I could sit with them, whilst he went to meet al-Sayyid. They welcomed me and sat around me in a semi-circle and I looked at their faces which were full of innocence and purity, and then I remembered the saying of the Prophet (saw) "Man is born to live by nature, so his parents could make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magus" ... and I said to myself, "Or make him a Shi'i."

They asked me, which country I came from, I answered. "From Tunisia." They asked, "Have you got religious schools?" I answered, "We have universities and schools." I was bombarded by questions from all sides, and all the questions were sharp and concentrated. What could I say to those innocent boys who thought that the Islamic world was full of religious schools where they teach Jurisprudence, Islamic Law, principle of Islam and Qur'anic commentary.

They did not know that in the modern world of Islam we have changed the Qur'anic schools to kindergartens supervised by Christian nuns so should I tell them that they are considered by us as being "backward"? One of the boys asked me, "Which Madhhab (religious school) is followed in Tunis?" I said, "The Maliki madhhab." And noticed that some of them laughed, but I did not pay much attention. He asked me, "Do you not know the Jafari Madhhab?" I said, "What is this new name? No we only know the four Madhahibs, and apart from that is not within

Islam."

He smiled and said, "The Jafari Madhhab is the essence of Islam, do you not know that Imam Abu Hanifah studied under Imam Jafar al-Sadiq? And that Abu Hanifah said, "Without the two years al-Numan would have perished." I remained silent and did not answer, for I had heard a name that I had never heard before, but thanked Allah that he - i.e. their Imam Jafar al-Sadiq -

was not a teacher of Imam Malik, and said that we are Malikis and not Hanafis.

He said, "The four Madhahibs took from each other, Ahmed ibn Hanbal took from al-Shafii, and al-Shafii took from Malik, and Malik took from Abu Hanifah, and Abu Hanifah from Jafar al-Sadiq, therefore, all of them were students of Jafar ibn Muhammad, who was the first to open an Islamic University in the mosque of his grandfather, the Messenger of Allah. and under him studied no less than four thousand jurisprudents and specialists in Hadith (prophetic traditions).

I was surprised by the intelligence of that young boy who seemed to have learnt what he was saying in the same way that one recites a Surah from the Qur'an. I was even more astonished when he started telling me some historical references which he knew the number of their volumes and chapters, and he continued with his discussion as if he was a teacher teaching a student. In fact I felt weak before him and wished that I had gone with my friend instead of staying with the young boys. I was not able to answer every question connected with jurisprudence or history that they asked me.

He asked me, "Which of the Imams I followed?" I said, "Imam Malik." He said, "How do you follow a dead man with fourteen centuries between you and him. If you want to ask him a question about current issues, would he answer you?" I thought for a little while and then said, "Your Jafar also died fourteen centuries ago, so whom do you follow?" He and other boys answered me quickly, "We follow al- Sayyid al-Khu'i, for he is our Imam." I did not know who was more knowledgeable, al-Khu'i or Jafar al-Sadiq.

I tried my best to change the subject so I kept asking them questions such as, "What is the population of al- Najaf? How far is al- Najaf from Baghdad? Did they know other countries beside Iraq ..." And every time they answered, I prepared another question for them to prevent them from asking me, for I felt incapable of matching their knowledge. But I refused to admit it, despite the fact that inside myself, I accepted defeat. The days of glory and scholarship in Egypt had dissipated here, especially after meeting those youngsters, and then I remembered the following wise words:

Say to him who claims knowledge in Philosophy, "You have known one thing but you are still unaware of many things."

I thought the minds of those young boys were greater than the minds of those Shaykhs whom I met in al-Azhar and the minds of our Shaykhs in Tunisia. Al-Sayyid al-Khu'i entered the place, and with him came a group of Ulama who looked respectable and dignified, and all the boys stood up, and me with them, then each one of them approached al-Sayyid to kiss his hand, but I stayed rigid in my place. Al-Sayyid did not sit down until everybody sat down, then he started greeting them one by one, and he was greeted back by each individual until my turn came, so I

replied in the same way. After that my friend, who had whispered to al-Sayyid, pointed to me to get nearer to al-Sayyid, which I did, and he sat me to his right. After we exchanged the greetings my friend said to me, "Tell al-Sayyid the things you hear in Tunisia about the Shia." I said, "Brother, let us forget about the stories we hear from here and there, and I want to know for myself what the Shia say, so I want frank answers to some questions that I have." My friend insisted that I should inform al-Sayyid about what we thought of al-Shia.

I said, "We consider the Shia to be harder on Islam than the Christian and Jews, because they worship Allah and believe in the Message of Musa-may Allah grant him peace, but we hear that the Shia worship Ali and consider him to be sacred, and there is a sect among them who worship Allah but put Ali at the same level as the Messenger of Allah." Also I told him the story about how the angel Gabriel betrayed his charge - as they say - so instead of giving the message to Ali he gave it to Muhammad (saw).

Al-Sayyid remained silent for a little while, with his head down, then he looked at me and said, "We believe that there is no other God but Allah, and that Muhammad (saw) is the Messenger of Allah, and that Ali was but a servant of Allah." He turned to his audience and said, indicating to me "Look at these innocent people how they have been brain-washed by the false rumours; and this is not surprising for I heard more than that from other people - (so we say) there is no power or strength save in Allah, the Highest and the Greatest." Then he turned to me and said, "Have you read the Qur'an?" I answered, "I could recite half of it by heart before I was ten." He said, "Do you know that all the Islamic groups, regardless of their sects agree on the Holy Qur'an, for our Qur'an is the same as yours?" I said, "Yes I know that." He then said, "Have you

not read the words of Allah, praise be to Him the Sublime: And Muhammad is no more than a messenger, the messengers have already passed away before him (Holy Qur'an 3:144) Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and those with him are from of heart against the unbelievers (Holy Qur'an 48:29) Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is the Messenger of Allah and the last of the Prophets (Holy Qur'an 33:40) I said, "Yes I know all these Qur'anic verses." He said, "Where is Ali then? If our Qur'an says that

Muhammad (saw) is the Messenger of Allah, so where did this lie come from?" I remained silent and could not find an answer. He added, "As for the betrayal of Gabriel, God forbid, it is worse than the first, because when Allah sent Gabriel unto Muhammad (saw), Muhammad (saw) was forty years old then, and Ali was a lad of six or seven years, so how could Gabriel make a mistake and did not differentiate between Muhammad (saw) the man and Ali the lad?" He stayed silent for a long time, and I started thinking about what he had said, which appeared to me as logical reasoning, so that it left a deep impression on me, and I asked myself why we did not base our analysis on such logical reasoning.

Al-Sayyid al-Khu'i added, "I would like to inform you that the Shia is the only group, among all the Islamic groups, which believe in the infallibility of the Prophets and Imams; so if our Imams, may Allah grant them peace, are infallible, and they are human beings like us, then how about Gabriel, who is an angel favoured by Allah and He called him "The faithful spirit". I asked, "Where did all these rumours come from?" He said, "From the enemies of Islam who want to divide the Muslims into groups that fight each other, otherwise Muslims are brothers, whether they were Shia or Sunnis, for all of them worship Allah alone and do not associate any other God with Him, and they have one Qur'an, one Prophet and one Qiblah (Direction to which Muslims turn in praying- i.e. Kabaa). The Shia and the Sunnis only differ on issues regarding jurisprudence, in the same way that the different schools of jurisprudence in the Sunni school differ among each other; as Malik did not agree all the way with Abu Hanifah who himself did not agree all the way with al-Shafii ... and so on."

I said, "Therefore, all the things which have been said about you are just lies?" He said, "You, praise be to Allah, are a sensible man and could comprehend things, also you have seen Shi'i countries and have travelled in their midst; so did you hear or see anything related to these lies?" I said, "No, I have not seen or heard anything but good things, and I thank Allah for giving me the opportunity to meet Mr. Munim on the ship, since he was the reason for my presence in Iraq, and indeed I have learnt many things that I had not known before."

My friend Munim said, with a smile, "Including the existence of a grave for the Imam Ali?" I winked at him and said, "In fact I have learnt many new things even from those young lads and wish I had had the opportunity to learn as they do in this Religious School." Al-Sayyid said, "Welcome, if you want to study here, then there will be a place for you in this school."

Everybody welcomed the suggestion, especially my friend Munim whose face was full of joy. I said, "I am a married man with two boys." He said, "We will take care of your accommodation and living and whatever you need, but the important thing is learning." I thought for a little while and said to myself, "It does not seem acceptable to become a student after having spent five

years as a teacher and educationalist, and it is not easy to take a decision so hastily." I thanked al-Sayyid al-Khu'i for his offer and told him that I would think about the matter seriously after I came back from al-Umrah, but I needed some books. Al-Sayyid said, "Give him the books." A group of learned people stood up and went to their book cabinets and after a few minutes each one of them presented me with a book, so I had more than seventy. I realized that I could not carry all these books with me, especially as I was going to Saudi Arabia, where the authorities censor any book entering their countries, lest new ideas get established, in particular those ideas which do not agree with their creed. However, I did not want to miss the chance of having all these books which I had never seen in all my life. I said to my friend and the rest of the people that I had a long journey ahead of me, passing through Damascus, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and on the way back my journey would be even longer for I would travel through Egypt and Lybia until I reached Tunisia, and beside the weight of these books was the fact that most of the countries prohibit the entry of these books to their territories. Al-Sayyid said, "Leave us your address and we will send them to you." I liked the idea and gave him my personal card with my address in Tunis on it. Also, I thanked him for his generosity, and when I was about to leave him he stood up and said to me, "May Allah grant you safety and if you stand by the grave of my forefather the Messenger of Allah please pass my greetings to him."

Everybody, including myself, were moved by what al-Sayyid had said, and I noticed that tears were coming from his eyes, then I said to myself, "God forbid that such a man could be wrong or a liar; his dignity, his greatness and his modesty tell you that he is truly a descendant of the Prophet." I could not help myself but to take his hand and kiss it, in spite of his refusal. When I stood up to go, everybody stood and said farewell to me, and some of the young lads from the religious school followed me and asked me for my addresses for future correspondence, and I gave it to them.

We went back to al-Kufa after an invitation from a friend of Munim, whose name was Abu Shubbar, and stayed in his house where we spent a whole night socializing with a group of intellectual young people. Among those people were some students of al-Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr who suggested that I should meet him, and they promised to arrange an interview with him on the day after. My friend Munim liked the idea but apologized for not being able to be present at the meeting because he has a prior engagement in Baghdad. We agreed that I would stay in Abu Shubbar's house for three or four days until Munim came back. Munim left us shortly after the dawn prayers and we went to sleep. I benefitted so much from these students and was surprised about the variety of subjects they study in the Religious

School. In addition to the Islamic studies which include Jurisprudence, Islamic Law (Shariah) and Tawheed (Islamic Theology); they study Economics, Sociology, Politics, History, Languages, Astronomy and a few more subjects.

A Meeting with Al Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al Sadr

I went with Abu Shubbar to al-Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's house, and on the way he honoured me and talked to me about the famous Ulama and about Taqlid (adoption of a legal decision by the Mujtahid) and so on ... until we entered the house where we found al Sayyid al Sadr surrounded by many young turbaned students. Al-Sayyid stood up and greeted us, then I was introduced to him and he welcomed me warmly and sat me next to him. After that he started asking me about Tunisia and Algeria and about famous Ulama like al-Khidr Husayn and al-Thahir ibn Ashoor and others. I enjoyed his talk, and despite his high position and the great respect he commands from his students, I found myself at ease with him and felt as if I had known him before.

I benefitted so much from that meeting because I listened to the questions asked by the students and his answers to them, also I appreciated then the idea of adopting the decision of the living Ulama who could answer all sorts of questions directly and clearly. I became convinced that the Shia are Muslims worshipping Allah alone, who believe in the message of our Prophet Muhammad (saw). At the beginning I suspected that what I saw was just acting, or perhaps as they call it Taqiyyah, i.e.

they show what they do not believe; but these suspicions disappeared quickly since it was inconceivable that the hundreds of people that I saw or heard coordinated their acting, and why should there be acting any- way? Besides who was I, and why should they be concerned about me to the extent that they used Taqiyyah with me? And all their books, whether they were old ones that had been written centuries ago or the newly published ones, all professed the unity of Allah and praise His Messenger Muhammad (saw). There I was, in the house of al-Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the famous religious authority inside Iraq and outside it, and every time the name of Muhammad (saw) was mentioned, the entire audience shouted in one voice "May Allah's blessings be upon Muhammad and his household."

When the time for prayer was due, we left the house and went to the mosque, which was next door, and al-Sayyid Muhammad al-Sadr led the midday and afternoon prayers. I felt as if I was living among the Companions (of the Prophet), for there was a solemn invocation from one of the men who had a moving voice, and when he finished the invocation the whole audience shouted, "May Allah's blessing be upon Muhammad and his household." The invocation was basically to thank and glorify Allah, the Great Majesty, and then Muhammad (saw) and his

good and purified posterity.

After the prayer, al-Sayyid sat in the Mihrab (the prayer niche) and people came to greet him, some asked him private questions, others asked him general questions, and he answered each one of them accordingly. When the person obtained an answer for his question, he kissed the hand of al-Sayyid then left, what lucky people to have such a dignified learned Imam who lives their experiences and solves their problems.

Al-Sayyid showed me so much care and generosity to the extent that I forgot all about my family and tribe, and felt that if I stayed for one month with him, I would have become a Shii, because of his manners, modesty and generosity. Whenever I looked at him he smiled and asked me if I needed anything, and I did not leave his company during the four days, only when I wanted to go to sleep. There were many visitors who came to see him from all over the world;

there were Saudi Shii from Hijaz, others came from Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey and Black Africa; and al-Sayyid spoke to each one of them and solved their problems, later they left him feeling happy and comforted. Here I would like to mention a case which was brought to al-Sayyid when I was in his company, and I was very impressed by the way he dealt with it. I mention it because of its historical importance so that the Muslims know what they have lost by leaving the rule of Allah. Four men, who were probably Iraqis, judging by their accents, came to see al-Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. One of them had inherited a house from his grandfather, who had died a few years ago, and had sold that house to a second person (he was present then). One year after the completion of the sale, two brothers came and proved that they were also legal inheritors of the dead man (i.e. the father). The four of them sat before al-Sayyid and each one of them produced a number of papers and deeds, which al-Sayyid read, and after he spoke for a few minutes with the men, he passed a fair judgement. He gave the purchaser the full right to his house, and asked the seller to pay to his two brothers their shares from the selling price, and after that they stood up and kissed al-Sayyid's hand and embraced each other.

I was astonished about what had happened and asked Abu Shubbar, "Has the case ended?" He said, "Yes, everyone received his right. Praise be to Allah!" In such case, and in such a short time, only a few minutes, the problem was solved. A similar case in our country would have taken at least ten years to resolve, some of the plaintiffs would die and their sons resume the case; often the legal costs exceed the price of the house. The case would move from the Magistrate Court to the Appeal Court to the Court of Review, and at the end no one is satisfied, and hatred between People and Tribes are created.

Abu Shubbar commented, We have the same thing if not worse." I asked, "How?" He said, if

people take their cases to the state courts, then they would go through the same troubles which you have just mentioned, but if they follow the Religious Authority and commit themselves to the Islamic Laws, then they would take their cases to him and the problem would be solved in a few minutes, as you saw. And what is better than the Law of Allah for people who could comprehend? Al-Sayyid al-Sadr did not charge them one Fils, but if they went to the state courts, then they would have paid a high price."

I said, "Praise be to Allah! I still cannot believe what I have seen, and if I had not seen it with my eyes, I would not have believed it at all." Abu Shubbar said, "You do not have to deny it brother, this is a simple case in comparison with other more complicated ones which involve blood. Even so, the Religious Authorities do consider them, and it takes them a few hours to resolve." I said with astonishment, "Therefore you have two governments in Iraq, a government of the state and a government of the clergy. He replied, "No, we have a government of the state only, but the Muslims of the Shii Madhhab who follow the Religious Authorities, have nothing to do with the government of the state, because it is not an Islamic government.

They are subjects of that government simply because of their citizenship, the taxes, civil laws and personal status; so if a committed Muslim had an argument with a non committed Muslim, then the case must be taken to the state courts, because the latter would not accept the judgement of the Religious Authorities. However, if two committed Muslims had an argument, then there is no problem, whatever the Religious Authorities decide is acceptable to all parties. Thus, all cases seen by the Religious Authorities are solved on a day-to-day basis, whereas other cases linger on for months and years."

It was an incident that made me feel content with rule of Allah, praise be to Him the Exalted one, which helped me to comprehend the words of Allah in His Glorious Book:

... And whoever did not judge by what Allah revealed, those are they that are the unbelievers
(Holy Qur'an 5:44).

... And whoever did not judge by what Allah revealed, those are they that are the unjust (Holy Qur'an 5:45).

... And whoever did not judge by what Allah revealed, those are they that are the transgressors
(Holy Qur'an 5:47).

That incident aroused in me feelings of anger and resentment about those who change the just rules of Allah with some unjust, man-made rules. They even go further, and with all impudence and sarcasm, they criticize the divine rules and condemn them for being barbaric and inhuman because it draws the limits. cuts the hand of the thief, stones the adulterer and kills the killer. So where did all these new theories, that are foreign to us and our culture come from? There is

no doubt they came from the West and from the enemies of Islam who know that the application of Allah's rules mean their inevitable destruction because they are thieves, traitors, adulterers, criminals and murderers.

I had many discussions with al-Sayyid al-Sadr during these days, and I asked him about everything I had learnt through the friends who talked to me about their beliefs and what they thought about the Companions of the Prophet (saw), and about Ali and his sons ... beside many other issues that we used to disagree upon.

I asked al-Sayyid al-Sadr about Imam Ali and why they testify for him in the Adhan [the call for prayers] that he is "Waliy Allah" [the friend of Allah]. He answered me in the following way: The Commander of the Believers, Ali, may Allah's blessings be upon him, was one of those servants of Allah whom He chose and honoured by giving them the responsibilities of the Message after His Prophet. These servants are the trustees of the Prophet (saw), since each prophet has a trustee, and Ali ibn Abi Talib is the trustee of Muhammad (saw).

We favour him above all the Companions of the Prophet (saw) because Allah and the Prophet favoured him, and we have many proofs of that, some of them are deduced through logical reasoning, others are found in the Qur'an and al-Sunnah [the Tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (saw)], and these proofs cannot be suspect, because they have been scrutinized, and proven right, by our own learned people (who wrote many books about the subject) and those of the Sunni Madhahibs. The Umayyad regime worked very hard to cover this truth and fought Imam Ali and his sons, whom they killed.

They even ordered people, sometimes by force, to curse him, so his followers - may Allah bless them all started to testify for him as being the friend of Allah. No Muslim would curse the friend of Allah in defiance of the oppressive authorities, so that the glory was to Allah, and to His Messenger and to all the believers. It also became an historical land mark across the generations so that they know the just cause of Ali and the wrong doing of his enemies. Thus, our learned people continued to testify that Ali is the friend of Allah in their calls to prayer, as something which is commendable. There are many commendable things in the religious rites as well as in ordinary mundane dealings, and the Muslim will be rewarded for doing them, but not punished for leaving them aside.

For example, it is commendable for the Muslim to say after al-Shahadah [i.e. to testify that there is no God but Allah, and that Muhammad (saw) is His messenger]: And I will testify that Heaven is true and Hell is true, and that Allah will resurrect people from their graves.

I said "Our learned people taught us that the priority of the succession was for our master Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, then to our master Umar al-Faruq, then to our master Uthman, then to our

master Ali, may Allah bless them all." Al-Sayyid remained silent for a short while, then answered me, Let them say what they want, but it would be impossible for them to prove it on legal grounds, besides, what they say contradicts their books which state: The best of the people is Abu Bakr then Uthman, and there is no mention of Ali because they made him just an ordinary person, however, the later historians started to mention him for the sake of mentioning the Rightly Guided Caliphs.

After that I asked him about the piece of clay on which they put their foreheads during the prayers and they call it "al-Turbah al-Husayniyyah". He answered, We all prostrate on the dust, but not for the dust, as some people claim that the Shia do, for the prostration is only for Allah, praise be to Him the Highest. It is well established among our people, as well as among the Sunnis, that the most favourable prostration is on earth or on the non-edible produce of the earth, and it is incorrect to prostrate on anything else. The Messenger of Allah (saw) used to sit on the dust, and he had a piece of clay mixed with straw, on which he used to prostrate. He also taught his Companions, may Allah bless them all, to prostrate on the earth or on stones, and forbade them from prostrating on the edges of their shirts. We consider these acts to be necessary and important.

Imam Zayn al-Abideen Ali ibn al-Husayn [may Allah bless them both] took a Turbah [a piece of clay] from near the grave of his father Abu Abdullah, because the dust there is blessed and pure, for the blood of the chief martyr was spilt on it. Thus, his followers continue with that practice up to the present day.

We do not say that prostration is not allowed but on Turbah, rather, we say that prostration is correct if it is done on any blessed Turbah or stone, also it is correct if it is done on a mat which is made of palm leaves or similar material. I asked, with reference to our master al-Husayn, may Allah's blessings be upon him, "Why do the Shia cry and beat their cheeks and other parts of their bodies until blood is spilt, and this is prohibited in Islam, for the Prophet (saw) said: He who beats the cheeks, tears the pockets and follows the call of al-Jahiliyyah is not one of us."

Al-Sayyid replied, The saying is correct and there is no doubt about it, but it does not apply to the obsequies of Abu Abdullah, for he who calls for the avenging of al-Husayn and follows his path, his call is not of the Jahiliyyah. Besides, the Shias are only human beings, among them you find the learned and not so learned, and they have feelings and emotions. If they are overcome by their emotions during the anniversary of the martyrdom of Abu Abdullah, and remember what happened to him, his family and his companions from degradation to captivity and then finally murder, then they will be rewarded for their good intentions, because all these

intentions are for the sake of Allah. Allah - praise be to Him, the Highest - who rewards people according to their intentions.

Last week I read the official reports from the Egyptian government about the suicide incidents that followed the death of Jamal Abdul Nasser. There were eight such incidents in which people took their lives by jumping from buildings or throwing themselves under trains, besides them there were many injured people. These are but some examples in which emotions have overcome the most rational of people, who happen to be Muslims and who killed themselves because of the death of Jamal Abdul Nasser, who died of natural causes, therefore, it is not right for us to condemn the Sunnis and judge them to be wrong.

On the other hand, it is not right for the Sunnis to accuse their brothers the Shia of being wrong because they cry for the chief martyr. These people have lived and are still living to this present day the tragedy of al-Husayn. Even the Messenger of Allah (saw) cried after the death of his son al- Husayn, and Gabriel cried also.

I asked, "Why do the Shia decorate the graves of their saints with gold and silver, despite the fact that it is prohibited in Islam?" Al-Sayyid al-Sadr replied, This is not done just by the Shia, and it is not prohibited. Look at the mosques of our brothers the Sunnis in Iraq or Egypt or Turkey or anywhere else in the Islamic world, they are all decorated with gold and silver. Furthermore, the mosque of the Messenger of Allah (saw) in al-Madinah al-Munawarah and the Kaba, the House of Allah, in the blessed Mecca is covered every year by a cloth decorated by gold which costs millions. So such a thing is not exclusive to the Shia.

I asked "The Saudi Ulama say that touching the graves and calling the saints for their blessings is polytheism, so what is your opinion?" Al-Sayyid al-Sadr replied: If touching the graves and calling the dead is with the understanding that they could cause harm or render a benefit, then that is polytheism, no doubt about it, the Muslims are monotheists and they know that Allah alone could cause harm or render a benefit, but calling the saints and Imams [may Allah bless them all] with the understanding that they could be an intermediary to Allah, that is not polytheism.

All Muslims, Sunnis and Shias, agreed on this point from the time of the Messenger up to the present day, except the Wahabiyyah, the Saudi Ulama who contradict all Muslims with their new creed. They caused considerable disturbances among the Muslims, they accused them of blasphemy, they spilt their blood and even beat old pilgrims on their way to the House of Allah in Mecca just because they say "O Messenger of Allah, may peace be upon you", and they will never let anybody touch his blessed grave. They had so many debates with our learned people, but they persisted in their stubbornness and their arrogance.

Al-Sayyid Sharaf al-Din, a famous Shi'i learned man, went on pilgrimage to the House of Allah during the time of Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, and he was one of those Ulama who were invited to the King's palace to celebrate with the King 'Id al-Adhha, in accordance with the customs there. When his turn came to shake the King's hand, Sayyid Sharaf al-Din presented him with a leather bound Qur'an. The King took the Qur'an and placed it on his forehead then kissed it. Al Sayyid Sharaf al-Din said, "O King, why do you kiss and glorify the cover which is only made out of goat's skin?" The King answered, "I meant to glorify the Holy Qur'an, not the goat's skin." Al-Sayyid Sharaf al-Din then said, "Well said, O King. We do the same when we kiss the window or the door of the Prophet's (saw) chamber, we know it is made of iron and could not harm or render a benefit, but we mean what is behind the iron and wood, we mean to glorify the Messenger of Allah (saw) in the same way as you meant with the Qur'an when you kissed its goat's skin cover.

The audience was impressed by al-Sayyid and said, "You are right." The King was forced to allow the pilgrims to ask for blessings from the Prophet's relics, until the order was reversed by the successor of that king. The issue is not that they are afraid of people associating others with Allah, rather, it is a political issue based on antagonizing and killing the Muslims in order to consolidate their power and authority over the Muslims, and history is the witness to what they have done with the Muslim nation.

I asked him about the Sufi orders, and he answered me briefly, There are positive and negative aspects to them. The positive aspects include self-discipline, austere living, renunciation of worldly pleasures and elevating one's self to the spiritual world. The negative aspects include isolation, escapism and restricting the mention of Allah by verbal numbers and various other practices. Islam, as it is known accepts the positive aspects but rejects the negative ones, and we may say that all the principles and teachings of Islam are positive.

The answers of al-Sayyid al-Sadr were clear and convincing, but it was very difficult for a person like me to comprehend them. Twenty-five years of my life had been based on the idea of glorifying and respecting the Companions of the Prophet, especially the Rightly Guided Caliphs. The Messenger of Allah commanded us to follow their teachings, in particular Abu Bakr al-Siddiq and Umar al-Farooq, but I had never heard their names mentioned since I arrived in Iraq. Instead, I heard strange names that I had never come across before, and that there were twelve Imams, and a claim that the Messenger of Allah had stated before his death that Imam Ali should be his successor. How could I believe all that (that all Muslims and the Companions of the Prophet- who was the best of people -, after the death of the Prophet agreed to stand against Ali - may Allah honour him) when we had been taught from childhood

that the Companions of the Prophet – may Allah bless them all – respected Ali and knew very well what kind of man he was. They knew that he was the husband of Fatima al-Zahra and the father of al-Hasan and al-Husayn and the gate to the city of knowledge.

Our Master Ali knew the quality of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, who became a Muslim before anybody else, and accompanied the Prophet to the cave, as is mentioned by Allah, the Mighty, in the Qur'an, and whom the Messenger of Allah charged with the leadership of the prayers during his illness, and said about him, if I was taking a very close friend, I would have chosen Abu Bakr." Because of all that, the Muslims elected him as their caliph. Imam Ali knew the position of our master Umar, with whom Allah glorified Islam, and the Messenger of Allah called him al-Farooq, he who separates right from wrong. Also Imam Ali knew the position of our master

Uthman,

in whose presence the angels of the Merciful felt shy, and who organized al-Usrah's army, and who was named by the Messenger of Allah as "Dhu al-Nurayn", the man who is endowed with two lights. How could our brothers al-Shia ignore or pretend to ignore all that, and make these personalities just ordinary characters subject to all worldly whims and greed so that they deviated from the right path and disobeyed the orders of the Messenger after his death. This was inconceivable since we know that these people used to hasten to execute the orders of the Messenger; they killed their sons and fathers and members of their tribes for the sake of glorifying Islam and its ultimate victory. He who would kill his father and son for the sake of Allah and His Messenger could not be subject to worldly and transitory ambitions such as the position of Caliph, and ignoring the orders of the Messenger of Allah.

Yes, because of all that I could not believe all the Shia were saying, in spite of the fact that I was convinced about many things. I remained in a state of doubt and perplexity: doubtful because of what the Shii learned scholars Ulama said to me, which I found sensible and logical; and perplexed because I could not believe that the Companions of the Prophet – may Allah bless them all – would sink to such a low moral stand and become ordinary people like us, neither sharpened by the light of the Message nor able to be enlightened by Muhammad. O my God, how could that be? Could the Companions of the Prophet be at the level described by the Shia? The important thing is that doubt and perplexity were the beginning of weakness and the realization that there were many hidden issues to be uncovered before reaching the truth.

My friend came, then we travelled to Karbala, and there I lived the tragedy of our master al-Husayn in the same way his followers, and only then did I know that he had not died an ordinary death. People tend to crowd around his grave like butterflies and cry with such sorrow and grief that I have never seen before, as if al-Husayn had just been martyred. I heard

speakers who aroused the feelings of people when describing the incident at Karbala, accompanied by crying and wailing, and soon the listener loses control of himself and collapses. I cried and cried and let myself go as if crushed, and felt a relief that I had never experienced before that day; I felt that I had been in the ranks of al-Husayn's enemies and had suddenly changed sides to be one of his followers who sacrificed themselves for his sake. The speaker was reciting the story of al-Hurr, who was one of the commanders in charge of fighting al-Husayn, who stood in the middle of the battlefield shaking like a leaf, and when one of his friends asked him, "Are you afraid of death?" He answered, "No, by Allah, but I am choosing between heaven and hell." Then he kicked his horse and went towards al-Husayn and asked, "Is there a repentance, O son of the Messenger of Allah?"

When I heard that, I could not control myself and fell on the floor crying and felt as if I was in the position of al-Hurr, asking al-Husayn, "Is there a repentance, O son of the Messenger of Allah? Forgive me O son of the Messenger of Allah. The voice of the speaker was so moving that people started crying and wailing, and when my friend heard my cries, he embraced me, like a mother embracing her child, and started crying and calling, "O Husayn...O Husayn..."

These were moments, during which I learnt that meaning of real crying and felt that my tears washed my heart and body from the inside, and then I understood the meaning of the Messenger's saying: If you knew what I know, you would have laughed little and cried more.

I was depressed throughout the day, although my friend tried to re-assure me and cheer me up by offering me some refreshments, but I had lost my appetite completely. I asked him to repeat the story of the martyrdom of al-Husayn, for I did not know much about it except the fact that our religious leaders told us that the enemies of Islam killed our masters Umar, Uthman and Ali, and that the same enemies killed our master al-Husayn; and that is all we knew. In fact we used to celebrate Ashura, as one of the festival days of Islam; alms were distributed and various types of food were cooked and the young boys went to their elders who gave them money to buy sweets and toys.

However, there are a few customs in some villages during Ashura: people do not light fires or do any kind of work. People do not get married or celebrate a happy occasion. We usually accept them at face value without any explanation given, and strangely enough, our religious leaders talk to us about the greatness of Ashura and how blessed it is.

After that we went to visit the grave of al-Abbas, the brother of al-Husayn. I did not know who he was, but my friend informed me about his bravery. We also met many pious religious leaders whose names I cannot recall in detail, but I can still recall their surnames: Bahr al-

Uloom, al-Sayyid al-Hakim, Kashif al-Ghita, al-Yasin, al-Tabatabai, al-Feiruzabadi, Asad Haidar, and others, who honoured me with their company. They are truly pious religious leaders, possessing all the signs of dignity and respect, and the Shia population respect them and give them one fifth of their incomes.

Through these donations they manage the affairs of the religious schools, open new schools, establish presses and assist students who come to them from all over the Islamic world. They are independent and not connected in any way with the rulers; unlike our religious leaders who would not do or say anything without the approval of the authorities, who pay their salaries and appoint them, and remove them whenever they want.

It was a new world that I had discovered, or rather, Allah had discovered for me. I started to enjoy it having previously kept away from it, and gradually blended with it after I had opposed it. I gained new ideas from this new world, and it inspired me with the quest for knowledge and research until I reached the desired truth which always comes to mind whenever I read the saying of the prophet: The sons of Israel were divided into seventy-one groups, and the Christians were divided into seventy-two groups, and my people will be divided into seventy-three groups, all of which, except one group will end up in Hell.

Here is not the place to talk about the various religions which claim to be the right one and that the rest are wrong, but I am surprised and astonished whenever I read this saying. My surprise and astonishment is not at the saying itself, but at those Muslims who read it and repeat it in their speeches and brush over it without analyzing it or even attempting to find out which the group is going to be saved and which are going to be doomed.

The interesting thing is that each group claims that it is the saved one. At the end of the saying came the following: "Who are they, O Messenger of Allah?" He answered, "Those who follow my path and the path of my Companions." Is there any group that does not adhere to the Book [Qur'an] and Sunnah (the prophetic tradition), and is there any Islamic group that claims otherwise? If Imams Malik or Abu Hanifah or al-Shafii or Ahmed ibn Hanbel were asked, wouldn't each and everyone of them claim that he adheres to the teachings of the Qur'an and the Right Sunnah'?

These are the Sunni Madhahib, in addition to the various Shii-groups, which I had believed at one time to be deviant and corrupt. All of them claim to adhere to the Qur'an and the correct Sunnah which has been handed down through Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophets Family) who knew best about what they were saying. Is it possible that they are all right, as they claim? This is not possible, because the Prophets saying states the opposite, unless the saying is invented or fabricated. But that is not possible either, because the saying is accepted by both the Shia and

Sunnis. Is it possible that the saying has no meaning?

God forbid that His Messenger (saw) could utter a meaningless and aimless saying, as he only spoke words of wisdom. Therefore we are left with one possible conclusion: that there is one group which is on the right path, and that the rest are wrong. Thus, the saying tends to make one confused and perplexed, but in the meantime it encourages research and study by those who want to be saved. Because of that, I became doubtful and perplexed after my meeting with the Shia, for who knows, they might be saying the truth! So should I not study and investigate? Islam, through the Qur'an and Sunnah ordered me to study, investigate and to compare, and

Allah - the Most High said:

And (as for) those who strive hard for Us, We will most certainly guide them in Our ways (Holy Qur'an 29:69). He also said: Those who listen to the word, then follow the best of it; these are they whom Allah has guided, and those it is who are the men of understanding (Holy Qur'an 39:18) The Messenger of Allah (saw) said, Study your religion until it is said that you are mad. Therefore research and comparison are legal obligations for every responsible person. Having reached this decision and resolution, and with this promise to myself and my Shii friends from Iraq, I embraced them and bade them farewell, full of sorrow since I liked them and they liked me. I felt that I had left dear and faithful friends who had sacrificed their time in order to help me. They did it out of their own choice and asked for nothing except the approval of Allah, Praise be to Him. The Prophet (saw) said, "If Allah chooses you to guide one man (to the right path), then that is worth more than all the riches on earth."

I left Iraq having spent twenty days among the Imams and their followers, and the time had passed like a nice dream from which the sleeper was loathe to awake. I left Iraq feeling sorry for the brevity of this period. and sorry to leave dear friends who were full of love for Ahl-al-Bayt. I left Iraq for the Hijaz seeking the House of Allah and the grave of the Master of the First
(and the Last (saw