The Authenticity of Ziyārat ʿĀshūrāʾ

The following is a translation of Sayyid Musa al-Shubayrī al-Zanjānī's response to a question regarding the authenticity of the widely-recited Ziyārat ʿĀshūrāʾ. *The version of the ziyārat that Sayyid al-Zanjānī speaks to, and that is found in by Shaykh ʿAbbās al-Qummī's* Mafātīh al-Jinān*, is originally cited in Shaykh al-Ṭūsī's compilation of prayers, entitled* Miṣbāḥ al-Mutahajjid*. This response is particularly noteworthy for the expertise and nuance brought to bear on questions of authenticity, which simultaneously establishes a place for spiritual validity. The translation was provided by Shaykh Haziq Sheikh, and has been emended for clarity.*

In His Name, The Exalted

Setting aside the spiritual evidence derived from reliable sources that supports the reliability of *Ziyārah ʿĀshūrāʾ*, the chain of transmission mentioned in Shaykh al-Ṭūsī's *Miṣbāḥ al-Mutahajjid* following the *Ziyārah* is sound (*sanad*^{un} *ṣaḥīḥ*^{un}).

To explain further, after transmitting the *Ziyārah* of Sayyid al-Shuhadāʾ (ʿa) from ʿAlqamah, the following is mentioned in *Miṣbāḥ al-Mutahajjid*:

Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Ṭayālisī narrated from Sayf b. ʿAmīrah, who said: I traveled to al-Gharī ((al-Gharī is an alternative name for the city of Najaf, Iraq)) with Ṣafwān b. Mihrān al-Jammāl and a group of our companions. When we finished our *ziyārah* ((This first *ziyārah* would be of the first Imam, Imam ʿAli, in Najaf)), Ṣafwān turned and faced toward the direction of Imam Husayn (ʿa). He told us, "You are to perform the *ziyārah* of Husayn (ʿa) from this place, near the head of Amīr al-Muʾminīn (ʿa). It was from this very place that, while I was accompanying him, Imam al-Sadiq (ʿa) pointed towards the Imam (Husayn)." Then Ṣafwān performed the *ziyārah* that ʿAlqamah b. Muḥammad al-Ḥaḍramī narrated from Imam al-Baqir (ʿa) on the Day of ʿAshuraʾ… ((al-Ṭūsī, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan, *Miṣbāḥ al-Mutahajjid* (Beirut: Muʾassassat al-Aʿlamī, 1998) pg. 539-40))

It is understood from this excerpt that Imam al-Sadiq (ʿa) pointed towards the Prince of Martyrs (Sayyid al-Shuhadāʾ, ʿa) and performed the very same *ziyārah* that ʿAlqamah narrated from Imam al-Baqir (ʿa).

As for the chain of transmission, there is no dispute in the reliability of Sayf b. ʿAmīrah and Ṣafwān b. Mihrān. Only two issues remain: the first is the chain of transmission to Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Ṭayālisī, and the second is in regard to the reliability of Muḥammad b. Khālid himself. As for the chain to al-Ṭayālisī, there are two ways to establish its reliability:

The first method: the expression "Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Ṭayālisī narrated" instead of "it is narrated from Muḥammad b. Khālid" evidently indicates that Shaykh al-Ṭūsī had personally verified the attribution of this narration to Muḥammad b. Khālid. This suffices in confirming the reliability of this

aspect of the chain.

The second method: this hadith was taken from the book of Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Ṭayālisī, to whom Shaykh al-Ṭūsī has attributed a book in his bibliographical index *al-Fihrist*. He narrates the book from: Ḥusayn b. ʿUbaydallāh al-Ghaḍāʾirī—from Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-ʿAṭṭār—from his father—from Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Maḥbūb—from Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Ṭayālisī. These narrators are all major scholars of the Imami Shiʿis, and reliable authorities. As for Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-ʿAṭṭār, he is from the *shuyūkh al-ijāzah*, scholars regarding whom it is established—through considerable research—that their trustworthiness does not depend on a testimony to their reliability (*al-tawthīq*).

What remains is the trustworthiness of Muḥammad b. Khalid al-Ṭayālisī himself. A number of factors attest to this:

First: Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Maḥbūb, one of the pillars of the community, narrates al-Ṭayālisī's books. This indicates his reliance upon [al-Ṭayālisī].

Second: al-Ṭayālisī is the narrator for certain esteemed and trustworthy scholars and is their source to the books of particular individuals, among which are (the books of) Sayf b. ʿAmīrah and Muḥammad b. Maʿrūf. Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar al-Razzāz, one of the most well-regarded teachers of the sect, narrates both books (of Sayf and Muḥammad) from al-Ṭayālisī. This indicates that al-Razzāz relied upon (and trusted) al-Ṭayālisī.

Included in this group (of books is that of) Ruzayq b. al-Zubayr. ʿAbdullāh b. Jaʿfar al-Himyarī narrates from Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Ṭayālisī from Ruzayq. Also Ḥumayd b. Ziyād—who both Shaykh al-Ṭūsī and al-Najāshī have deemed trustworthy despite his being *wāqifī*—narrates many primary a*ḥādīth* from Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Ṭayālisī.

Third: a number of esteemed trustworthy narrators transmitted from him. In addition to those already mentioned are the following individuals: Saʿd b. ʿAbdullāh; Salmah b. al-Khaṭṭāb (who is certainly trustworthy); [al-Ṭayālisī's] own son, ʿAbdullāh b. Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Ṭayālisī; ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm [al-Qummī]; ʿAlī b. Sulaymān al-Zurārī; Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṣaffār; Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Abū al-Khaṭṭāb; and Muʿāwiyah b. Ḥukaym.

These are some of the strongest indicators supporting Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Ṭayālisī's trustworthiness. He has also not been disparaged by anyone, not even by Ibn al-Ghaḍāʾirī, from whom there are reports wherein he incorrectly disparages many trustworthy narrators. Therefore, Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Ṭayālisī's trustworthiness should not be doubted.

From the preceding evidence, we can conclude this chain of transmission for *Ziyārat ʿĀshūrāʾ* is sound.

Arbaʿīn: the Miʿrāj of a Mourner

The following reflection expresses the depth of the spiritual walk from Najaf to Karbala on Arbaʿīn. These personal expressions of sacrifice serve as crucial landmarks in a believer's journey to become proximate to God (swt) through devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt, particularly Imam Husayn (ʿa).

From a well-known narration by Imam Hasan al-ʿAskarī (ʿa) delineating the five signs of a believer, the one recalled foremost is to perform *ziyārah* of Imam Husayn (ʿa) on the 40th day following his martyrdom, known as Arbaʿīn.((Al-Majlisi, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 98, pg. 329.)) This day is also significant for reportedly being the first time Imam ʿAli Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn (ʿa) and Lady Zaynab (ʿa) along with the other captives returned to Karbala to perform *ziyārah* of the martyrs. The difference between reading these accounts and acting on them by being physically present in Karbala on the day of Arbaʿīn is the difference between theoretical and practical knowledge, the difference between knowing and doing. The annual commemoration of Arbaʿīn in Karbala is more than a mere page of recitation from the *Mafatīḥ al-Jinān*; it is an entire volume of sensory expressions of love for Imam Husayn (ʿa). Those who have been privileged to participate know and understand this. Those who have not yet had the opportunity to partake in this honor can only imagine. Arbaʿīn is a veritable journey of the heart that can be called the *miʿrāj*, or spiritual ascension, of a mourner.

Although I had already performed *ziyārah* in Iraq and had some idea of what to expect, Arbaʿīn was a *ziyārah* on an entirely different level. Upon arrival in Iraq, we were immediately faced with repeated delays, as though Allah (swt) wanted to further purify us, testing our patience and the extent of discomfort we were willing to embrace for the chance to kiss the shrine of our Imam (ʿa). No amount of research could prepare me for the sheer number of people gravitating toward the Prince of Martyrs—Sayyid al-Shuhadāʾ (ʿa)—for Arbaʿīn from all over the globe. We first went to Najaf to pledge our love and allegiance to the Commander of the Faithful, Imam ʿAli (ʿa). However, amid the millions of bodies and feet, finding even three square feet to pray was a struggle. This was not the leisurely *ziyārah* of my past; this was a glimpse of the future, of the Day of Judgment when everyone will be begging for Imam ʿAli's (ʿa) intercession in Allah's (swt) court. Acknowledging my own insignificance in the presence of the brother (ʿa) of the Best of Creation (ṣ) was at once awe-inspiring and ego-deflating, a necessary ablution for proceeding on this path.

Our few days in Najaf flew by, and the time came for shifting the qiblah of our hearts to Karbala, to Abū ʿAbd Allah al-Husayn (ʿa). I had heard tales of the miraculous nature of this walk, and as I set out to unearth its secret, I discovered it in plain sight. Everywhere I looked, I would see a manifestation of Love. Mourners of all ages and races marching to the same beat, the beat upon and within their hearts that throbbed the name "Husayn". The Iraqi hosts and their immeasurable hospitality, giving anything and everything without hesitation to the visitors of Imam Husayn (ʿa). Even the very dust at our feet

billowed and settled on our clothes, as though it too wanted to serve us, by covering us with that divinely-promised intercession for the sake of Imam Husayn (ʿa). I have never seen a love this tangible, pervading everything. Just as congregational prayers multiply the rewards of a single prayer, millions of souls ardently seeking a sole beloved multiplied the love exponentially, until it completely encompassed us in layers of brotherhood and security. We were not individuals on that Walk; we had merged into a single black-clad, moving mass that only knew Husayn and hastened towards him.

Walking 50 miles over two or three days affords plenty of time to reflect, and there is plenty to reflect upon. I was touched by the eagerness of young children, the elderly, and even the disabled to serve the pilgrims—echoes through time of the loyalty and passion for Imam Husayn (ʿa), first demonstrated by the elite 72. I was grieved to recall Lady Zaynab (ʿa) and the first pilgrims on this same path centuries ago, to compare the circumstances in which they traveled to the freedom and relative luxury of our wayfaring. I was humbled by the kindness of hosts, by the faith of strangers, by the ailing woman in a *mawkib* who painstakingly made her way to me, to plead for a prayer for her health, sincere in her belief that a sayyid's prayers held greater sway with Allah (swt). I was struck by the ubiquitous images of martyrs, taped on poles and pinned with pride to family members' bags—a distant possibility to those of us living in the West, but a definite reminder that every one of us will taste death; and blessed are those who will find it honey-sweet. And then there were the recurring reminders of Imam Mahdi (ʿa), the unseen imam of this mobile congregation. Many pilgrims wore signs pledging every one of their steps to his Reappearance. I have no doubt that these incalculable steps of millions did in fact move us closer to

the dawn of Reappearance. However, I felt ashamed to think of how little we are prepared, and how content we are with the darkness of the night. Just as out of love for Imam Husayn (ʿa), we took action and began walking towards him, getting closer and closer with each step, we need to do the same to affirm our love for Imam Mahdi (ʿa), and take active steps to move closer to him. The number of miles walked or poles crossed began to lose all meaning as I lost myself in the depths of this Walk.

Several prayers and reflections later, the moment came when we reached Karbala and beheld the glorious shrine of Abū al-Faḍl al-ʿAbbas (ʿa). The beauty of that moment is such that you forget all your blisters and cramps, and the tears you shed completely energize and revive you. Such is the suffusing strength of the Standard-Bearer (ʿa) that even Death is powerless to restrain it. Now that we were so close to our goal, I became restless to reach the shrine (*ḥaram*) of Imam Husayn (ʿa). After stopping briefly at the hotel to drop off my bag, I continued onwards to the *ḥaram* of Abū al-Faḍl al-ʿAbbas (ʿa). Unaccustomed to the physical exertion of the past couple days, I was audibly whimpering with every step my right leg took, but my ears could not hear because my heart's cry of "Labbayk Ya Husayn" was so much louder. I entered Abū al-Faḍl al-ʿAbbas' (ʿa) shrine in time for Fajr prayer. In this short prayer, we recited Duʿa al-Faraj three times—first between *aẓān* and *iqāmah*, then in *qunūt*, and after the final *salām*. As everyone chimed in the recitation, the words would reverberate throughout the *ḥaram*; it seemed as though Abū al-Faḍl al-ʿAbbas (ʿa) himself were exhorting us to always be faithful to the Imam of our time, just as he had been to the Imam of his time. I pledged my servitude and turned my broken heart and body to face the mecca of Karbala. Bayn al-Ḥaramayn was a black sea of tears, yet the Captain of Salvation (ʿa) who had been with me since I set off on this course expertly guided me into his shrine, to the winding, clamoring line which would ultimately lead to him. Minutes turned into an hour, and as the crowd inched forward, my mind raced backward with recollections of that tragic day. I desperately tried to gather my thoughts and prepare for the treasured few seconds I would be granted to connect with my beloved Imam (ʿa).

At last, that long-awaited moment arrived when I was finally pressed against the blessed *ḍarīḥ*. Gone from my mind were the lists of wishes and prayers for family and friends. Gone were the crowds crushing from all sides. At that final moment of union, it was only Imam Husayn (ʿa) and me, in the presence of Allah (swt), in heaven on earth. All my Muharrams had culminated in this honor, and then time stopped as I stood suspended between sorrow and hope. With my fingers laced in the *ḍarīḥ*, I looked up with blurred eyes into the glittering dome "under which answers to supplications are guaranteed," and called out aloud to Imam Mahdi (ʿa), begging Allah (swt) to hasten his return. The prayer ascended, and I was pulled away by the keepers of the shrine.

The physical journey came to an end, but this Arbaʿīn *ziyārah* continues to linger in my mind. I pray it stays with me for an eternity, because so long as the memory remains, the motivation for improving myself and performing greater acts of worship will also remain. Prophet Muhammad (ṣ) said, "Prayer is the *miʿrāj* of a believer." Through private conversation with our Creator (swt), we have the potential to elevate our worship and spiritual state. Likewise, for one who weeps over Imam Husayn (ʿa), visiting him on the day of Arbaʿīn has the potential to elevate our connection with him, and in turn raise our rank with Allah (swt). *Ziyārah* truly is a journey of love with the power to transform us, to polish us into a better version of ourselves, so that, upon our return, we can reflect the light of our Imams (ʿa) wherever

we go. However, other people's stories cannot do Arbaʿīn justice. This is a journey that everyone needs to make for themselves. May Allah accept our efforts and grant us the opportunity to visit those sacred lands and holy personalities (ʿa) time and time again.

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Islam's Sacred Story: A Contemporary Retelling-Part 2

This is the second installment of the two-part article by Syed Rizwan Zamir, which explores how Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi attempted to revive South Asian Shi'i Islam in the 20th century through the ethical and mytho-theological example of Imam Husayn. Here, we learn of Imam Husayn's role in the sacred and eternal story of Islam, a sacrifice that transforms not just Muslims and their moral consciousness, but indeed, all of humanity. The first part of the article may be accessed here.

PART II: A MYTHO-THEOLOGICAL UNIVERSE

The discussion thus far makes clear that Sayyid Naqvi approaches both Husaynology and the broader Islamic sacred history with the same interpretive lens. Yet the parallels between Sayyid Naqvi's Husaynology and his telling of Islam's sacred story do not end with *hermeneutical* similarities; quite crucially, they extend to the narrative itself, where, *narratively* speaking, Imam Husayn becomes a crucial figure within Islam's sacred history. This narrative intersection between Husaynology and Islam's sacred history is crucial to understanding why Imam Husayn is ascribed the all-important role of "illuminating Islam" for Sayyid Naqvi's contemporary Muslim and non-Muslim audience. Though not always made explicit, Husayn's heroic act is situated within an underlying mytho-theological story of Islam. I will now turn to situating Karbala and Imam Husayn within the broader narrative of Sayyid Naqvi's presentation of Islam's sacred story.

The Mythical Backdrop

History of Islam (*Tārīkh-i Islām*) covers the historical terrain that begins from "the beginning," and ends with the death of the Prophet. What is predominantly a work on the life of the Prophet opens with the creation story, under the section "Beginning of Creation" (*Āghāz-i āfarīnash*):

> Allah and Allah alone was there, and nothing else. By the gesture of His Will was born a *light* that illumined the possibilities of existence within the all-pervasive darkness of non-existence. *Thirteen other lights* were radiating in that luminous arena. In the rays of these lights that became the encompassing atmosphere, millions of small and big lights began tossing and rolling about restlessly [for expression]. There was no temporality for us to tell how long this lasted. Then, spirits were born, who, along with the lights, swept the breeze of life for all that was other than God. All beings with spirits, which were to be born till the day of Resurrection, were now gathered with their qualities of will and intelligence. The Creator then took a pledge from them regarding the knowledge of, and obedience to their Lord. They affirmed and covenanted the same. (1, emphasis added)

This mytho-theological story continues until the jinns, angels, and eventually Adam appear on the scene (4). Despite God's command, 'Azāzīl—a jinn who was accepted into the company of angels in Sayyid Naqvi's telling—refuses to prostrate to Adam, God's representative on Earth. He was banished from the company of angels, but asked for permission to explore the fate of humans and possibly mock God's claim of human superiority over angels. God responded: "You can strive your hardest but some sincere and virtuous humans will live such that they will not succumb to your instigations, and will not deviate

from the path of truth and virtue."(4)((Here Sayyid Naqvi is referring most probably to Qurʾan, *al-Isrāʾ* (17):64-65: "Rouse whichever of them you can with your voice, muster your cavalry and infantry against them, share their wealth and their children with them, and make promises to them—Satan promises them nothing but delusion—but you will have no authority over My [true] servants: Your Lord can take care of them well enough.")) Humanity until today then is caught between upholding God's covenant and the machinations of ʿAzāzīl, now Satan.

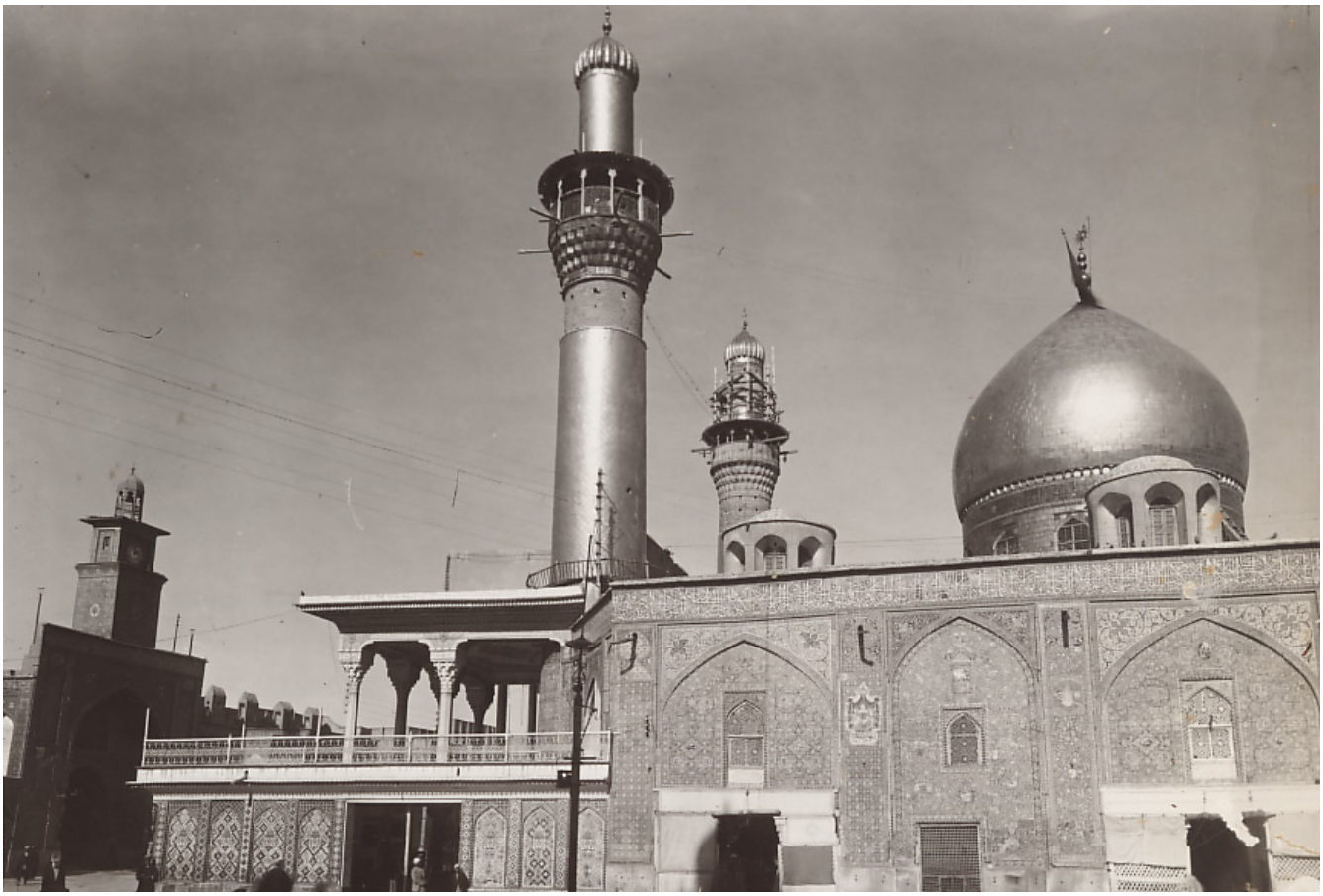
Eve is born as Adam's mate, and together Adam and Eve inhabit the Garden. Eve was tempted by Satan, who in turn convinced Adam to taste the fruit of the forbidden tree. Adam and Eve were banished to Earth—where they had to reside anyway—and regretted and repented for their disobedience. Their repentance was accepted. Now it was their task to cultivate the Earth into a dwelling place through having progeny. God granted Adam knowledge of all that was necessary for sagacious living. Since marriage among brothers and sisters needed to be prohibited, houris descended from Heaven for that purpose. Seth became the successor of Adam's mission on earth, while the story of Cain and Abel—the other two sons—is presented as the archetypal story of humanity caught between the forces of light and darkness. (5-6)

> …[A] historical lens cannot really carry the burden of the subtleties of reality's depth. The reality which is called "Islam" has always existed…

At this junction, Sayyid Naqvi makes a statement that is key to his discussion. He introduces Islam as the perennial religion in the following words:

> The message Adam brought was indeed *Islam*; teachings given by Noah were also *Islam*. Similarly, all God-sent messengers and prophets were missionaries of *Islam*. From this perspective, the biographies of Adam, Noah, and other prophets are all part of the history of Islam. However, a historical lens cannot really carry the burden of the subtleties of reality's depth. The reality which is called "Islam" has always existed, but it was not given the terminological name "Islam" [as yet]. We learn from the Glorious Qurʾan that the term Islam began from the time of the revered Abraham. As mentioned in the Qurʾanic verse, "Strive hard for God as is His due: He has chosen you and placed no hardship in your religion, the faith of your forefather Abraham. God has called you Muslims—both in the past and in this [message]—so that the Messenger can bear witness about you and so that you can bear witness about other people" (*al-Ḥajj* (22):78), he was the elderly sage who named the followers of this religion "Muslim". The first ones to be named with this title were Abraham and his son Ishmael, and they prayed to God to keep this title alive for their progeny (*al-Baqarah* (2):127-128): "As Abraham and Ishmael built up the foundations of the House [they prayed], 'Our Lord, accept [this] from us. You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.[128] Our Lord, make us surrender ourselves to You; make our descendants into a nation which surrenders itself to You.

Show us how to worship and accept our repentance, for You are the Ever-Relenting, the Most Merciful." It clarifies then that the progeny of Abraham that descended from Ishmael and followed the correct religion can be considered followers of the religion of Islam. It is because it is the religion of their great patriarch [i.e., Abraham], the perpetuation of which through his shared progeny with Ishmael they had prayed. Therefore, the religions of Judaism and Christianity that were established within the progeny of Isaac during the intervening [period] were unique to the Israelites; they were not for the children of Ishmael. The religion for the progeny of Ishmael was the same Abrahamic religion that was titled a "nation of *ḥanīfiyyah*" or Islam, and which according to the Qurʾan was a competitor to Judaism, Christianity and idolatry: (Qurʾan, *Āl ʿImrān* (3):67) "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian. He was Muslim *ḥanīf*, never an idolater." (7-8)



The next section is titled "Abraham the Friend of God and His Islamic [Heroic] Deeds (*kārnāmay*)," where Abraham is recounted heroically fighting three battles: 1) against idolatry; 2) against the worship of celestial objects, idols, and humans—i.e., worshipping Nimrod—; and 3) his personal sacrifice and willingness to die as the "first one offered to Islam." (8-13) Given the special destiny of Abraham in the Divine plan, "In the end, He protected Abraham and his martyrdom did not occur." (13) Yet these heroic deeds did not lead to faith for the community, and when all levels of arguments did not overcome

unbelief, “The missionary of Islam chose emigration so that other parts of God’s Earth can be illuminated with the invitation to truth. There were only two people of faith who accompanied him: one his honored wife, Sarah, and the other his nephew, Lot.”((He cites Qurʾan, *al-ʿAnkabūt* (29):26 here: “Lot believed him, and said, ‘I will flee to my Lord: He is the Almighty, the All Wise.”)) Arriving in Syria from Babylon as “the first emigrants of Islam,” they settled in Palestine. Lot was called to preach to Jordan, but yet again, “The only answer his people gave was to say, ‘Expel Lot’s family from your town, for these are a people determined to be pure.’” (Qurʾan, *al-Naml* (27):56) And they were driven out: “These are the earlier traces (*nuqūsh*) of Islamic history that have turned events of affliction (*maṣāʾib*), pain (*takālīf*), torment [from others], homelessness, and exile, into the treasured beginnings of Islam.((As the reader may have noticed, this is the context for the quote cited earlier in this essay.)) While Lot’s community was punished, except for Lot’s wife, his family was saved: “His wife, who was exempt of qualities of faith and virtue was separated from him and met with divine punishment. A lesson to ponder, O people of insight.”((See Qurʾan, *al-Ḥashr* (59):2, a clear evidence again for Sayyid Naqvi’s underlying ethical aims for his historical pursuits.)) (15)

The story then takes a turn from battling the world to an inward family battle. With growing age and no children, Sarah herself suggests marriage with Hagar; yet with the birth of Ishmael—and Abraham’s natural affection for Hagar for that reason—Sarah wished both to be taken away from her presence.

> Veiled behind [this family crisis], Divine wisdom saw an opportunity for a huge nation, a great country, nay, the establishment of a center for the worlds. That is why He appointed His friend [i.e., Abraham] to act upon Sarah’s insistence and take Hagar and their son outside Syria. [Imagine] the land of Palestine and that of Mecca. The guidance of the same Supreme Guide that had brought the friend [i.e., Abraham] this far, brought him to a place where there was no fountain, no greenery, no agriculture, where he left his wife, who trusted fully in God, and her suckling child without any ostensible means of support and returned to Syria (17).

At this stage, he recounts the legendary thirst of Ishmael and Hagar’s seven rounds of running between hillocks of Safa and Marwa in search of water, and the miraculous gushing of the stream of Zamzam. Echoing the same ethos of Islam that set the stage earlier, he sums up in a nutshell the deeper currents that define and make sense of the historical unfolding of Islam as the perennial religion:

> This was the foundation of Islam’s center in whose account helplessness, exile, emigration, hunger, and thirst are clearly perceptible. The same intensity and pain would become the preamble for the happiness and prosperity (*farrākhī wa khush ḥālī*) that was to come. “So truly with hardship comes ease, so truly with hardship comes ease.”((Qurʾan, *al-Sharḥ* (94):6.)) (17)

> The sole purpose of appointing prophets, messengers, and religious leaders is to offer its lofty illustrations [of sacrifice].

The next section recounts the well-known sacrifice of Ishmael. That the memory of this event was kept alive ritually and communally both in the pre-Muhammadan and Muhammadan eras are presented as confirmation of why it was Ishmael, and not Isaac—as the Jews and Christians claim. The episode is discussed at some length, and as usual various ethical and theological points are highlighted all along. For the purposes of this discussion, what's most significant is the concluding passage((Why this passage is so significant should become clear in the ensuing pages.)):

> "Thus, do We reward the virtuous"((Qurʾan, *al-Ṣāffāt* (37):106.)) is a proclamation of a general principle that our complete order [of creation] is linked through sacrifices; the right to rewards for accomplishing high ideals and for winning God's pleasure is proportionate to the amount of sacrifice made. "That was indeed a conspicuous ordeal. And We ransomed him with a mighty sacrifice."((Qurʾan, *al-Ṣāffāt* (37):107-8.)) In fact, all commandments, callings, and the entire code of religious conduct rest on demanding sacrifice from humanity. The sole purpose of appointing prophets, messengers, and religious leaders is to offer its lofty illustrations [of sacrifice]. If Ishmael's sacrifice had been the supreme model of sacrifice before God, it would not have been postponed, nor would it need the substitution [of a lamb]. But because in the Divine knowledge the most perfect and complete sacrifice was yet to come from within Ishmael's progeny (had Ishmael's sacrifice assumed finality, the lineage that was [destined] to set in order the complete history of sacrifices would not have existed) in view of the "Greater Sacrifice" it was thought proper by the Creator to postpone Ishmael's sacrifice through substitution. (21)

The ensuing section, "Construction of the Kaʿbah," then discusses Abraham and Ishmael's collaborative building of Islam's Holy Temple. Citing the Qurʾanic passage, "the first House erected for people was the one at Bakka, a blessed spot and guidance for the worlds (*hudan li-l-ʿālamīn*),"((Qurʾan, *Āl ʿImrān* (3):96.)) Sayyid Naqvi notes that "to call 'House', a 'guide for the worlds' indicates the existence of some [beings] who are of this House (*ahl al-bayt*—the People of the House) who shall be the source of Divine mercy and guidance for the worlds. The most perfect among them was spoken to [by God in the following words]: 'We sent you [O Muhammad] not, but as mercy to the worlds.'"((Qurʾan, *al-Anbiyāʾ* (21):107.)) (22)

God commands Abraham to invite people to the pilgrimage. Instituting the Hajj as his final act, Abraham leaves the scene for his progeny to carry his mission forward. Rewarding Abraham's tireless strivings and special prayer ("Our Lord, I have settled some of my progeny in a valley where no vegetation grows, near your Sacred House, our Lord, that they may perform the prayers. Make people's hearts turn toward them."((Qurʾan, *Ibrāhīm* (14):37.))) God declares the Sacred House the center of pilgrimage for all, as a means to the end of turning "people's heart toward Abraham's progeny." (23)

Beginning from page 24, Sayyid Naqvi traces the Prophet's Ishmaelite lineage. In the process he underlines *a special role* for this lineage, "the guardianship of the Sacred House," (34-5) and certain *duties*: to never accept an idle life; avoid discord within the community; and "to the furthest extent, be strivers on the path toward unity and accord." (32-33) In tracing the lineage, only one historical event is narrated at length: the event of the Elephant. Abraha—the monarch of Yemen—built a cathedral which he sought to make the center for pilgrimage that will replace the Sacred House in Mecca, which he then sought to raze to the ground. When Abraha's army detained his camels, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib complained to Abraha. Abraha's army mocked him for being worried about camels, when he should have been more worried about the Sacred House from which Quraysh drew all of its honor. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib responded in the following words: "I was the owner of the camels, so I spoke about them; the House belongs to Someone Else who will protect it Himself." (39) Asking all to move outside Mecca, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, along with his chosen people spoke to God at the Sacred House: "Everyone must defend his house, so must You." (39) Leaving the Sacred House in His Owner's hands, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib awaited the outcome. The Owner of the House intervened through miraculous feathered flocks, "hurling at the army stones from the hell-fire and left them like worm-eaten leaves."((Qurʾan, *al-Fīl* (105).)) The event became legendary among the poets of Arabia who kept its memory alive. In one confrontation and opposition with Quraysh, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib felt helpless and prayed for being gifted ten sons, and if heard, he pledged to sacrifice one. The prayer was heard, and he remembered the burdensome task of offering one of his sons as a sacrifice. Lots were cast and it turned out to be ʿAbd Allah, the father of Muhammad. People advised him to sacrifice camels instead. He kept casting lots with ten camels added to the offering, and only at a hundred was the burden lifted from him.

This mytho-theological prelude to the "history of Islam" told in the first 41 pages sets the stage for the coming of the Prophet of Islam and his prophetic career. Inevitably, the Prophet Muhammad is carrying forward—according to the Divine plan—the unique mission of his patriarch, Abraham. The next 500 pages are then the telling of Muhammad's life till his departure from the world. Without this grand narrative within which is embedded all that Muhammad is supposed to perform in his role and function, his life and prophetic career would barely make sense. It was Muhammad's inescapable burden to carry forward the *special role and duties* of his Ishmaelite lineage.

Is the History of Islam "Historical"? The Hermeneutical Circle of Mytho-Theology, History, and Ethics

So what kind of historian is Sayyid Naqvi, and what kind of history is he writing? The discussion thus far makes it clear that Sayyid Naqvi's historical narrative is embedded within a mytho-theological universe, in other words, the mytho-theological universe of Shiʿi Islam. Since for Sayyid Naqvi—and the wider Muslim tradition as well—Islam is a perennial religion (in fact, the only religion according to the Qurʾan) an account of Islamic history could not begin with the Prophet of Islam in the 7th century, but with "the

beginning", the creation story. That is why early sections of the book trace Islamic history from creation to Adam, from Adam to Abraham, and then, Abraham through to the Prophet of Islam. Jewish and Christian prophets and revelations are, therefore, an integral part of this story. Although humans do make choices in history that have good or bad consequences, history is not independent of the Divine Plan. Recall Sayyid Naqvi's observation that, "Divine wisdom saw an opportunity for a huge nation;" Abraham was needed to execute the Divine plan. History does not operate independent of the Divine Will, a clear indication of the mytho-theological universe that is driving the lens of history.

Just as the ethical is intertwined with the historical, the historical in turn is intertwined with the mytho-theological. History as "narration of what happened at a given moment in historical time" is thus embedded within a "sacred mythology" that sets the backdrop for the *meaning* of these events. Mytho-theology and history thus meet within an interpretive circle which makes it impossible to separate them, or point out a clear hierarchy between the two. Even when he seemed to be historicizing mythology—and ran into serious controversies—the historical analysis was an extension of this mytho-theology that undergirds the vision of history itself.

> History does not operate independent of the Divine Will, a clear indication of the mytho-theological universe that is driving the lens of history.

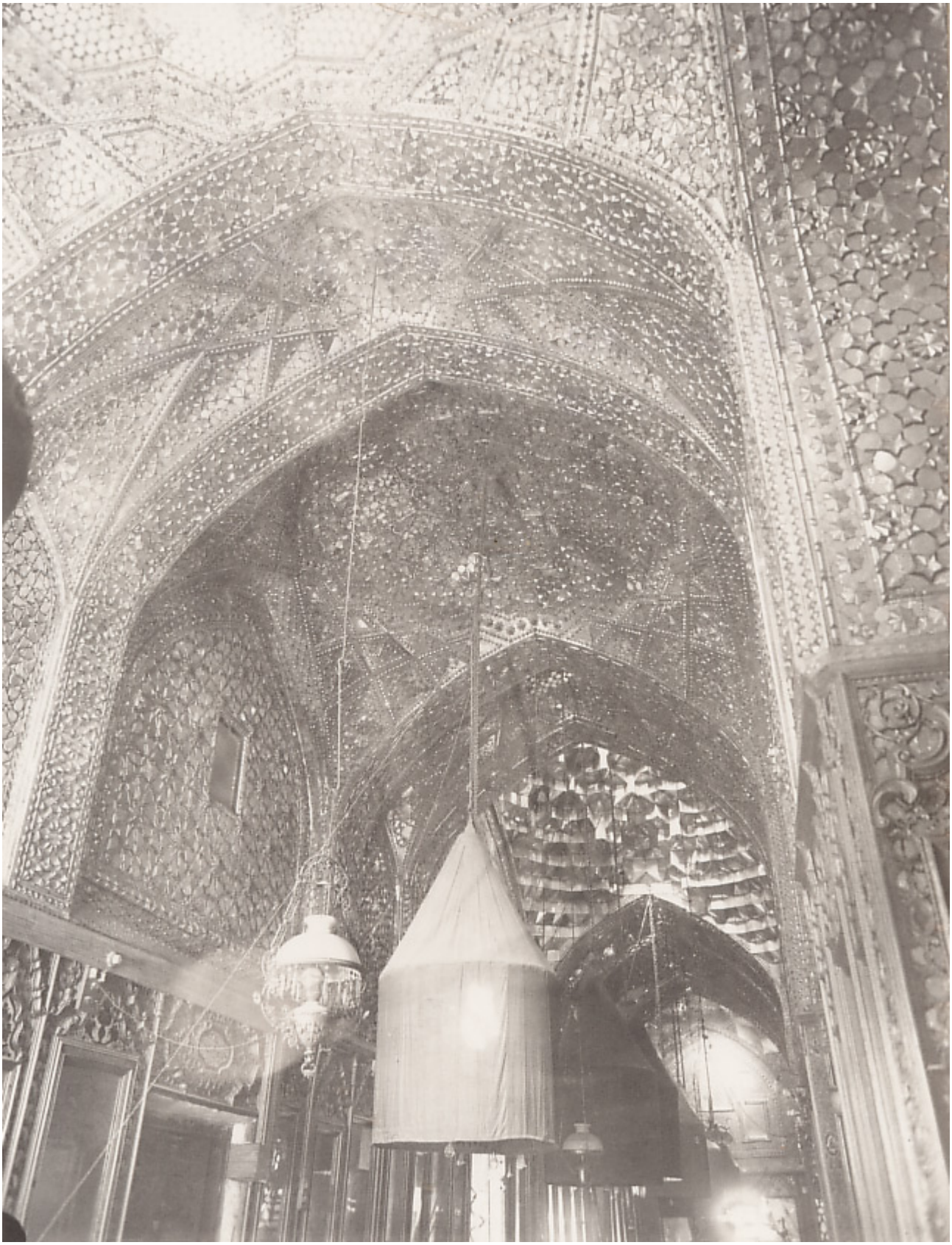
But what is the meaning of history, of this sacred story? What is this story about? The answers are found right within Sayyid Naqvi's writings and speeches on Husaynology and Islam's sacred story; it is performed on almost every page. The meaning is the lessons learned from the story. *Meaning is ethical*. It is an ethical story, and that of an ethical human life. The mytho-theological, historical, and the ethical are clearly *intertwined* and *united*. Yet, this strong sense of the underlying unity of Islam's historical narrative is a result, not of historical analysis itself, but the mytho-theological framework that sets its backdrop.

In the final analysis, the interpretive circle encompasses within it the ethical, historical, and the mythological. Though a rational and critical lens is brought to particular historical details all throughout, the exercise in history draws its own vision and *raison d'etre* from the mytho-theological, and is simultaneously guided—and restricted too—by the quest for the ethical. In sum, the intellectual enterprise of "history" as narration of "what happened" is informed by the mytho-theological story that makes history possible on the one hand, and on the other, by its intended goal: the ethical well-being of human beings and human societies. In support of this reading, *Islām kī Ḥakīmānah Zindagī* provides an even more elaborate comment:

> In reality, if we are commanded to cry and mourn, and the best of rewards are reserved for it, it is because when we consider these rewards, then we will be willing to reflect on the [various] situations (*ḥālāt*), and it will impact our actions. *If through [mourning this] calamity, the event was not given this importance, then like every other incident of history this event would have as well been limited to history books; that every child of ours knows this event*

> *would not have been possible. And we were not even familiar with it, how could we have gained any lesson from it?* This calling [of Karbala]—from calamity to mourning and practical impact—necessitated by nature, was to institute this [practice] so that the event is not forgotten, the real benefits of the event are preserved and the real objective of the event is established (*qā'im rahay*).((Interestingly, the words in italics appear in *Shahīd-i Insānīyat*, p. 584 as well.)) Even the minutest details of the incident of Karbala are exemplary in teaching Islam. Every action has a dimension of education in it. The incident of Karbala, despite its brevity in terms of time [in which it occurred], was the center of the core teachings of Islam. Teaching of every practical subject—from the rights of God (*ḥuqūq Allāh*), to the rights of [fellow] human beings (*ḥuqūq al-nās*), relating to the character-formation of a family (*tarbīyat-i manzil*), the criterion of governance and rule, culture, an individual or society's life, with respect to the conditions of love; in sum, all moral, conceptual, and practical teachings—are contained within Karbala. That is why even the minute details of the incident carry such importance that they need to be conveyed to us… (*Islam kī Ḥakīmānah Zindagī*, 67-8, italics added)

Altogether then, the exercise in historical research is about preserving stories that are worth reflecting over. Why preserve the story of Husayn? Why tell it? So the human beings could live a virtuous life and form virtuous communities. If that is not the intent, why bother!



In concluding the discussion, one more point needs to be highlighted: The question of the sources of the mytho-theological-historical story. In Sayyid Naqvi's telling, accounts from past historians such as al-

Ṭabarī are intertwined with the ultimate source of Islam's story: the Qurʾan. We have seen examples of how the Qurʾan is employed again and again to buttress claims about pre-Islamic history, and the word "Islam" is extended to all the previous prophets. Reason sifts through these accounts, probes them, tries to understand them, collaborates in telling them, accounts for contradictions; yet it takes the previous and scriptural tellings seriously. The trust put in the authority of the various versions is related quite directly to the mytho-theological framework itself.((The role of reason in both experiencing, telling, and navigating this story, although significant, remains beyond the scope of this paper.)) That is why to the extent the Qurʾan tells the details, or the plot, it is invoked as the *definitive* account.

Husayn's Place within Islam's Sacred Story

So where is Husayn located in this grand narrative? Since both strands (*History of Islam* and Husaynology) originate from the same theological vision, *History of Islam* provides important keys to understand Sayyid Naqvi's writings on Husaynology. Whereas the particular Shiʿi mytho-theological backdrop was often invoked in his discussion of the various aspects of Husaynology, it largely remained scattered, and was hardly ever presented systematically. *History of Islam* fills in this lacuna and clarifies the underlying mytho-theological story fully, embracing both the sacred prophetic history and the place of Husayn in it.

From within the sacred story, Husayn can be discovered first right at "the beginning of it all," and then as a successor to the Ishmaelite lineage with all its glory and burdens. In other words, Husayn appears in two-ways:

2. In reference to thirteen lights (see above) right at the origins of all things. In the mytho-theology of Shiʿi Islam, the first light is the Muhammadan light, and the rest of the thirteen lights, of Fatima and the twelve Shiʿi Imams; together the Fourteen Pure Ones. (Husayn is the third Shiʿi Imam.)
4. As inheritor of the Ishmaelite lineage, its nobility,((In Shahīd-i Insāniyat [Martyr of Humanity], Sayyid Naqvi enumerates nine unique points that make this family special in their nobility and honor. See pages 36-37.)) duties,((The reader may recall the discussion of these duties earlier in this essay.)) but most crucially, the special role((The roles inherited from Abraham would include: the guardianship of the Sacred House, propagation of the primordial religion of Islam, and readiness to sacrifice all that is necessary in fulfilling the Divine call.)) this lineage has within the Divine script.

Yet that is not all. Within this sacred story, there is a lingering unfinished plot. Recall his comments: "If Ishmael's sacrifice had been the supreme model of sacrifice before God, it would not have been postponed, nor would it need substitution [of a lamb]. In Divine knowledge, the most perfect and complete sacrifice was yet to come from within Ishmael's progeny." As the new Ishmael,((And as carrier of the mantle of his forefathers, he is the also the new Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Jesus, and Muhammad.)) Husayn comes on to the scene to offer the most perfect and complete sacrifice.

There is even more. I have had the occasion to point out Sayyid Naqvi's critical hermeneutical move of plotting the ethical side-by-side with the historical, and his hierarchic view of the virtues. Recall also his categorical statement about ethical life: "In fact, all commandments, callings, and the entire code of religious conduct rest on demanding sacrifice from humanity, and the sole purpose of appointing prophets, messengers, and religious leaders is to offer its lofty illustrations." Sacrifice thus becomes the highest ideal of virtuous life. If sacrifice is the highest ideal, then the one enacting "the most perfect and complete sacrifice" becomes the supreme exemplar for a virtue-seeking community. Carrying the mantle of his sacred lineage and covering the expanse of a huge flow of time, this luminous being from among the fourteen lights in "the beginning" appears onto the plains of human history towards its end, and offers the utmost and final example for the most virtuous ideal of sacrifice. He becomes thus the *decisive hero* of Islam's sacred story. (The sacred story of Islam of course does not end here. No Shiʿi mytho-theology is complete without the final act of the "Awaited One", the messianic savior, the Mahdi.)

> If sacrifice is the highest ideal, then the one enacting "the most perfect and complete sacrifice" becomes the supreme exemplar for a virtue-seeking community.

In understanding why in *Illuminating Islam* there could not be a better historical reference than Husayn—the opening quote of this essay—we have had to cover a lot of ground. It is time to forestall a potential misunderstanding. Given the context of modernity and crisis of religion that led to the re-imagining of Islamic tradition on the part of Sayyid Naqvi—a problem most Muslim scholars and thinkers of the last two hundred years have had to grapple with—can *Illuminating Islam* be construed as "apologetic", an attempt to defend Islam in the face of criticisms from within and without the tradition?

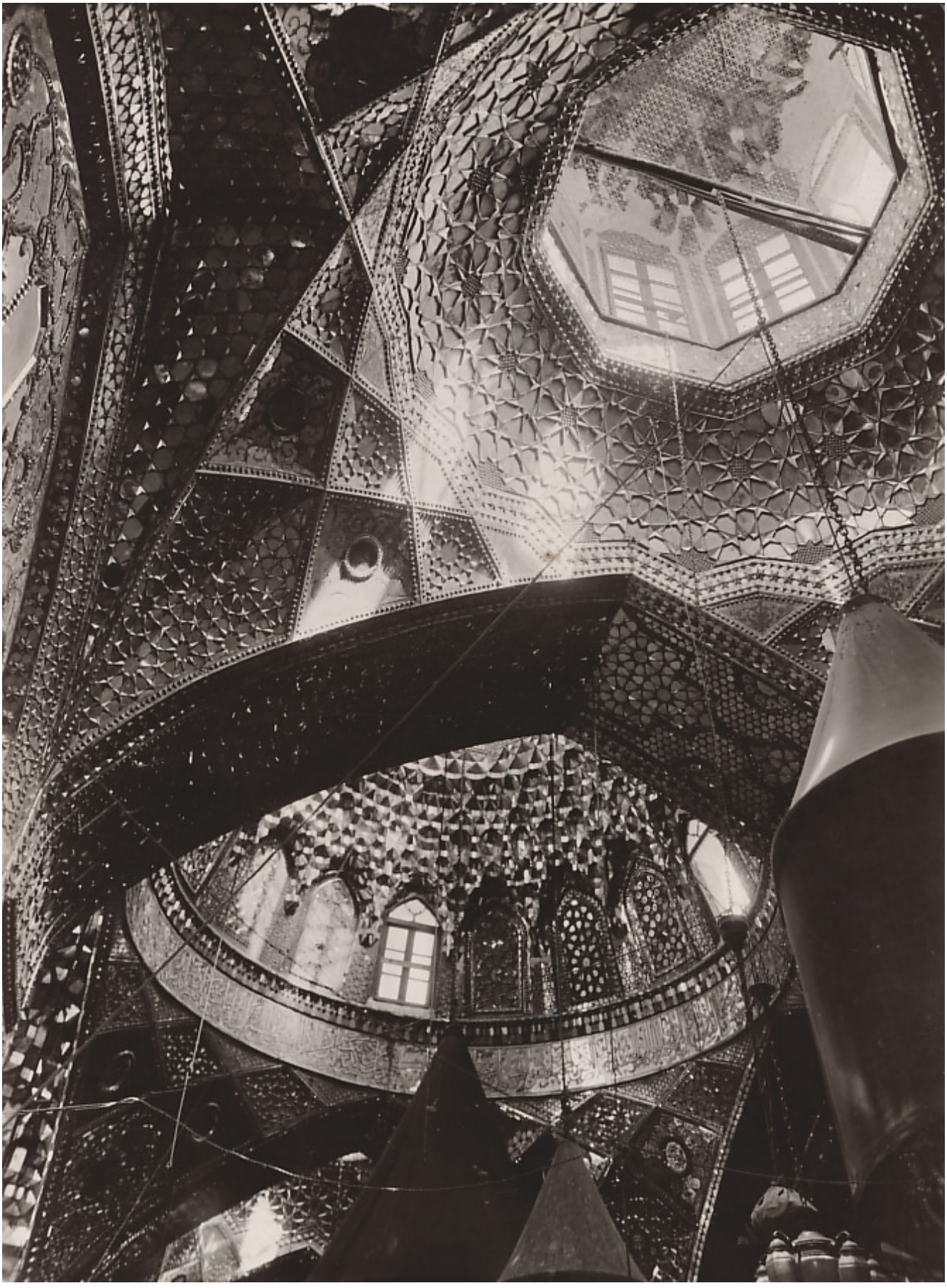
A gentle "yes", but a much stronger "no" in response! Unless our author has managed to fool us completely, the mytho-theological underpinnings and its accompanying ethical intent imply that this concern can be gauged through the same interpretive circle. Without delving too deeply into the question—the lack of space prevents that—I refer you to Sayyid Naqvi's statement regarding why Islam needs to be protected as a religious tradition: "If there is a religion [i.e., Islam], which with respect to its teachings is a supporter of peace and harmony, and of generating a milieu of tranquility and concord, then such a religion deserves to be preserved for renovation (*iṣlāḥ*) of the world." (200)((*Lā Tufsidū fī al-Arḍ*.)) If the thrust of Islam's mytho-theology is ethical, the thrust of Islam is ethical as well. Since in its encompassing Islam stretches both within space and time (and beyond both as well!), and because it is simultaneously perennial and global, the concern to protect Islam is an ethical concern. In other words, to protect Islam as a religious tradition is to protect the possibility of virtuous life for humanity. In sum, Sayyid Naqvi's concern for defending Islam is not apologetic; it is again ethical:

> The importance given to the event of Karbala is not because these people were related to the Prophet. In fact, it is because the person killed by the sword of Muslims was the true embodiment of Islam. The propagation of this event is also not necessary simply because it was a heartrending calamity that needs to be remembered, but rather to underscore for us the goal for which these calamities were endured. Without doubt, crying for Husayn is perpetual

> worship and a cause for God's pleasure. *But the real aim of Islam is our practical rectitude*. If we have forgotten this aim today—or fail to even consider it—then it is not Islam's fault. (69-70, emphasis added)((*Islām kī Ḥakīmānah Zindagī* (Lucknow: Imamiya Mission Hind, n.d.).))

Just as they intersect in narrative, ethical thrust, and message, the mission of Husayn and that of Islam profoundly intersect. Just as Islam is perennial and universal, Husayn as its ultimate hero is too. That is why Sayyid Naqvi prescribes, not just to Muslims but even non-Muslims who were familiar with the Karbala episode, to reflect on that episode and derive moral and social implications from it. In *Ḥusayn kā Payghām ʿĀlam-i Insāniyyat kay Nām* [Ḥusayn's Message to Global Humanity] Sayyid Naqvi invokes the voice of Imam Husayn speaking to his non-Muslim audience as follows:

> You who celebrate my commemoration and revive my remembrance: its outcome should also be that you are aware of my goal. Strive to follow this [goal] in your practice. Remember! I do not belong to any particular group. Only the one who reflects on my principles and perspective, and learns its lessons could benefit from me. (24)



Seen from the mytho-theological lens and the hermeneutical circle it becomes clear that while the universality of Husayn's message can serve numerous other purposes, for example, demonstrating the truth of Islam to the modern world, these concerns could only be peripheral. But a more significant task faced Muslims: "the real struggle for rectification (*iṣlāḥ*) will be the spreading (*tarwīj*) of the teachings of the [Islamic] religion and the attempt to turn people into its adherents."((*Lā Tufsidū fī al-Arḍ*, 201.)) In the task of spreading "the ethical vision of Islam" and winning more adherents, Sayyid Naqvi finds Husayn, and his heroic act at Karbala the best resource. Humanity needed to be invited to Islam through introduction to its ultimate hero. Notice the title and opening passage from the treatise *Husayn's Message to Global Humanity*((*Ḥusayn kā Payghām-i ʿĀlam-i Insāniyyat kay Nām* (Lucknow: Sarfarāz Qawmī Press, 1959).)):

> Listen carefully! The voice of the innocent martyr of Karbala is reverberating in the air. "O those who dwell in my Lord's spacious earth…I do not call upon you by your sectarian and communal names. Your opposition dissolves because of your sympathy for my immense humanity and your lamenting my being greatly oppressed, just as rivers and cascades lose their anxiety and restlessness in the serene ocean. I invite you all to come and learn who I was and why I stood up. (3)((Also see "*Ḥusayn awr Islām*" in *Nigārshāt-i Sayyid al-ʿUlamāʾ* (Lahore: Imamiya Mission Pakistan Trust, 1997), another text which introduces Husayn's life and mission at Karbala in a similar fashion. See pp. 153-180.))

An interesting short treatise in this regard is "What does Commemorating Husayn Demand from Free India?"(("*Ḥusayn kī Yād kā Āzād Hindūstān say Muṭālbah*," (Lucknow: Sarfaraz Qawmi Press, 1950).)) He critiques the post-Christian Western obsession with materialist power, an obsession which was a consequence of the underlying materialistic worldview (*mādda parastī*) that had come to dominate Western thought and culture. In his view, this materialistic worldview had led Western writers to study Islam's political history from the point of view of only those who appear to be "the conquerors", regardless of the ethical-spiritual criteria of these conquests. That is why, says Sayyid Naqvi, the Karbala episode has altogether been ignored by such writers and thinkers. He contrasts this view with Eastern or Indian spirituality which sees warfare from a spiritual point of view, and therefore has always appreciated the endeavor of Husayn as witnessed in the writings and sayings of major Indian leaders and intellectuals such as Gandhi and Nehru, among others. In conclusion, Sayyid Naqvi notes that:

> This proclamation needs to be brought into the limelight in "secular" (*ghayr madhhabī*) India, for even when being "secular", the people of India cannot step out of their [particular] sect and regional community (*qawm*). This sacrifice [of Husayn] is guidance for every sect and regional community. That is why the commemoration of the sacrifice of Husayn ibn ʿAli can make claims on free India akin to those made by every sect and regional community. (10)

> The supreme martyr-hero of Islam had transitioned into becoming the martyr par excellence of humanity.

By the time Sayyid Naqvi puts together his *magnum opus Shahid-i Insānīyat* [Martyr of Humanity] on Husayn, the supreme martyr-hero of Islam had transitioned into becoming the *martyr par excellence of humanity*—the title of Sayyid Naqvi's definitive biography of Husayn. The mytho-theological story of Islam and Husayn with its full thrust toward the ethical was now re-imagined in a global modern context, and an exceptional figure of human history was universalized to become the martyr *par excellence* of global humanity:

> Although from the point of view of its occurrence, every event of the world is related to a particular land, a particular community, and a particular class (*ṭabaqah*)—[and] from this angle the incident of Karbala is also [related to the] land of Iraq, country of Arabs, family of Hāshim, and the community of Muslims—but events gain universality and depth through attributes and outcomes that relate to the whole of humanity [transcending] the distinctions of religion, race, or nation. If seen from this point of view, the incident of Karbala from multiple viewpoints is the focal point of the whole of humanity. (26) First, hatred of the oppressor and sympathy for the oppressed is part of human nature…Although numerous prophets and [God's] friends suffered oppression in the hands of worldly people—indeed, many innocent people were killed or imprisoned, and (their property) plundered—but overall, those hardships that each of them had to face individually were combined in the personality of Imam Ḥusayn (peace be upon him). That they gathered in him simultaneously [means that] the oppression he suffered was unique in its example.
>
> Second, his oppression was not the oppression of someone who was helpless; it is not, for example, like someone who is attacked by a robber, robbed of everything, and then murdered. This person is also oppressed (*maẓlūm*) and would also draw sympathy. But this oppression is not volitional. There is also no act associated with it that is praiseworthy from the moral point of view. Imam Husayn's oppression is not of this kind. He bore all these adversities to support a righteous cause and in preservation of a principled stance. This is sacrifice.
>
> Third, his sacrifice did not have an aim that was contestable from the point of view of other religions. Human morality and attributes have a station upon which all religions come to agree. The true foundation of all religions—upon which they have been erected—is to raise human morality to its [highest] limits. It is a different matter for the temporal differences [among these religions] to lead to some variations in certain injunctions, or for the principles of some religions to be increased or reduced due to later generations' misunderstandings. But the real axis [of all religions] is morality and the perfection of humanity. The aim of Imam Husayn was this shared point of view…

> Fourth, examples of diverse ethical and [human] attributes presented by Imam Husayn and his companions at Karbala are such that all members of humanity can benefit from those examples. This is the reason why despite mutual differences and emotional struggle the world has come to a consensus (*yagāngī*) about Karbala: nations of the world have all equally accepted its importance. Even after the passing of hundreds of years of this important incident, their interest in it has stayed, and has at times grown. (26-8)((*Shahīd-i Insānīyat.*))

> …[B]ut events gain universality and depth through attributes and outcomes that relate to the whole of humanity [transcending] the distinctions of religion, race, or nation.

Sayyid Naqvi is convinced that the one who appears on the pages of history seemingly leading a political revolution against a mighty ruler is in fact driving a revolution of an entirely different order. He wants the human community of the world to recognize that unlike other revolutions, Husayn did not seek the destruction of an empire; instead his sacrifice was for the cause of sculpting the moral and intellectual consciousness of humanity:

> The goal of Imam Husayn—as discussed in this book on various occasion—was not to destroy Yazīd ibn Muʿāwiyah's government in direct material ways. If this is what he had intended, he should have employed material ways, and would have gathered military power around him. Instead, he struggled for [the sake of] a true intellectual revolution. Obviously, military power and the sword can cut human bodies to pieces, but it cannot change the mindset of people. Therefore, he did not pay any attention to that: His sole objective was to change the mindset.
>
> The true and eternal benefit of the incident of Karbala is quite different from the reactionary, material revolutions and vengeful results that occurred during that period. Rather, they are related to that moral force which is the true guarantor of the right restoration and guidance of humankind's mentality. (536)((*Shahīd-i Insānīyat.*))

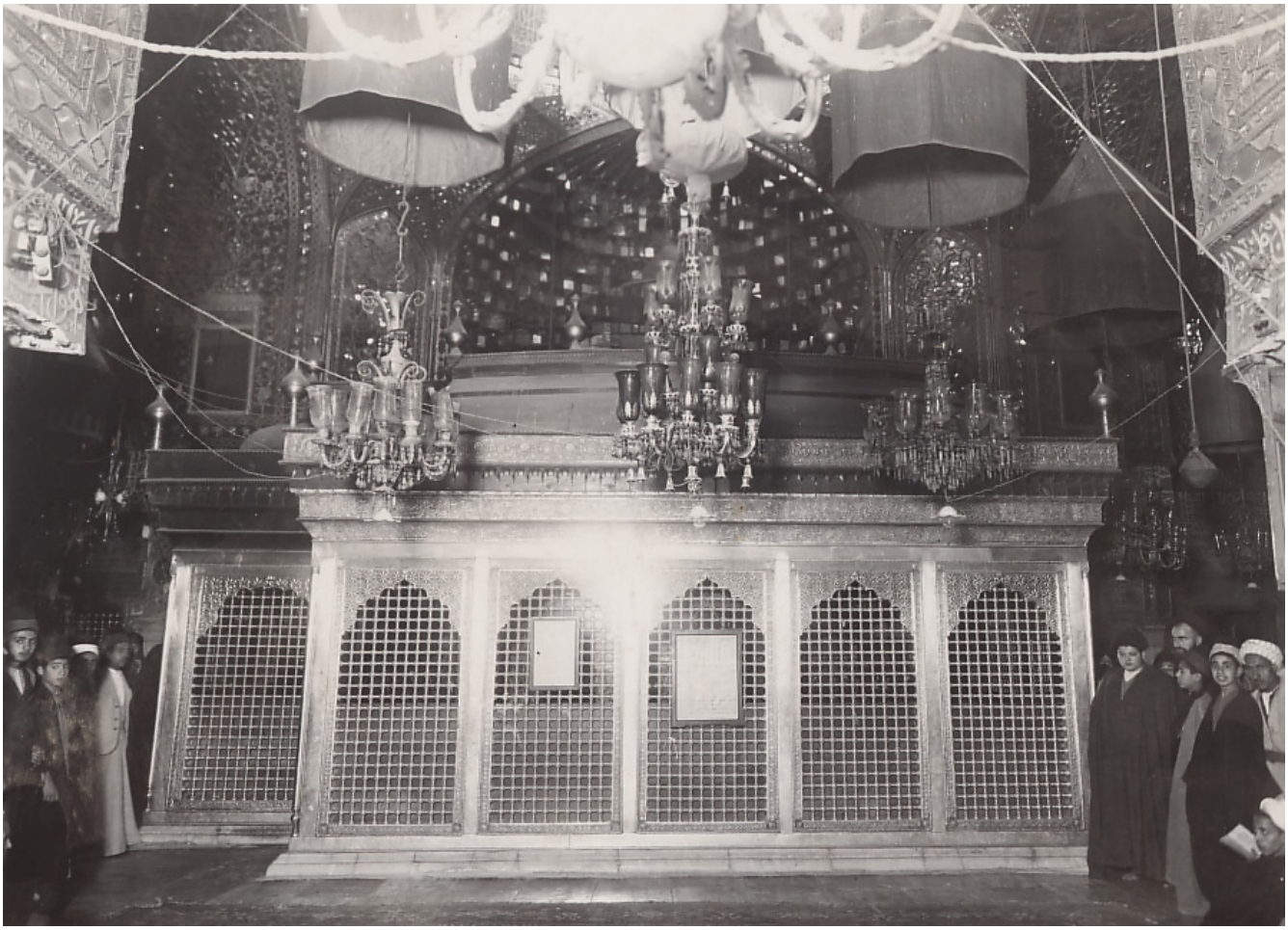
When recognized from within Islam's sacred story, Imam Husayn carries the noblest prophetic lineage and ancestral duties that come with it. He is the new Ishmael who has come to offer, willingly and with patience and gratitude, the most complete and perfect sacrifice. Above all, he is a light among the fourteen primordial lights that came to not only illuminate Islam, but also to illuminate through Islam's rays the ethical and moral norms for all of humanity. And that is precisely why he needs to be shared with the global human community, not just as hero of Islam, but that of humanity.

> To restrict the personality of Imam Husayn and his immortal feat (*kārnāmah-i*

> *jāwīd*)—with all the graces and blessings [that pour from it]—to a single group is against the spirit of Islam, [the spirit] that underlies calling the Creator of the universe "Lord of the worlds" (*rabb al-ʿālamīn*). When the lordship of God cannot be restricted to any particular group, then restricting the sacrifice of a martyr like Husayn to a single group is also completely wrong. In fact, the benefit of his martyrdom concerns all those people who desire to draw from him some lesson about human life. (539)((*Shahīd-i Insānīyat.*))

In view of our discussion it is hardly surprising then why Sayyid Naqvi would claim that in "illuminating Islam" he could not find a historical figure more fitting and compelling than Husayn. That is why, fully aware of this indebtedness to Husayn and his heroic deeds, he was never tired of praising him:

> O Husayn b. ʿAlī! My greetings to you. Till the last moment you did not let go of your sense of duty or of calmness and patience. You sacrificed your life, dignity, everything. You did not deem anything more worthy than your grandfather's *sharīʿah*. You made the world remember the lesson of true *tawḥīd*. You died temporarily, but gave new life to Islam. Every drop of your blood that touched the ground of Karbala breathed new spirit into the *sharīʿah*. Religion owes you its life, and Islam can never repay you for your beneficence (*iḥsān*)((Literally, "raise its head in the face of your beneficence.")) toward it. On our behalf, may God present you with the gift of blessings. (317)(("Banī Umayyah kī ʿAdāwat-i Islām kī Aik Mukhtaṣar Tārīkh awr Maydān-i Karbalā kā ʿAzīm Kārnāmah" in *Nigārshāt-i Sayyid al-ʿUlāmaʾ*, pp. 304-317.))



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Islam's Sacred Story: A Contemporary Retelling-Part 1

This is the first installment in a two-part article on the historical thought of Sayyid al-ʿulamāʾ, Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi. The article explores the attempts of Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi to revive South Asian Shi'i Islam in the 20th century through the ethical and mytho-theological example of Imam Husayn. In this

installment, the author first presents Sayyid Naqvi's lifelong goal of "illuminating Islam" for his South Asian Muslim audience. Then he examines the historical thought of Sayyid Naqvi, wherein the ultimate goal of history is not simply knowing the past, but rather to present ethical lessons that must inform our lives today, and to manifest the ultimate sacred story of Islam. The second installment of this article is available here.

Introduction

> Yes, yes, it is true that in "illuminating Islam", [in answering] "What is it?" I am unable to find a better [historical] reference than the person of Ḥusayn (ʿa). If I were to clarify the real practical meaning of Islam, then in world history only one person can be found: His name is Ḥusayn (ʿa).((*La Tufsidū fī al-Arḍ* (1935), p. 115.))

"Illuminating Islam" underlies Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi's((In communal memory, known with his honorific titles "sayyid al-ʿulamāʾ" and "naqqan sāḥib", Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi (1905–1988), is arguably the most prolific (we are looking at over 250 works in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic), widely popular, and revered Indian Shiʿi scholar of the twentieth century. Justin Jones describes him as "one of the subcontinent's most prominent *ʿulamāʾ* in the 1930s-1940s," "the final great mujtahid of South Asia," and that "after independence he would remain the most well-known, widely published and widely quoted Shiʿa ʿalim in the country for four decades." (*Shia Islam in Colonial India*, p. 247) Decades earlier, S. A. A. Rizvi had called him "a very impressive and lucid orator." (*A Socio-Intellectual History of Shiʿi South Asia*, vol. II, p. 152) One must also mention Simon Fuchs' recent study of Shiʿism in Pakistan, where the influence of Sayyid al-ʿulamāʾ on the Shiʿi intellectual and religious landscape of Pakistan have been observed on several occasions. See his *In a Pure Muslim Land: Shiʿism between Pakistan and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2019).)) entire intellectual corpus. He strove to illuminate Islam for his South Asian Muslim audience—especially the Shiʿi—so that they may successfully survive, even thrive. But survive what? Various attacks and critique from without, and doubts from within regarding the worth of a seemingly declining if not altogether obsolete religious tradition; simply put, a deep "crisis of religion"((For a fuller account of this "crisis of religion" and its reception and articulation by Sayyid Naqvi, see chapter 1 of Syed Rizwan Zamir, "Rethinking, Reconfiguring and Popularizing Islamic Tradition: Religious Thought of a Contemporary Indian Scholar" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2011). See also footnote 4.)) for South Asian Muslims. This was during what many have called the "modern age" of Islam, an era defined by not only the prevailing conditions of modernity, but more importantly, the dominance of a modern Western worldview.((Given the complexity of the subject, it is extremely inconvenient to attempt here a robust description of modernity and modernism, i.e., the underlying worldview of modernity. The best that can be offered is a general sense of their relevance to our purposes. Through the direct rule of Western colonial powers in the 18th, 19th, and the first half of the 20th centuries, Muslim thought and cultures came into serious contact with Enlightenment-inspired modern Western thought and institutions. Throughout these centuries—and the trend continues to this day—Muslims have grappled with these ideas and institutions, and have continuously assessed their

viability for Muslim thought and culture. It is this grappling with modern Western ideas, values, and institutions in colonial times that scholars and Muslim thinkers like Sayyid Naqvi deemed modernity and modernism as significantly new challenges for contemporary Islamic civilization.)) This "crisis of religion" was articulated clearly quite early in his intellectual career, especially in his 1935 speeches titled *La Tufsidu fī al-Arḍ*; in fact, beginning in the early 1930s and lasting until his death in 1988, Sayyid Naqvi's writings and preaching from the venue of Muharram-commemoration gatherings was his partial response to what he saw as a grave "crisis of religion" faced by his Shiʿi community, the larger Muslim population of India, and in fact, all religious communities. This crisis of religion according to Sayyid Naqvi was a result of two broader intellectual and social currents:

2. The undermining of Islam by Christian and Hindu missionaries;
4. The undermining of Islamic or religious foundations of any religion through rationalistic, scientistic, and materialistic philosophies.

While the missionaries undermined the religion of Islam, the new philosophies inspired by post-Christian modern Western thought had begun to reduce "religion"—not any religion in particular (Islam or Christianity), but "religion" as such (*madhhab*)—to an outdated "thing" of a bygone era, with no relevance whatsoever to the modern world. According to Sayyid Naqvi, these new attacks on religion-as-such had made it extremely difficult for the lay piety—whether Sunni, Shiʿi, or of any other religion for that matter—to uphold its basic religious commitments, therefore drawing its adherents often to an "indifference toward religion", even atheism (*lā dīnīyat*). Although Sayyid Naqvi acknowledges various other serious crises Muslims faced during the British Raj—i.e., economic, political, social, and cultural—for him this "crisis of religion" was by far the most formidable challenge for the well being of Indian society, a challenge which again was not simply confined to Muslims.

But how does Ḥusayn (ʿa) and the battle of Karbala help him illuminate Islam? Was he simply paying lip service to pious Shiʿi sensibilities? Not really. If his seven-volume Qurʾanic commentary is excluded, almost one-third of his writings relate to the theme of Husaynology((I borrow this term from Justin Jones, "Shiʿism, Humanity and Revolution in Twentieth Century India: Selfhood and Politics in the Husainology of 'Ali Naqi Naqvi," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24 (3) 2014, pp. 415-34.)) directly. Even those writings whose main subject-matter is not Husaynology contain ample allusions to and reflections on it.((It must be noted, for example, that the quote that opens this essay comes from one such text, namely, *La Tufsidū fī al-Arḍ*.)) If one surveys his entire corpus, it becomes clear that he meant what he said. A few other facts corroborate this point: 1) The theme of Karbala is with Sayyid Naqvi from the beginning of his intellectual career.((The earliest work was written in Arabic during his seminary studies in Najaf, Iraq, to defend what were seen as extreme forms of Shiʿi mourning against criticisms from certain *ʿulamāʾ*, especially Ayatullah Muḥsin al-Amīn, the author of the well-known *Aʿyān al-Shīʿa*. See "The Flagellations of Muharram and the Shiʿite Ulama'" in *Der Islam*, 55 (1978), p. 19-36. Upon his return from Iraq, the first book he authored was again related to the subject of Ḥusayn (ʿa) and Karbala. Coincidentally it is also Imamia Mission Publication House's first publication. *Qātilān-i Ḥusayn kā madhhab* (Lucknow: Manshurah Imamiyah Mission and Sarfaraz Qawmi Press, 1932).)) 2) From among the first hundred volumes of his work that were published by Imamia Mission Publication House (the idea of it was Sayyid Naqvi's inspiration), thirty-four dealt with Husaynology, and only Husaynology-related

texts were translated into languages other than Urdu.((For example, *Ḥusayn awr Islām* (1935) was immediately translated into Hindi and English. This work was followed by *Ḥusayn kā Atam Balaydān* and *The Martyrdom of Ḥusayn* (1936) in the same year.)) 3) There are ample occasional allusions to this theme in texts that do not deal with it in any direct way.((*La Tufsidū fī al-Arḍ*, for example, includes the theme of Karbala and martyrdom of Ḥusayn (ʿa). It occurs in the context of a discussion on how a *muṣliḥ* is often accused by people of being a *mufsid*: "Earlier I had said that religion and state, even if separate from one another, could cause a [complete] destruction of the world. But if religion is subsumed by power, there will be no limits to corruption (*fasādāt*). The greatest example of this is the sultanates of Umayyads; here religion and political power—the two things that can be great sources of corruption in the world (*fasād fī al-ʿarḍ*)—were merged. What was the result of this? Could there be an illustration of *fasād fī al-ʿarḍ* greater than [what happened in] the event of Karbala?... Was there anyone more *muṣliḥ* of the world than Ḥusayn ibn ʿAli? Absolutely not...Imam Ḥusayn and his followers are blamed for *fasād fī al-ʿarḍ*. Ḥusayn presents his defense by action, and through this action the result is made clear [regarding whether he was a mufsid or a *muṣliḥ*?]" (86-88))) 4) Sayyid Naqvi was somewhat unique for someone of his stature in his willingness to speak from the pulpit during Muharram and throughout the year, a forum generally attributed to preachers of limited scholarly training. And finally, 5) Sayyid Naqvi continued writing on this subject throughout his life without any noticeable gap, extending his reflections and analysis in both depth and breadth. His reflections on the Karbala narrative were thus not simply an inevitable burden carried by a Shiʿi *ʿālim* and religious leader. Rather, they were crucial to Sayyid Naqvi's lifelong struggle to revive Islam in 20th-century South Asia for his modern audience, restoring it to its once-privileged societal status.

Yet a consistent interpretive pattern underlies all of Sayyid Naqvi's intellectual engagements with the Karbala narrative((For example, see: *Mujāhidah-i Karbala* (1933); *Ḥusayn awr Islām* (1932); *Maʿrakah-i Karbalā* (1935); *Maḥārabah-i Karbalā* (1936); *Banī Umayyah kī ʿAdāwat-i Islām kī Mukhtaṣar Tārīkh* (1928/1963); and *Khilāfat-i Yazīd kay Mutaʿalli Āzād Ārāʾīn* (1953).)) and wider Islamic sacred history:((Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi, *Tarīkh-i Islām*, 4 vols (Islamabad: Imāmīya Dar al-Tablīgh, 2000).)) First, grounding historical details within historical sources to set the historical record straight; and second, drawing out and explicating the ethical meaning both from the broader historical narrative and its very concrete moments. In other words, though historical accuracy is a huge concern for Sayyid Naqvi, the goal of history is not history itself. Rather, it is the lessons learned therein. Generally, these lessons are ethical and are drawn out to edify his religious audience. For Sayyid Naqvi, accuracy of the historical narrative, though quite crucial in its own right, would be incomplete if it does not tend toward the ethical.

This paper illumines how in engaging narratives of Karbala—and by extension, Islam's sacred (read: prophetic) *mytho-history*—Sayyid Naqvi was drawing on the Islamic tradition's symbolic and mythical sources. Use of the term "myth" here needs to be contrasted clearly from its popular conceptions as a "false, fictional, fantasy story". Myth as used in the academic study of religion (and utilized here) refers to an "orienting tale", that is, a sacred story which is at the heart of a religious tradition. It provides to its believers an overarching account of life and the world, their origins (i.e., "In the beginning was…"), the arc and flow of history through time—and significant historical events within—and finally an account

of the end of it all. These myths are “orientational” because they orient for those inhabiting the myth almost every aspect of human life, its purpose and day-to-day religious rituals, ethical principles, and practices. It is in view of these observations that one notices that Sayyid Naqvi’s telling of Islam’s sacred origins and unfolding of prophetic history through the ages has both mythical and historical character.

> …though historical accuracy is a huge concern for Sayyid Naqvi, the goal of history is not history itself. Rather, it is the lessons learned therein.

Just as Sayyid Naqvi draws on the *uṣūlī*-intellectual framework to “re-imagine”, “translate”, and “re-present” Islamic theology and praxis for his 20th-century Muslim audience,((See chapter 3 of Syed Rizwan Zamir, “Rethinking, Reconfiguring and Popularizing Islamic Tradition: Religious Thought of a Contemporary Indian Scholar” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2011).)) he also draws on Islam’s symbolic and *mytho-theological*((Akin to “mytho-history” discussed earlier, the term “mytho-theology” highlights the intertwining of mythic and theological underpinnings of the narrative. The ensuing discussion should make this point clearer.)) sources for the same purpose. If the former represents reviving Islam through its intellectual tradition, then the latter represents this revival through Islam’s mythological tradition.((Though not the subject of this essay, it is also pertinent to note that in taking up the pulpit (and the impactful preacher-scholar role for which Sayyid Naqvi became so popular) was also for the task of religious preservation and revival. And in doing that he also revolutionized Shiʿi preaching. Put simply, Sayyid Naqvi’s Husaynology and preaching in its various dimensions was his simultaneous act of “preaching Shiʿi revival” and “reviving Shiʿi preaching”.)) Together and complementing one another, they complete Sayyid Naqvi’s religio-intellectual project. This paper discusses Sayyid Naqvi’s engagement with the foremost mythological source of the Shiʿi Islamic tradition, the figure of Ḥusayn (ʿa) and his heroic act on the plains of Karbala. Discussing at length first Sayyid Naqvi’s Husaynology, I will proceed to show how in Sayyid Naqvi’s Husaynology, the historical continually meets the ethical, without collapsing the integrity of either.

Yet, to stop our analysis at the purely ethical is to miss an even more crucial aspect of Sayyid Naqvi’s Husaynology and his presentation of Islam’s sacred history: the mytho-theological worldview that underlies—and inevitably configures—the historical narrative. We can only appreciate his statement that opens this essay by, first, appreciating the close connections between the historical, ethical, and the mytho-theological; and second, by understanding how they all inform and together play out in Sayyid Naqvi’s Husaynology and mytho-theology—within which Ḥusayn (ʿa) becomes the ultimate hero of Islam and humanity. Finally, the essay will also note that Sayyid Naqvi is a “contemporary Muslim historian”, who on the one hand, enacted the long-standing tradition of Muslim histories through the hermeneutic of his mytho-theology, while on the other, was responsive to the intellectual challenges of the twentieth century by highlighting an ethical framework.

PART I: THE HERMENEUTICS OF HISTORY

The Overlap of the Historical and the Ethical in Sayyid Naqvi’s Husaynology

A clear statement regarding this close connection between the historical account and its ethical implications is found in *Uswa-i Ḥusaynī*, where Sayyid Naqvi notes the following:

> The event of Karbala and its practical results is a topic that deserves a lengthy commentary. Every sub-event of this incident is a fountain of ethical, social, and religious teachings. Imam Ḥusayn had patched together all human perfections (*kamālāt-i insānī*). In fact, the incident of Karbala unveils all the characteristics of truth and falsehood (*ḥaqq wa bāṭil*)…The numerous valuable lessons taught by Ḥusayn at Karbala should not be viewed through a wrong lens, and then lost to forgetfulness. *These lessons should be made into the plan of life and the constitution for a practical communal life* (*dastūr-i ʿamal-i ḥayāt-i millī*) (129, italics added).((*Uswah-i Ḥusaynī*. Whenever the word *millī* is used in his writings and in this essay, even when translated as “nation” it means community. Though *millī* can be rendered as “national”, but since Sayyid Naqvi hardly ever spoke of “nation” in the sense of nationalism, “community” and “communal” seem more appropriate for *millat* and *millī*, especially in this context.))

A few pages later, he states:

> The incident of Karbala is not simply about heartrending afflictions (*maṣā’ib*) that invite human nature to shed tears. It is also a didactic institution (*madrasah-i tarbīyat*) where the world is taught the principles of virtue, etiquette (*adab)*, and a sense of duty. Blessed are those who—just as they are affected by the mourning aspect [of this incident]—also gain from its didactic dimension, and apply and demonstrate these teachings in a manner akin to what Ḥusayn envisaged for the world. (142)

The ethical thrust of Husaynology is even more clearly illumined by *Shahīd-i Insāniyat*, a 584-page volume published in 1942 upon the 1300th anniversary of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn (ʿa), and still the most comprehensive work on Husaynology in the Urdu language.((Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi, *Shahīd-i Insānīyat* (Lahore: Imāmīya Mission Pakistan Trust, 2006).)) The text is dedicated to a historical reconstruction of the complete life of Ḥusayn (ʿa) from his birth leading up to his martyrdom and its immediate impact afterward. The historical sources are drawn from both Sunni and Shiʿi sources among which Tabari's history was overwhelmingly given the foremost status.((In *La Tufsidū fī al-Arḍ*, while discussing Ḥusayn's (ʿa) mission as *muṣliḥ*, Sayyid Naqvi notes: "I will present to you proofs (*shawāhid*) in which Imam Ḥusayn has rebutted this misunderstanding, and shows how [historical] outcomes have supported Ḥusayn…I have only this book in my hand, called Tarīkh-i Ṭabarī. On such an occasion, I do not use any work other than this. That is why I will present proofs only from this [work], ones that are relevant to my subject." (87-88) This special status accorded to al-Ṭabari's history by Sayyid Naqvi is due to its authoritativeness for the wider Muslim community.)) This engagement with historical sources was intended to provide an historical account that would be acceptable to most Muslims, regardless of their sectarian affiliations. After devoting over five hundred pages to a rigorous historical reconstruction of events leading up to Karbala, its implications, and the historical aftermath—in other words, the historicizing of the Karbala mythology—he turns to the various ethical implications of this event for contemporary Muslims. Without delving into too much detail, I list here the various lessons Sayyid Naqvi cites under sub-headings that capture in a summary fashion the wide range of his many ethical reflections in the context of Husaynology:

2. Change of mindset (*tabdīl-i dhahnīyyat*) (536);
4. demonstration of the power of religion and spirituality (539);
6. affirmation and propagation of Islam's veracity (540);
8. moral and cultural teachings such as freedom (543);
10. perseverance (544);
12. collective discipline (546);
14. dignity (*ʿizzat-i nafs)* (548);
16. patience (550);
18. sacrifice for others (553);
20. empathy (555);
22. good dealings with others (555);
24. sympathy for human beings (558);
26. truthfulness (559);
28. peacemaking and tolerance (564);
30. and sacrifice (573).

The section concludes with "miscellaneous" other teachings that included: veiling (574), arranging for a will before death (578), reverence for Divine laws (581), and remembering forefathers and nobility (581).

The list provided in *Shahīd-i Insānīyat* is far from being exhaustive of the various lessons Sayyid Naqvi derived from his reflections. Interspersed in all his writings, be those on the Karbala-narrative explicitly or on another subject, are found numerous other lessons. Unsurprisingly again, in closing the book, Sayyid Naqvi reiterates how the true purpose of mourning is neither to seek intercession, nor to simply lament Ḥusayn's (ʿa) death, but to apply his teachings to one's life. A clear proof that the true intent of telling the narrative is ethical is the fact that the long historical narrative itself converges onto the various "lessons learned" from that narrative.((In passing, it should be mentioned that Sayyid Naqvi's historicizing of the Karbala mythology obviously did not occur without controversy and pushback from pious Shiʿis. These controversies have been discussed at length in Justin Jones's article cited earlier.))

The Overlap of the Historical and the Ethical in Sayyid Naqvi's Study of Islamic Sacred Prophetic History

The strong connection between the historical and the ethical is also evident in Sayyid Naqvi's presentation of Islamic history from his later years, in his well-known four-volume *Tārīkh-i Islām* [*History of Islam*].((Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi, *Tarīkh-i Islām*, 4 vols (Islamabad: Imāmīya Dār al-Tablīgh, 2000).)) Again, *History of Islam* is not history for history's sake. It is not intended as a text that would simply lay

out a detailed account of “what happened”. Akin to his Husaynology, moral and spiritual lessons are intricately woven into the historical narrative. Let me illustrate this through Sayyid Naqvi’s discussion of the prophetic career of Abraham.

In Sayyid Naqvi’s telling, the story of Islam begins with trials, suffering, patience, and sacrifice. Commenting upon the Qurʾanic verse of *Sūrat al-Anbiyāʾ* (21):68,((“They said, ‘Burn him [Abraham], and help your gods, if you would do aught.’” Qurʾan, Sūrat al-Anbiyāʾ (21):68.)) which describes Nimrod’s tyranny toward Abraham that ultimately led to his emigration, Sayyid Naqvi remarks that Divine Wisdom did not intervene at this stage. It waited until the brutality of the oppressor and the patience of the oppressed both reached their final limit. Divine Wisdom lets events take their course, to a point where the oppressor could not argue that “we did not intend to burn, we were simply threatening,” and where the oppressed Abraham’s patience and loyalty to God in the face of threats of fire are also tested to their utmost limit. Human choices were not obstructed; rather, they were allowed freedom to be exercised fully so there is neither confusion nor doubt as to the brutality of the oppressor and the trial of the oppressed. It is only after Abraham was thrown into fire that the Divine Will intervened and saved Abraham. Since God had other aims for Abraham, he did not become a martyr. A perfect embodiment of “the sacrificing ethos” of Islam’s foremost guides and exemplars, Abraham in this exposition becomes the first person to have made sacrifices for Islam. With Lot and Sarah, he also becomes the first emigrant of Islamic history. (12-13) This telling of the historical account begins to reveal its ethical thrust, and also brings to light a hierarchic view of virtues, whereby *sacrifice* and *patience* in the face of trials to emerge as the crowning virtues a human being can achieve.((We will turn to the discussion of the “hierarchy of virtues” again later in the essay. It must be pointed out here though that the intertwining of ethics, history, and sacred mytho-theology in the telling of the episode of Abraham is quite emblematic of the general trend in Sayyid Naqvi’s writings and speeches.))

> …a hierarchic view of virtues, whereby sacrifice and patience in the face of trials to emerge as the crowning virtues a human being can achieve.

The Islamic history of affliction, suffering, and sacrifice continued with prophets that succeeded Abraham. For example, Lot suffered at the hands of his community, which had refused to follow divine injunctions and eventually drove him out of the area. He writes: “These are the earlier traces (*nuqūsh*) of Islamic history that have turned events of affliction (*maṣāʾib*), pain (*takālīf*), torment [from others], homelessness, and exile into a treasure. That is why the Prophet of Islam said, ‘Islam began with exile.’” ((*Tarīkh-i Islām*, p. 14. The hadith reads as follows: “Islam began with exile, and returns to being with exile. So there are glad tidings to those in exile.” (badā al-islāmu gharīban wa sayaʿūdu gharīban fa-ṭūbā li-l-ghurabāʾ). See al-Ṣadūq, Kamāl al-Dīn wa-Tamām al-Niʿmah, vol. 1, p. 200.)) But there is clear contemporary import to these lessons; they come as ethical injunctions to his community, reminding them that as a prophetic community, suffering is destined for them. And faced with suffering, the community should not lose heart: “How then could it be apt for Muslims that they are troubled, or lose hope with the occurrence of afflictions (*maṣāʾib*) or extreme difficulties (*shadāʾid*)? They should understand these things as part of their communal character and should always be prepared to bear them,” he added.((*Tarīkh-i Islām*, p. 14.)) In other words, Sayyid Naqvi is responding to the anxieties and

deep angst that the turbulences of the colonial era had afflicted upon his Muslim audience. His reading of history thus becomes an exercise in finding inspiration and igniting hope for the anxious South Asian Muslims of the modern colonial period.

An even more interesting hermeneutical move presents itself at this juncture. One observes Sayyid Naqvi plotting the ethical side-by-side with the historical. The occasion is Abraham's pleading with God in the context of Lot's story. Yes, the prophet-guides of Islam had always suffered in the hands of their community; the community rebelled and disobeyed them, yet the prophets never cursed them nor took revenge. They, in reality, went beyond simply being patient with their communities. They went out of their way to protect their communities, through prayers, through intercession with God, and at times, even by arguing with Him. Abraham's efforts to protect Lot's community is presented as a key example in this regard. Through Qurʾanic references, Sayyid Naqvi notes how when the Divine Wisdom found no room for rehabilitating Lot's community (and it sent angels to punish them) Abraham argued with them and with God to protect them (14).((Here, he is making reference to the following Qurʾanic verses: Hūd (11):74, al-Sharḥ (94):6, and Āl-i ʿImrān (3):19. Making sure that the incident is not read as Abraham's disobedience toward God's Will, Sayyid Naqvi notes that Abraham's act of dissent is his special privilege as the intimate friend of God, and therefore a friendly and frank quarrelling that only friends could do. (14-15)))

> They, in reality, went beyond simply being patient with their communities. They went out of their way to protect their communities, through prayers, through intercession with God, and at times, even by arguing with Him.

One final instance of the edification of his audiences should suffice. The context is Abraham's building of the House of God in Mecca:

> This building of the *Kaʿbah* was in fact the building of a center for the Islamic religion, which is a source of success and salvation for the whole world. Both father and son were busy erecting it: the father was constructing it, while the son was doing the hard labor. Though the tribe of Jarham had already settled in Mecca, the Creator desired that the house be built by father and son alone. In this way, this concept that there is no harm in labor and hard work was established forever for the followers of Islam. It is so because our great religious and spiritual ancestors were [themselves] employed by the Creator for this task. (22)

In pointing out the *centrality* of Mecca to the story of Islam, the opportunity for highlighting the significance of hard work was not neglected either.

One more point needs to be made regarding the theological underpinnings of this intertwining of the historical and the ethical: the overarching theological vision that provides the parameters and criteria by which particular events of history are assessed and commented upon exhibits an unmistakable Shiʿi

coloring. Sayyid Naqvi's subtle and repeated stress that "Islam is a religion of the oppressed" in these early pages is, in orientation, quite clearly Shiʿi: The history of Islam—which includes all previous prophets—is the history of an oppressed and suffering community. If the message of the various prophets is one with the message of the Prophet of Islam, they also share a common fate: that they will be misunderstood, their teachings will be forgotten by most, and the prophets will always suffer at the hands of their communities. It is obvious how this particular lens through which Sayyid Naqvi looked upon history could easily be extended to the life of the Prophet on the one hand, and to the household of the Prophet on the other. It is also clear how Sayyid Naqvi would tie this view of history to the sufferings of Ḥusayn (ʿa) and his companions on the planes of Karbala. Like the episode of Abraham, the events of Karbala revealed the extent of Umayyad oppression and Ḥusayn's forbearance in the face of that oppression. This view of history is clearly distinct from the usual Sunni version of a triumphant and victorious Islam.

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On Knowledge and Ḥikmah: An Interview with Sayyid Munir al-Khabbaz

What do the Qurʾan and aḥādīth *teach us about knowledge and wisdom? What role does knowledge play in our religious life? And what can we learn from the lives of our* ʿulamāʾ*, in devoting our lives to seeking deep and critical knowledge, and striving for a life of* taqwā *and God-consciousness? We sat down with Sayyid Munīr al-Khabbāz to gain insights into these questions and more.*

Sayyid al-Khabbāz is among the senior ʿulamāʾ *and teachers of the Qumm seminary. Originally from Qatif, Saudi Arabia, Sayyid al-Khabbāz began his seminary training at the young age of 14, and has studied with some of the most eminent scholars of our time, including Sayyid Abu al-Qāsim al-Khūʾī, Sayyid Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Sīstānī, and Mīrzā Jawād al-Tabrīzī. Currently, he teaches the subjects of* uṣūl al-fiqh *(Islamic legal theory) and* fiqh *(Islamic law) at the highest level (*al-baḥth al-khārij*) in the Qumm seminary.*

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*Al-Sidrah: How do our revealed religious texts define knowledge (*ʿilm*) and wisdom (*ḥikmah*)? How are*

the two distinct from one another?

SMK: In the discipline of logic, knowledge is traditionally defined as a concept that is present in the mind. It is divided into two types: simple apprehension (*taṣawwur*) and ascension (*taṣdīq*). Linguistically, knowledge is defined as the unveiling of reality or truth for a person. But our religious texts do not use the word "*ʿilm*" (knowledge) in a particular way (*ḥaqīqah sharʿiyyah*) that is distinct from its lexical meaning.

Some *aḥādīth* describe knowledge as a light that God bestows upon the hearts of whomever He wills among His servants. Others state that knowledge is better than wealth because wealth depletes as it is spent, whereas knowledge grows when it is used; or that those who collect and guard wealth are overcome and defeated even while they are still alive, whereas scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) persist forever; or state that knowledge calls to action, and if it finds action [then it stays], otherwise it departs. The apparent sense of these texts appears to describe knowledge as the presence of God in the soul (*nafs*) of a person. When a person is able to perceive God as present in his own soul, he has attained this knowledge that the *aḥādīth* indicate, a knowledge that protects one from hypocrisy, that is more valuable than wealth, and that allows a person to attain the good of this world and the hereafter. This spiritual presence of God is the light (*nūr*) which he puts into the hearts of His servants, a reality He alludes to in the verse, "God guides whom He pleases to His light." ((Qurʾan, *al-Nūr* (24):35.))

As for the term "wisdom" (*ḥikmah*), linguistically it refers to situating things in their proper place. If a person has this ability, he is characterized as wise (*ḥakīm*) because his action are coherent and "firm" (*muḥkam*), for he places things where they ought to be. A number of verses of the Qurʾan speak about the effects of wisdom. For example, the Qurʾan states: "Whoever is given wisdom, he has been given abundant good;"((Qurʾan, *al-Baqarah* (2):269.)) "God bestowed upon you the book and wisdom and gave you knowledge of that which you knew not. The grace of God upon you is of great magnitude."((Qurʾan, *al-Nisāʾ* (4): 113.)) *Ḥikmah* is in fact juxtaposed or paralleled to the divine Book (*kitāb*): "It is he who sent forth to the *ummīyīn*, from among them, a messenger who recites to them His signs, purifies them, and teaches them the Book and wisdom."((Qurʾan, *al-Jumuʿah* (62): 2.))

> Thus, wisdom refers to that totality of virtues that come as a result of the dominion of the intellect over all other faculties of the soul.

From the apparent sense of these verses—with the first verse equating wisdom with the divine Book, the second stating that wisdom is something taught and bestowed, and the final stating that whoever is bestowed with *ḥikmah* is bestowed with "abundant good"—we can understand wisdom to be the sum total of what it means to have righteous conduct, what we call practical wisdom (*al-ḥikmah al-ʿamaliyyah*). *Ḥikmah* refers in reality to the totality of virtues. The faculties of the soul are usually divided into three main categories: anger, lust, and intellect (*al-ghaḍabiyyah*, *al-shahwiyyah*, and *al-ʿaqliyyah*). Wisdom is when the soul's intellectual faculty has dominion over the other faculties, a state in which every action that emanates from a person emanates from the balance that the intellect creates within that person's soul. Thus, wisdom refers to the totality of virtues that result from the dominion of

the intellect over all other faculties of the soul.

Al-Sidrah: What role does knowledge play in a person's piety and spiritual growth? Is knowledge a necessary element in this growth?

SMK: There is no doubt that knowledge is necessary for a person to attain true piety. We read in the Qurʾan that, "It is only the knowledgeable (*'ulamā'*) among God's servants who fear Him."((Qurʾan, *Fāṭir* (35):28.)) The apparent sense of this verse signifies delimitation and exclusivity, that the [singular] path towards true piety and fear of God is knowledge. A second verse states, "Is he who supplicates in the watches of the night, prostrating and standing, apprehensive of the Hereafter and expecting the mercy of his Lord [like someone who is not such]? Say: Are those who know equal to those who do not know? Only those who possess intellect take heed."((Qurʾan, *al-Zumar* (39):9.)) Prostration and standing in prayer are succeeded by a reference to knowledge; in other words, these actions are fruitful only by virtue of the presence of knowledge. [The verses commands:] say that these acts of worship are only fruitful with and by the presence of knowledge, that only a knowledgeable person can benefit from this worship. Therefore, knowledge is the path to piety, to real and true fear of God, Sublime and Holy is He.

Sayyid Munir al-Khabbaz giving a lecture during the month of Ramadan. June 9, 2018.

However, only knowledge that is connected to the Divine, to Allah, can fulfil this role. Other types of knowledge cannot do so, even if that knowledge is itself intrinsically valuable. Sometimes a person commits an act because it contains an intrinsic value; at other times, he acts in a utilitarian way, to

receive some other benefit. Sometimes, a person seeks to use the sunlight, or he wants to utilize water from the sea, or whatever other blessing that God has bestowed. This person aims to benefit from those objects in themselves. At other times, a person may approach an object to gain something else. It is this second case that is relevant to knowledge; in other words, divine knowledge is when a person sees all the beings of this world as simply signs of God and emanations of the Divine. If he sees all these things as means to an ultimate end, then he has traversed the path of knowledge that will convey him to true piety and fear of God.

In this respect, the following hadith is narrated from Amīr al-Muʾminīn (ʿ*a*), "I have not seen anything except while seeing God before it, after it, with it, and within it."((قال امير المؤمنين: ما رأيت شيئاً إلاّ ورأيت الله قبله وبعده ومعه وفيه.)) It is also reported from the Imam, "Even if [all] veils were to be lifted, my level of certainty would not be increased."((لَوْ كُشِفَ اَلْغِطَاءُ مَا اِزْدَدْتُ يَقِيناً. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 40, p. 153.)) This type of sacred ʿ*Alawī* soul does not see any being except as a means, as a manifestation of God and a mirror reflecting God. He is, in effect, an instance of the verse, "We will show them our signs in the horizons and in their own selves such that it becomes manifest that it is the truth. Does it suffice not that your Lord is witness over all things?"((Qurʾan, *Fuṣṣilat* (41):53.))

Al-Sidrah: Whenever we hear the phrase "religious sciences" we often think of fiqh *and* tafsīr*. How do we differentiate between religious and non-religious sciences? What is the criteria for this distinction?*

SMK: A report is transmitted from Imām al-Ṣādiq (ʿ*a*) in which he says, "Teach your children from our knowledge what will avail them." What is meant by "our knowledge" mentioned in this hadith? Religious knowledge, or in other words, the knowledge of the Ahl al-Bayt, is every knowledge that is relevant to the realization of God's aims and goals on Earth. Every science or field that has a share in accomplishing this final aim is considered "religious knowledge", because it is a means of actualizing religion and its realization on Earth. We read in the Qurʾan: "By God! We have most certainly sent our messengers with clear signs and sent down with them the book and the scale so that the people establish equity."((Qurʾan, *al-Ḥadīd* (57):25.)) The entire purpose of sending messengers was to establish equity. Thus, every knowledge or science that shares in establishing equity is properly classified as "religious knowledge." We also find in the Qurʾan: "I created not the jinn and mankind except that they worship me."((Qurʾan, *al-Dhāriyāt* (51):56.)) [This verse states that] another goal of the creation of jinn and humankind is worship. All knowledge that allows for the realization of worship is properly "religious knowledge."

Therefore, the religious sciences are not limited to *fiqh*, *uṣūl*, *ḥadīth*, the Qurʾanic sciences, etc. Rather, any knowledge that allows for the realization of the goals of religion is religious knowledge or science. This is what separates the religious sciences from the non-religious sciences.

Al-Sidrah: …So some human sciences or social sciences could also be considered religious science or knowledge.

SMK: Yes, even some social and natural sciences can fall under the category of religious sciences, if they are a means to the realization of those religious ends.

> ...any knowledge that allows for the realization of the goals of religion is religious knowledge or science.

al-Sidrah: The curriculum of the ḥawzah *and that of universities is different both in the topics that they study and in the amount of time they spending acquiring the necessary competencies. What are the reasons for and benefits of the traditional* ḥawzah *curriculum?*

SMK: The traditional curriculum of the *ḥawzah* is, from one perspective, beneficial and praiseworthy, but from another, open to criticism. The traditional curriculum of the *ḥawzah* has a special property, namely that it cultivates in the student the capacity to think and engage with issues critically but productively. The *ḥawzah* is based on quality, not quantity, meaning that it focuses on cultivating a person's mind to critique and produce, to meticulously analyze information and present new theories. This is the difference between a curriculum that focuses on induction and one that focuses on reasoned argument and deduction.

This does not mean, however, that the seminary curriculum is free of any criticism. In many standardized texts of the seminary, the information that is taught may be from a previous era. For example, one of the best texts on legal theory and hermeneutics (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) is *al-Kifāyah*.((*Kifāyat al-Uṣūl* is a textbook on legal theory and hermeneutics written by al-Ākhūnd Muḥammad Kāẓim al-Khurāsānī (1839-1911). It is currently taught as a foundational textbook in the field of legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*).)) This book represents a particular level of legal theory that was present at the author's time. As for the contemporary state of the field of legal theory, a student has to struggle to learn and understand it himself. The same is true in Islamic law (*fiqh*) wherein the standard texts that are studied, by al-Shaykh al-Anṣārī, al-Shahīd al-Awwal, or al-Shahīd al-Thānī, reflect the state of the field during their time. This is also the case with the study of philosophy. Today's textbooks—the *Manẓūmah* of al-Sabzawārī, the *Asfār* of al-Mullā Ṣadrā, *Bidāyat al-Ḥikmah* and *Nihāyat al-Ḥikmah* of al-ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī—reflect the state of philosophy of previous eras. Today, however, it has become necessary for the student to read and compare the philosophy that is studied in the seminary to that of the West, and to become acquainted with how later philosophers have critiqued previous thought and further developed these fields.

So the seminary's curriculum is better in the sense that its trains its students to critique and produce, whereas the academic curriculum is beneficial because it stays abreast of current developments in various fields.

al-Sidrah: Many religions in Western society do not place the same emphasis on religious law [as Islam does.] How do we explain to our society the importance of Islamic law to a Muslim?

SMK: *Fiqh* is a means of assembling and constructing life. *Fiqh* in this sense is not just the *fatāwā* that are listed by jurists in their legal manuals; rather, it is composed of religious rulings and general directives to society. More importantly, *fiqh* is not limited to the individual, rather it also contains laws for the collective. Collective or societal *fiqh* looks at the general state of society and is not directed at

the individual.

For example, we admit that society has many necessities, such as creating a political system. Muslims in the West, in order to bring Islam to life in this society, need to enter into the political sphere in whatever way they can, so as to ensure Muslims have a say and a presence in these Western countries. As a result, the delineation of particular methods by which Muslims can establish their status in society through engagement in the political system is among the concerns of *fiqh*. Thus, *fiqh* is not limited to the issues of personal or individual religious practice; we should not think of *fiqh* simply as a set of rules for the individual regarding his canonical prayers, his individual worship, or his personal transactions.

Sometimes when we read the following in religious legal manuals: "It is obligatory upon every responsible adult to be a *mujtahid*, follower of a *mujtahid*, or precautionary actor in all his actions and restraint," it is as though we interpret *fiqh* as just focusing on the individual alone. Rather, we must see *fiqh* in an intimate way, such that it reveals itself as that complete system that is constitutive of life. This is only possible if *fiqh* is both societal and individual. So, when we look at the *fiqh* of judgeship, family, roads, etc. with this big-picture view, we are able to present *fiqh* as a path for structuring life [as a whole], as we see in the verse, "O you who believe! Respond to God and the Messenger when they call you to what gives you life."((Qurʾan, *al-Anfāl* (8): 24.))

Al-Sidrah: A few years ago, a question was posed to Sayyid al-Sīstānī about why today's youth are so quick to forgo their faith and fall into religious and spiritual crises. In his response, Sayyid al-Sīstānī focused on the need to bolster a sense of pride and care for our religious identity, and to try to direct that innate human sense of pride from a young age towards religion and religious identity. Why did Sayyid al-Sīstānī focus on the issue of "religious identity" when answering this question?

SMK: The question posed to him was about a psychological issue, and that was: Why is it that when many Muslim youth face a doubt or question about their religion, they quickly fall into an existential and religious crisis and a loss of faith? What is the root psychological cause for these sudden crises and the resultant loss of faith? The question was asking what these psychological causes are. For this reason, Sayyid al-Sīstānī gave an answer from a psychological standpoint attempting to identify the latent weakness which leads to this quick defeat. He responded that it is part of human nature to have pride for one's own identity. Sometimes it is pride in a person's national identity—for example, when a person states [proudly], "I am from such and such country"—or his tribal affiliation—"I come from such and such a tribe,"—or even a linguistic identity—for example, "I am Arab, Persian, etc." Every human carries within him a deep-seated sense of pride for his identity. It is this psychological element of pride in one's identity that we must utilize to strengthen a deep sense of religious identity. Therefore, the question was not about responding or resolving these intellectual doubts and deviations, for him to respond scientifically or theoretically, or for example, for him to mention the economic problems, or even the social and sociological issues that cause this religious crisis. It was about the internal psychological issues that cause a person to so quickly lose his faith. The issue [Sayyid al-Sīstānī] identified was that the person does not consider his religion to constitute a part of his identity. Were a person to understand his religion as a part of his identity, he would take the same amount of pride and care regarding his religion as he does for his nation, his language, and so on.

al-Sidrah: We often focus on the intellectual side of the life of ʿulamāʾ*—their research and detailed analyses. do you have any stories of the role of piety in the intellectual and academic upbringing of scholars?*

SMK: Religious sciences are different from other scholarly fields, insofar as the goal of religious sciences is to create a scholar that is a representative of the religion, which is different from [goals of] other intellectual pursuits. The goal of those [fields] is not for the person to become a symbol or representative of a particular belief [within society]. Because this is the goal of religious knowledge—to create a scholar that represents the religion—it is therefore impossible to separate knowledge from piety, to have religious knowledge without a firm relationship with worship and acts of piety. For this reason, we see that *ʿulamāʾ* believe that among the established means for a scholar to become a means of reaching God, and a sign from among the signs of God, is for him to pair knowledge with piety.

It is reported that Sayyid Hādī al-Mīlānī—one of our highly-esteemed scholars and *marājiʿ*—said that one of the conditions of *ijtihād* is *ṣalāt al-layl*. This does not meant that it is impossible, as a matter of fact, for a person to reach the level of *ijtihād* if he is not a performer of *tahajjud*. What he intended was that *ṣalāt al-layl*, by its very existential reality, creates a state of sincerity and humility towards God, and allows a person to reach the blessings and graces of the knowledge of Ahl al-Bayt (ʿ*a*). After all, the *aḥādīth* of the Ahl al-Bayt are not simply just scattered reports. Rather, their narrations contain symbols and secret treasures which a person will not understand without combining knowledge with piety, and truly fearing and humbling oneself towards God.

> …*ṣalāt al-layl*, by its very existential reality, creates a state of sincerity and humility towards God, and allows a person to reach the blessings and graces of the knowledge of Ahl al-Bayt (ʿa).

This is what our *ʿulamāʾ* have devoted themselves to. Thus, for example, it is reported that al-Shaykh al-Anṣārī((al-Shaykh Murtaḍā al-Dizfūlī al-Anṣārī (1214-1281 A.H./1781-1864 C.E.) was the foremost *marjiʿ* of his time, completely transforming the fields of Shiʿi law and legal theory of his time. He is widely recognized as both an exemplary scholar, a pious sage, and a teacher of the greatest scholars of succeeding generations. His effect on modern Shiʿi intellectual and religious history can hardly be overemphasized.)) would go to the shrine of Amīr al-Muʾminīn (ʿ*a*) and weep in view of the public for a long time. This was at a time when he was the sole *marjiʿ* of the Shiʿa. He was setting an example: that the reason he had reached that status—he was the sole *marjiʿ* of his time and continues to be a pillar of juridical thought to this very day—was because he paired and connected his knowledge with piety.

This is what we have observed of our *ʿulamāʾ* and *marājiʿ*, among them our own teacher Sayyid ʿAlī al-Sīstānī, may he prosper for a long time to come. From the beginning of the time I spent with him, even before he became a *marjiʿ*, we saw that he was a [truly] spiritual person. His relationship with worship was on par with his relationship with knowledge and studying. His love for worship was equal to his love for knowledge and study. It was to such an extent that some colleagues tried to dissuade us from his courses, saying things like, “This man is a dervish…preoccupied with other things, just sitting on his

prayer mat with his rosary…He spends hours sitting in the mosque of Kufa and sitting in the mosque of Sahlah," and other things of this nature. This is how they thought about him, as if he was not qualified for juridical thought.

However, he was following the guidance of Amīr al-Muʾminīn (*ʿa*), pairing his knowledge with action, his knowledge with asceticism, distancing himself from worldly manifestations. When speaking to his students, he would also cite the example of Shaykh al-Anṣārī, explaining that [Shaykh al-Anṣārī] was the prime example of a scholar who had combined asceticism with knowledge, and knowledge with action.

The Apprehension of Gleams of Infinite Light: The Upright Religion and Sectarianism

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There is only but one single truth. God, who is *al-Ḥaqq*, is at once the only Truth and the only Reality; there being none other. This divine unicity and cognitive unity calls forth in man a single-minded and wholehearted attachment to the Truth as such. This is as it should be. But God in His infinite perfections is essentially unfathomable. Being separated from Him, we can only know Him through His names, signs, and creations, which are apparently not "one" but rather multiple and multifarious. The multiplicity of the created order makes the single-minded attachment to the One Truth a difficult and somewhat perilous endeavor. To the degree that we become attached to any one particular sign or manifestation and lose sight of its essential identity with the Essence, and hence with all other manifestations, we are not giving God His due and are in reality trying to limit the non-delimited Totality. This truth applies to all things that are primarily connected with the divine and constitute the ways and means by which He is approached. Hence religion, when it is humanized and seen as an ideology that is on par with and in opposition to other religions, acts as an obstacle and barrier to the wholehearted worship of God immaculate—a worship that would constitute what the Qurʾan calls the "upright religion" that was brought by all prophets. ((In many of his speeches, Imam Khumaynī (*r*) reminded his audience that if all of the prophets were to be gathered in one place and at one time, they would not have any conflict or discord with one another. See: http://www.hawzah.net/Hawzah/magazines/MagArt.aspx?MagazineNumberID=4334&id=28408))

The sign which tells us that our hearts are no longer open to the infinite nature of the divine and which warns us that veils have entrapped them is complacency. When we are complacent and comfortable with our religion, being smug with the "fact" that we and only we are in possession of the "whole" truth, that is when the true worship of God ceases and the raison d'être of religion is no longer in place. Such

complacency brings about a false sense of euphoria and happiness. The Qurʾan speaks of this happiness as a quality possessed by the *mushrikūn* in the following verses:

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا ۚ فِطْرَتَ اللَّـهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا ۚ لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّـهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ وَلَـٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾ مُنِيبِينَ إِلَيْهِ وَاتَّقُوهُ وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَلَا تَكُونُوا مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٣١﴾ مِنَ الَّذِينَ فَرَّقُوا دِينَهُمْ وَكَانُوا شِيَعًا ۖ كُلُّ حِزْبٍ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ فَرِحُونَ﴿٣٢﴾

> So set your heart on the religion as a people of pure faith, the origination of Allah according to which He originated mankind (There is no altering Allah's creation; that is the upright religion, but most people do not know)—turning to Him in penitence, and be wary of Him, and maintain the prayer, and do not be among the polytheists—of those who split up their religion and became sects: each faction exulting in what it possessed.((Qurʾan, *al-Rūm* (30):30-32.))

Sulṭān Muḥammad Gunābādī, a mystic of the 19th century, comments on this verse in his exegesis of the Qurʾan:

> Know that on account of his human nature, man is predisposed to attachment and association. If he were to become aware, he would know that he has not achieved human perfections *per se*, and that which he has achieved is not his complete perfection; rather, there exist for him boundless "lost" perfections [of which he is presently deprived]. So, if he is in search of that which he has lost—the seeker being none other than the wayfarer journeying to God in all sincerity—then he will not be happy with that which is [presently] with himself, but rather, he will abhor it and will turn away from it. But he who is not in search of that which he has lost will become attached to nothing but that which he has achieved of superficial perfections such as sciences, beliefs, qualities, moral virtues, mystical disclosures, wealth, and children. It is in this way that "every faction exults in that which it possesses"; the street-sweeper exults in the perfection of his sweeping, the magician of his magic, the businessman of his business, the scholar of his knowledge, the worshiper of his worship, the ascetic of his asceticism, and the mystic of his mysticism.((Sulṭān Muḥammad Gunābādī, *Tafsīr Bayān al-Saʿādah fī Maqāmāt al-ʿIbādah*, vol. 3 (Beirut, 1988), p. 221.))

Now this should not be taken to mean that the “superficial perfections” are not perfections, or that which a person has achieved and acquired of the truth is not the truth, so as to imply either the relativity of knowledge or the relativity of truth, and bring about a debilitating skepticism cum pluralism. Rather, what this quote is emphasizing is the limitation of knowledge that comes with the human state, and the truth that awareness of this limitation is quintessential to the spiritual life of the individual soul as well as the religion as a whole. For it is only when man comes to know that he does not know, that he acquires the necessary humility to turn to God in penitence.

The awareness of his ignorance with respect to reality and the Real allows him to be truly wary of God (*ittaqūhu*) and consequently to continuously aspire to maintain His remembrance by maintaining the prayer.

> For it is only when man comes to know that he does not know, that he acquires the necessary humility to turn to God in penitence.

On the contrary, when man is oblivious to the limitations of his knowledge and claims to possess it in an absolute and exclusive sense—this is when he is making the relative to be the absolute and the limited to be the unlimited, and this is nothing other than shirk.

وَمَا يُؤْمِنُ أَكْثَرُهُم بِاللَّـهِ إِلَّا وَهُم مُّشْرِكُونَ

> And most of them do not believe in Allah without doing shirk.((Qurʾan, *Yūsuf* (12):106.))

When this is done in the case of religion, which is the way to God, it leads to sectarianism. In sectarianism, the *madhāhib* are absolutized to the extent that there remains no room for any other manifestation of God’s infinite Truth.

This does not mean that man cannot know and must remain oblivious of the possibility of deviation in any religion and the coming to the scene of heterodoxies and heresies—for error does exist and it can be recognized. Hence any error posing as a religion or a *madhhab* must be exposed. When any sect moves away from the guiding principles of the religion in which it is based, it becomes a heterodoxy and eventually a heresy. In the case of Islam, the essential and substantial principles of the Truth are succinctly expressed in the *shahādatayn*. Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (ʿ*a*) defines the Muḥammadan Islam and its canonical consequences in the following manner:

الاسلام شهادة أن لا إله إلّا الله والتصديق برسول الله (ص) به

حُقِنَت الدِّمَاءُ وعليه جرتْ المَناكِحُ والمَواريثُ وعلى ظاهره جماعةُ الناس

> Islam is the testimony ‘there is no god but Allah’ and the affirmation of the Messenger of Allah (ṣ); because of it blood is spared, upon it marriages and inheritances take place; and on its apparentness the congregation of people [as an Ummah] transpires.((al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 2, p. 25.))

This “simple” criterion of the *shahādatayn* is in fact extremely profound and full of wisdom. On the one hand, it reflects the breadth and horizontal scope that God wishes Islam to have, whereby anyone who even verbally consents to these truths is included in the fold of God’s infinite mercy and generosity. Allowing for this is to say that the limited understanding of any believer, no matter how weak, is still a truth and an instance of an understanding that is valid. For though it might be weak and low, because it is pointing to something higher and hence “open-ended”—and while it is not in conflict with the basic principles—it is an authentic representation of the truth and is spiritually efficacious.

On the other hand, the criterion of the *shahādatayn* reflects the great depth and the vertical infinitude of the truth of Islam and God. It is because *tawḥīd*, or God’s unicity, ultimately pertains to His Essence, which de facto cannot be fathomed, and because the inner substance of the Messenger of Allah (ṣ) is beyond the reach of lesser men, that the *shahādatayn* remind us of Divine Mystery and our limitations with regard to it. To rephrase, speculatively (*theoria*) the Divine Essence is unknowable and Its infinite words or signs are inexhaustible, and practically (*praxis*) the prophetic substance is superabundant and the sunnah of the Prophet (ṣ) cannot be practiced by imperfect men in its totality.

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To repeat, on the one hand, the limited truth is true in reality (it is not a construct and creation of the human mind as asserted by skeptics, relativists, and pluralists), and this leads to certainty on the cognitive plane and resolve on the volitional level. With regards to the *madhhab* that any believer might be following, it brings about a surety and determination that is characteristic of those that worship God. On the other hand, the limited truth is limited due to man’s limitation of knowledge, and upon introspection, he knows that he does not know the total Truth, and this leads to a sacred perplexity (*taḥayyur*) on the noetic plane and to humility on the plane of the will. Such an awareness ensures that the follower of a *madhhab* does not absolutize it and take it to be the Truth. But if he were to put humility aside and feign to own the “truth”, then the ingrained sectarianism that would ensue would initially set him at odds with other sects, but eventually it would put him in conflict with other followers of his own sect, as he would see their version or reading of the sect to be “wrong” precisely because it is against his own understanding and the one that he “possesses”.

The allure of this spirit of "possessing" the truth is so great that it is ubiquitously found in all religious movements—especially those that claim to be the defenders of the true doctrine. Such claims are more predominant among the ideologues, activists, and the politicians, as their predilection for the pole of action over contemplation, or for the level of the rational over the properly intellectual does not give them the necessary depth of understanding to have an awareness of the truth that is not in their possession (*ladayhim*) and that is principially with God (*ʿind Allah*). The recent claims of a government official in Iran, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, to the ascendancy of the "school of Iran" over the "school of Islam", can be understood in this light, as can the outrageous statements of the Kuwaiti-born demagogue, Yāsir al-Ḥabīb, on one side, as well as the diatribe of Wahhabi pulpiteers, on the other.

On a positive note, there are in the ummah more balanced voices of greater intellectuality. The most recent of these is the historic fatwa of the Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Āyatullāh al-ʿUẓmā al-Sayyid ʿAlī Khamenei, in which he decreed:

> [Even] the deprecation of the notables of our Sunni brothers is forbidden (*ḥarām*), to say nothing of the denunciation of the wife of the Prophet (the blessings of Allah upon him and his progeny) so as to violate her honor—this is rather not even possible in respect of the wives of the prophets [in general] and especially in the case of their master, the Greatest Messenger (the blessings of Allah upon him and his progeny).((يحرم النيل من رموز إخواننا السنة فضلاً عن اتهام زوج النبي (صلّى الله عليه وآله) بما يخل بشرفها بل هذا الأمر ممتنع على نساء الأنبياء وخصوصاً سيدهم الرسول الأعظم (صلّى الله عليه وآله).))

Now, those sectarians who are sincere in their defense of their limited version of truth bring forth from traditional sources proofs for their perspective. On one level, it is easy to respond to them by saying that they are only seeing one side of the story and are not giving due attention to other traditions which oppose and may even abrogate their own proofs. But this, though perhaps sufficient for some, would be a superficial response. For while it is true that such individuals are guilty of absolutizing the limited truth that is in their possession, the very existence of such traditions which allow them to do so is a matter that is open to questioning. Why do there exist narrations and traditions in the Shiʿi corpus that would be found offensive to Sunnis and vice versa? Is it the case that these traditions have simply been fabricated? Do they, as the sectarians would have us believe, allude to the fact that the other side is totally wrong and that there is only one sect that will be saved, all the others deserving only hellfire? Or can there be another explanation for these polemical traditions?

The Dome of the Rock (مسجد قبة الصخرة), on the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem.

One possible explanation comes from the mystics of Islam. In their discussions on the beautiful names of Allah, they talk of two different realities which they refer to with the expressions, "the marriage of the names" and the "opposition of the names".((تناكح بين السماء والتقابل الذي في الأسماء)) The latter phrase outlines the necessity of the opposition of certain names with others on the plane of manifestation. They stress the fact that this opposition here only highlights the greatness of the unity that prevails on the higher planes. To them the qualitative plenitude of God's unicity directly implies His rich multiplicity, along with its apparent conflicts and differences.

It is in this light that there can be "necessary antagonisms" among the *madhāhib*; for in its attempt to fully manifest its idea and "name", each *madhhab* seeks to forge an identity that is "separate" from the others.

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The polemics that follow serve to maintain its integrity and allow for the *madhhab* to display its particular genius. Hence the existence of certain divisive traditions—usually based on historical details

and facts—is perhaps the *madhhab*'s way of keeping the lowest of their adherents within the fold.

However, what kept these traditions from feeding the flames of rampant sectarianism in the past was the existence of higher levels of intellectuality and a living spirituality as embodied in the *ʿulamāʾ* and the saints of Islam. These accomplished souls made sure that the *madhhab* was firmly grounded in the doctrines and principles of Islam formally speaking, that it was in continuous communion with the Prophetic presence on the substantial level, and that it was open to spiritual wayfaring on the essential plane. Of course, those who could reach this last stage were few indeed, but it was they who used the full capacity of their intellect to see the unity that lies beyond the opposition and antagonism in the manifested order, and it is they who would then (re)turn to the people to enjoin them to work towards unity.

تَحْسَبُهُمْ جَمِيعًا وَقُلُوبُهُمْ شَتَّىٰ

> You suppose them to be a united body, but their hearts are disunited. That is because they are a lot who do not intellect.((Qurʾan, *al-Ḥashr* (59):14.))

Unity is based upon the coming together of the hearts; disunity is their being dispersed. Disunity is a sign of an absence of true intellectuality. Imam ʿAlī (ʿ*a*), who was the very embodiment of principled intellectuality after the Prophet (ṣ), wholeheartedly practiced the Qurʾanic imperative of unity and avoided creating disunity at all costs. Āyatullāh Jawādī Āmulī writes:

> Ḥaḍrat Amīr al-Muʾminīn (ʿ*a*) was foremost in not being tainted by any type of sectarianism nor sullied by any kind of internecine discord; his way was always in line with universal agreement [and general consent].((Jawādī Āmulī, *The Expectation of Mankind from Religion,* p. 127.))

Hence, in a letter to Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī, Imam ʿAlī (ʿ*a*) wrote:

وليس رَجُلٌ فاعلم أحرص على جماعةِ أمّةِ محمدٍ (ص) وأُلفَتِها مِنّي أبتَغِي بذلك حُسْنَ الثوابِ وكَرَمَ المآبِ

> There is not a man—heed this—more anxious to preserve the integrity and union of the ummah of Muḥammad (ṣ) than I. I seek for this [nothing but] a goodly reward and a noble end [with Allah].((*Nahj al-Balāgah*, sermon 78.))

The Imam warned of the dangers of disunity in this way:

فَإياكم والتَّلَوُّنَ في دين اللهِ فإنَّ جماعةً فيما تَكرَهونَ من الحقِّ خيرٌ من فُرقَةٍ فيما تُحِبُّونَ من الباطلِ وإنَّ اللهَ سبحانَه لم يُعْطِ أحداً بِفُرقَةٍ خيراً مِمَّنْ مضى ولا مِمَّن بَقِي

> Beware of subjecting God's religion to vagaries [and whims]. Indeed unity for the truth, though disliked by you, is better than divisiveness for a falsehood that you like; and indeed Allah, glory be to Him, has given no good to anyone on account of division and disunity—neither in the past nor in the future.((*Nahj al-Balāgah*, sermon 176.))

Hence, when we give our own "color" (*talawwun*) to religion and limit it by forcing it to confine to the limits of our human imperfections and *nafsānī* predilections, we open the way to a false happiness or smugness with regards to the product of our caprice. We label this created sect and contrived faction with the word "religion", not realizing that in doing so we effectively put an end to the true nature of religion and stifle its ability to act as an open-ended vehicle of transformation (an *upaya*, as the "upper" end of religion must necessarily involve the unlimited, infinite, and mysterious). This caricature of religion, being thus delimited and cut off vertically from its infinite source, the Real, is also cut off horizontally from other such caricatures, leading to contrariety and opposition with them.

Such division and divisiveness is liked by the lower soul as it is "happy" with its "own" creation and wishes for it to supersede all others.

فَتَقَطَّعُوا أَمْرَهُم بَيْنَهُمْ زُبُرًا ۖ كُلُّ حِزْبٍ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ فَرِحُونَ

> But they fragmented their religion among themselves, each party exulting in what it had.((Qurʾan, *al-Muʾminūn* (23):53.))

If on the other hand, we do not color the religion of Allah with our own hands, and we take what has come to us of the truth from Him—knowing it to be both the truth and limited—and use it to transcend ourselves by going beyond the lower caprice of our souls, though difficult and disliked by them, we will be able to see the limited truth in other divine dispensations and in other religious people. This subtle and sublime vision might enable us to unite with them for the sake of the higher Truth and His wish to be known in His infinite plenitude; but failing that, it must at the very least make us refrain from indulging in sectarianism that is the kiss of death of spirituality as such.

Intellection in the Islamic Tradition: A Lecture by Shahīd Muṭahharī

The following is the transcript of a lecture series by Shahīd Murtaẓā Muṭahharī to the Islamic Association of Doctors in Iran, delivered in the years 1973-1974. The series was later published, then translated by Dr. Mansoor Limba under the title Training and Education in Islam *(Ahlul Bayt University, 2011), and can be purchased here. The translation has been slightly edited for clarity and readability.*

Intellection (*Taʿaqqul*) in the Qurʾan

Islam strongly advocates intellection (*taʿaqqul*). I shall cite a Qurʾanic verse and a tradition which mentions this verse. We read in *Surat al-Zumar*:

فَبَشِّرْ عِبَادِ ٱلَّذِينَ يَسْتَمِعُونَ ٱلْقَوْلَ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ أَحْسَنَهُۥٓ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ هَدَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ ۖ وَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمْ أُو۟لُوا۟ ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ

"So give good news to My servants who listen to what is said and follow the best of it. They are the ones whom Allah has guided, and it is they who possess *albāb*."((Qurʾan, *al-Zumar* (39):17-18.))

The subject begins with "My servants." It is as if the Qurʾan wants to say that to be Allah's servant, one must have a certain description and this description would be a requisite for being His servant—that such a servant "listens to what is said." *Samāʿ* (to hear*)* is different from *istimaʿ* (to listen). *Samaʿ* means to hear something whether you intended to listen or not. *Istimāʿ* means to hear but with attention. For example, you take a seat here [in this lecture hall] and prepare yourself for listening [to a lecturer]. Regarding [*ḥarām*] music, it is said that hearing it is not *harām*; what is *harām* is listening to it. The Qurʾan in this verse is describing those who *listen* to what is said. It means they do not reject any word which they have not yet discerned, and they do not say that they do not want to listen to it. They listen first and then make an assessment and an analysis afterward. They evaluate good and bad, and choose and follow the best of what they have heard. In essence, the verse highlights the independence of the intellect or reason (*ʿaql*) which must serve as a filter for humankind. He must filter all that he hears, meticulously assessing what is good and bad, and choosing and following the best of it.

The verse continues: “They are the ones whom Allah has guided.” Although this guidance is a rational one, the Qurʾan regards it as divine guidance. They are the ones who truly possess intellect (*ulu al-albāb*). *Albāb* is the plural form of the word *lubb,* which means kernel, not only in the sense of a “mind” but is used in a general sense, and is often used to describe fruits or foods. For example, we speak of a “walnut’s kernel.” Perhaps this is one of those expressions used exclusively by the Qurʾan (as we have not encountered this usage in other texts). Even if it were not the case, we can say that the Qurʾan uses the word “kernel” in many instances in describing the intellect. It is as if the Qurʾan likens man to a walnut or an almond which is entirely covered, but his essential part is his kernel which is located within. If you consider the entire human body and its limbs, his kernel is his intellect or reason. What shall we call an almond without a kernel? We say that it is empty or hollow, and it is thrown away. A person who lacks intellect does not possess the kernel and criterion of humanity; he is a hollow person. He is human in form but not in content. As such, intelligence sums up the meaning of “humanity” to that extent; to be intelligent bespeaks of his independence—“who listen to what is said and follow the best of it.” Basically, one cannot find an expression better than this call for man to support his independence: he must have the power to assess and evaluate. He must be able to analyze issues. A person who does not possess this talent is lacking something essential.

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Taʿaqqul in the Sunnah

In the *sunnah,*((Editor’s note: The Arabic word *sunnah* can be generally translated as “tradition” or “norm.” In the parlance of Shiʿi Islam it refers to the speech and actions of the Prophet Mohammad and the Imams (ṣ).)) especially in Shiʿi narrations, the intellect or intellection has been given much importance. One of the merits of Shiʿi narrations compared to non-Shiʿi narrations is the greater importance and authority given to the intellect. For this reason, social writers today including Sunnis acknowledge that in the Islamic period, Shiʿi reasoning has been stronger than its Sunni counterpart.

Aḥmad Amīn has a famous quadrilogy entitled *Fajr al-Islām*, *Ḍuhā al-Islām*, *Ẓuhr al-Islām*, and *Yawm al-Islām*. *Fajr al-Islām* is a single volume treatise. *Ḍuhā al-Islām* has three volumes. *Ẓuhr al-Islām* has four volumes. *Yawm al-Islām* is a one volume book. All-in-all, the quadrilogy has nine volumes. The treatise is very technical and, of course, from a Shiʿi perspective, it has ample points of weakness. In fact, some have even considered it an anti-Shiʿa book, but academically it is no doubt profound.

Although a renowned anti-Shiʿa, in this book Amīn acknowledges that Shiʿi reasoning has always been more deductive. He wants to drive home the point that the reason why Shiʿi reasoning is more deductive is that they are more familiar with speculative interpretations (*taʾwīlāt*).((Editor’s note: *Taʾwīl* (pl. *taʾwīlāt*) is a technical term that is translated here as the esoteric interpretation of the Qurʾanic text. It refers primarily to meanings of Qurʾanic statements that are beyond, yet in consonance with, the surface-level meaning of the text. For more information regarding *taʾwīl*, see “Qurʾanic *Taʾwīl*: Comparing the Views of Ibn ʿArabī and ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī.”)) But the truth of the matter is that the

ones responsible for this condition are the infallible Imams (ʿ*a*) who have invited people to thinking and intellection. Amīn says, “For example, philosophy during the Islamic period flourished among the Shiʿa and not as much among the Sunnis. Philosophy was non-existent in Egypt until it was ruled by the Shiʿa. When the Shiʿa came, philosophy flourished. Then, as Shiʿism was no longer dominant in Egypt, philosophy also diminished and was almost non-extant until the last century when Sayyid Jamāl (who was a Shiʿa) came to Egypt and the intellectual market flourished again.” Then he (Amīn) has this pleasant expression:

والحق أن الفلسفة بالتشيع الصق منها بالتسنن

“The truth is that philosophy adheres more to Shiʿism than it does to Sunnism.”

In general, according to him, Shiʿi reasoning is more deductive. The reason for this—which perhaps he did not pay attention to—is that compared to its Sunni counterpart, the Shiʿi tradition has given more importance to it. In scholastic theology (*kalām*), Sunnis were divided into two opposite camps from the beginning, viz. Muʿtazilites and the Ashʿarites. The Muʿtazilites were more inclined to rationalism while the Ashʿarites leaned more to *taʿabbud*. The Shiʿa were with the Muʿtazilites; they had a difference of opinion with the Muʿtazilites but in principle they were together. Their commonality was that both gave more value and importance to reason and reasoning. In Shiʿi narrations, there are wondrous expressions about the intellect which cannot be found in Sunni books. Shiʿi books like *al-Kāfī, Biḥār al-Anwār,* and other hadith collections begin with *Kitāb al-ʿAql wa-l-Jahl* (*The Book of Intellect and Ignorance*), followed by sections on *Tawḥīd*, Prophethood, and *Ḥujjah.*((*Tawḥīd* means the belief in the Unicity of Allah, the principle belief of Islam. *Ḥujjah* means ‘authority’, and may refer to any means of obtaining evidentiary value to act a certain way, whether that be a religious text or religious personality, such as a prophet or imam.)) Of course, reason or intellect is juxtaposed with ignorance which I shall explain. We can see that Shiʿi narrations give remarkable value and respect to reason and its validity.

The Intellect (ʿ*aql*) and Ignorance (*jahl*) in Islamic *Aḥādīth*

It is no trifling matter for an Imam to say that Allah has two types of authority (*ḥujjah*): an outward authority and an inward authority. The outward authority refers to the Prophets (ʿ*a*) while the inward authority denotes the intellects of people.((The author is referring to the following report from Imam al-Kāẓim: يا هشام إن لله على الناس حجتين: حجة ظاهرة وحجة باطنة، فأما الظاهرة فالرسل والأنبياء والأئمة – عليهم السلام –، وأما الباطنة فالعقول. ” Hishām! God has two types of authority against humankind: an outward authority and an inward authority. The outward (authority) is the prophets, messengers, and imams—peace be upon them. The inward (authority) is the intellects. (Al-Kulaynī, *Al-Kāfī*, vol. 1, book 1, hadith 12, p. 16.)))This hadith is an established truths among the Shiʿi *aḥādīth*, and can be found in *al-Kāfī*. Now, some may have rejected the purport of this hadith, i.e., whether or not the intellect is actually authoritative. It is not my concern here to refute this objection. In the end of the day, this concept exists (among Shiʿi *aḥādīth*).

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"Ignorance" (*jahl*) which is mentioned in this tradition is the exact opposite of intellect (ʿ*aql*), and in Islamic narrations, ʿ*aql* refers to the analytical faculty. In most cases you can see, Islam disparages the ignorant. As the opposite of "learned", *jāhil* does not mean "illiterate." Rather, it means the opposite of intelligent. An *āqil* is one who does not possess this ability. We know of many individuals who are learned yet they are *jāhil*. They are learned in the sense that they have outwardly vast knowledge. They know many things. Yet, their minds are nothing but storerooms. They have no *ijtihād* of their own.((*Ijtihād* generally means to strive or work hard. It technically refers to the process by which a person contemplates, thinks, and researches in order to come to a conclusion. In Islamic law, *ijtihād* would refer to the process of deriving legal conclusions from religious sources.)) They have no ability to inference. They cannot analyze issues. According to Islam, such people are ignorant in the sense that their intellects are dull. They may be knowledgeable but their intellects are dull.

We have heard the following narration frequently:

الحكمة ضالة المؤمن

> Wisdom is the lost property of the faithful.

No doubt, wisdom means knowledge with real substance, which is profound and deep rooted and not a delusion. That is, the state of the faithful in seeking truths must be like that of a person who has lost something valuable and is always looking for it. There are other narrations which add to this. There was a time when I listed the references for this narration and I found close to twenty versions. One such reference states:

خذوا الحكمة ولو من أهل النفاق...و لو من مشرك

> Acquire wisdom even from the people of hypocrisy…even if they may be polytheists.

That is, if you feel that what he has is right and is knowledge or wisdom, do not worry about whether he is an unbeliever, polytheist, impure, or non-Muslim. Go and take it. Wisdom is yours and is only borrowed by him.

أينما وجدها فهو أحق بها

“Wherever he finds it, he is more deserving of it.”

That is, whenever a believer finds wisdom, he must consider himself more worthy to possess it.

Let us not mind this (contemporary) backwards intellectual state of ours in which everything we have is negatively perceived. In the early part of the second century when the spread of Islam was at its height, suddenly texts of all sciences of those outside the Muslim world—Persians, Byzantium, Indian, Greek—were translated and introduced to the Muslim world. What was the reason behind this and why did the Muslim world not show any opposition? The reason was that there are such teachings such as this. These teachings paved the way such that if a book were found even in far-off China, there would be nothing wrong in translating it:

اطلبوا العلم ولو بالصين

Seek knowledge even if it is in China.

For example, ʿAbd Allah ibn al-Muqaffaʿ who translated the book *Aristotelian Logic* lived during the time of Imam al-Ṣādiq (ʿ*a*); rather, actually from the Umayyad period, but it reached its peak during Imam al-Ṣādiq's (ʿ*a*) time. During the imamate of some of the Imams during the reign of the Abbasid Caliphs Hārun and Maʾmūn, texts of the primary sciences were voluminously translated. Bayt al-Ḥikmah was a school which was unprecedented in the world at the time and matchless for some time afterward.

Yes, our Imams (ʿ*a*) were critical of the caliphs and exposed their deviations again and again. As the caliphs were accursed and rejected, the Imams (ʿ*a*) unveiled the true colors of these people. Yet, we cannot see even a single tradition or narration of our Imams (ʿ*a*) suggesting that efforts such as Bayt al-Ḥikmah should be treated as a *bidʿah* in religion.((*Bidʿah* generally means innovation. Here it refers to the technical meaning of Islam's general prohibition of introducing changes or additions into religious practice and attributing them to religion where one has no authority to do so.)) The Imams could have said, "One of the harmful things to have happened to our community has been the translation of scientific texts of the unbelieving nations, such as the Greeks, Byzantines, Indians, and Persians, and the introduction of them into the Muslim world." This was in spite of the fact that a statement like this would have been among the best means to tarnish their image with the common people. However, we have not seen even a single tradition in which this work of the caliphs was portrayed as an act of *bidʿah* and therefore contrary to Islam.

My point is that it is a principle which is introduced by Islam itself: "Acquire wisdom even from the people of hypocrisy." Traditions related to this subject have excellent content. There is a tradition in our collection in which Jesus Christ (ʿ*a*) is reported to have said:

كونوا نقاد الكلام

> Be a critic of speech.

> My point is that it is a principle which is introduced by Islam itself: "Acquire wisdom even from the people of hypocrisy."

That is, just as the money-changer weighs a coin, identifying what is more or less valuable in it and taking the more valuable, likewise you must also be such with respect to speech and points of argument. We take whatever others have [which is valuable and good]. We have our own thinking and intellects. We are not afraid that we are doing something wrong by this. We think about such statements, and we take whatever is good in them and reject whatever is bad in them. Now, what is the basis for this idea: "Acquire wisdom even if it were from hypocrites, the faithless, or from polytheists?" It is this Qurʾanic injunction:

فَبَشِّرْ عِبَادِ ٱلَّذِينَ يَسْتَمِعُونَ ٱلْقَوْلَ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ أَحْسَنَهُۥٓ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ هَدَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ ۖ وَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمْ أُو۟لُوا۟ ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ

> So give good news to My servants who listen to what is said and follow the best of it. They are the ones whom Allah has guided, and it is they who possess *albāb*.((Quran, *al-Zumar* (39):17-18.))

A Narration from Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓim (ʿ*a*)

There is a famous narration recorded in *al-Kāfī* from Imam Mūsā ibn Jaʿfar al-Kāẓim (ʿ*a*) addressed to Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam. Hishām was one of our hadith narrators but he was a narrator who often focused on the doctrinal pillars of faith (*usūl al-dīn*).((*Usūl al-Dīn* translates to "Principles of Religion", and generally refers to matters of faith, such as to believe in the Oneness of Allah, the Day of Resurrection, and the Prophethood of Mohammad (ṣ). *Usūl al-Dīn* can be contrasted with *furūʿ al-dīn*, which translates to "Branches of Religion" and refers to matters of religious practice, such as prayer, fasting, and bidding others to do good and prohibiting them from evil.)) In the parlance of that time, he was known as a *mutakallim*((*Mutakallim* refers to a scholastic theologian.)) although he himself would likely have been reluctant to accept this label. He used to engage with the theologians. That is, he used to discuss *tawḥīd*, prophethood, *maʿād*,((*Maʿād* generally means "to return" but here refers specifically to the belief in the Day of Resurrection.)) and the general principles of religion. There is a consensus of opinion among Sunnis and Shiʿa that Hishām was one of the most distinguished theologians during his time.

Recently, in preparation for writing the book *A Historical Study of Mutual Services of Islam and Iran,*((The original title in Farsi is *Khadamāt-i Mutaqābil-i Islām wa Īrān.*)) I read the very profound book, *The History of the Science of Theology*((The original title in Farsi is *Tāhrīkh-i ʿIlm-i Kalām*.)) by Shibli Nuʿmānī, the Indian scholar. In narrating the life of Abū al-Hadhīl Allāf—an outstanding theologian who was of Persian origin and by whose hand many Zoroastrians of Persia became Muslims—I noticed that Nuʿmānī thus wrote: "Everyone would avoid debating with Abū al-Hadhīl who, in turn, would avoid debating with Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam."

The point is that Hishām, who was highly talented, and academically and intellectually engaged, was spoken to by Imam Mūsā ibn Jaʿfar (ʿ*a*). The Imam (ʿ*a*) told him:

يا هشام! إن الله تبراك و تعالى بشّر أهلَ العقلِ والفهمِ في كتابِه فقال: فَبَشِّرْ عِبَادِ ٱلَّذِينَ يَسْتَمِعُونَ ٱلْقَوْلَ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ أَحْسَنَهُ...

> O Hisham! Allah, the Blessed, the Exalted, gave good news in His Book to the people of intellect and understanding: "So give good news to My servants who

> listen to what is said and follow the best of it. They are the ones whom Allah has guided, and it is they who possess *albāb*."((Muhammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 1, pg. 132, and *Tuḥaf al-ʿUqūl*, vol. 1, pg. 383.))

The above noble verse mentions the intellect, which its basic function is analysis, filtering, and separating the correct from the incorrect.

One of the intellect's functions is the acquisition of knowledge and learning, which is not that important. But to analyze, digest, scrutinize, and separate the correct from the incorrect, it is only then that the intellect in its true sense begins to function.

There are two excellent statements of Abū ʿAlī ibn Sīnā(([Editor's Note:] Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Sīnā Balkhī, or Ibn Sīnā (c. 980-1037) was a Persian polymath, and arguably the most influential philosopher and physician of the Islamic world.)) that can be both found in the book *al-Ishārāt.* One is as follows:

من تعود أن يصدق بغير دليل فقد إنخلع من كسوة الانسانية

> Whoever is accustomed to accepting a statement without any reason has ceased being human.((*Al-Ishārāt*, or in full, *al-Ishārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt* was a later work of Abu ʿAlī ibn Sīnā, consisting of four parts, viz. logic, physics, metaphysics, and mysticism. [Trans.]))

> But to analyze, digest, scrutinize, and separate the correct from the incorrect, it is only then that the intellect in its true sense begins to function.

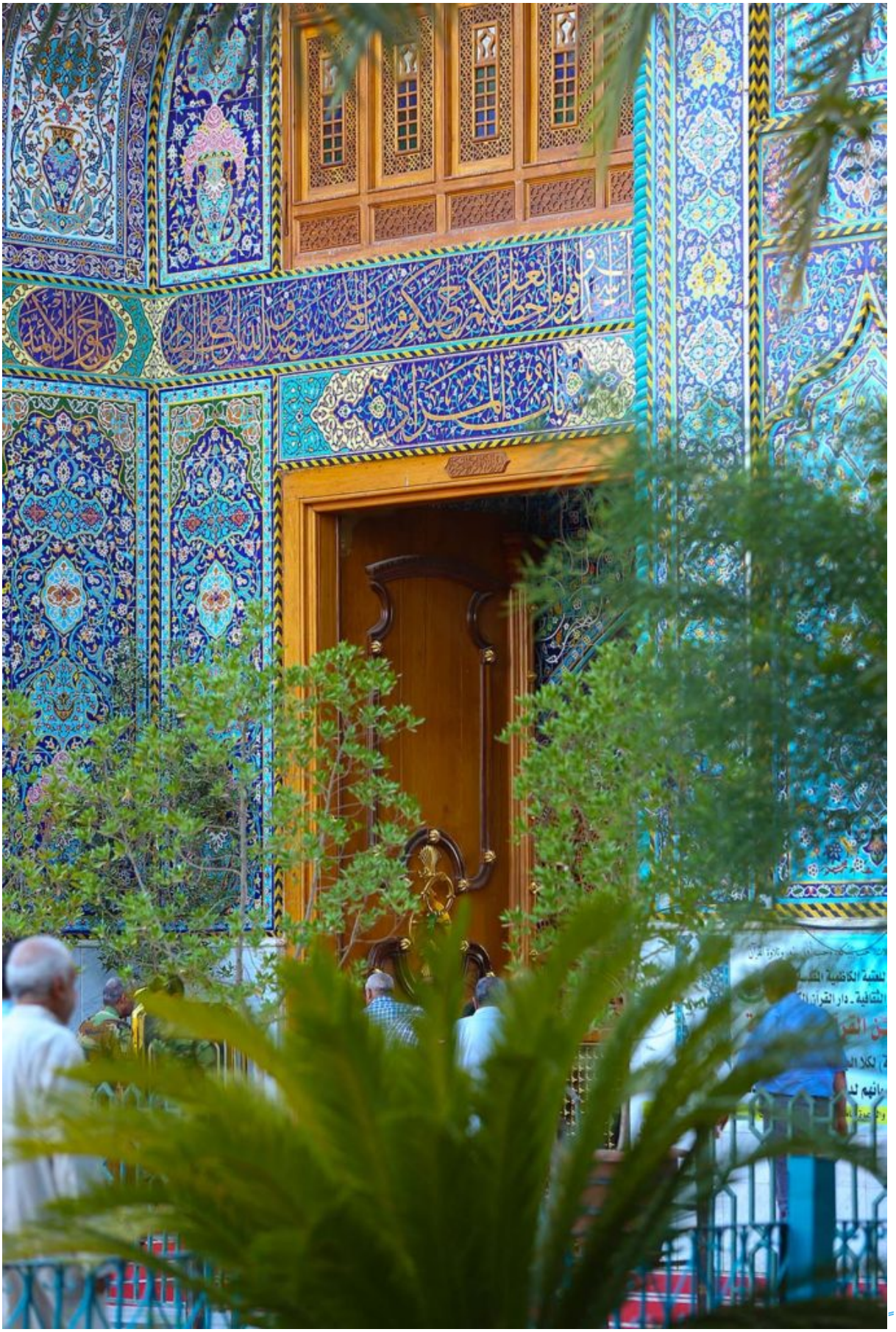
That is, a human being does not accept a statement without reason. On the contrary, it is also bad for a person to reject everything without any reason. He says:

كل ما قرع سمعك من العجائب فذره في بقعة الامكان ما لم يذدك عنه قائم البرهان

> Regarding all the strange things that reach your ear, allow for the possibility of it, so long as you have not a proof for or against it.((Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt*, vol. 3 (Qumm: Daftar Nashr al-Kitāb), 418.))

That is, if you hear something strange, do not reject it so long as you know it could be possible, nor

should you accept it outright. Say instead, “It could be so.” A real human being is one whose acceptance or rejection is based on reason, and whenever there is no authority to establish its correctness or incorrectness, that person should say, “I do not know.”



The Necessity for Combining the Intellect and Knowledge

The narration of Imam [Mūsā] (ʿ*a*) is very elaborate. I will only quote parts of it. The Imam (ʿ*a*) then said that one must not be content with the intellect alone. The intellect must be coupled with knowledge. The intellect has an instinctive or natural state which everyone has, and knowledge enhances the intellect. The intellect must be nourished by knowledge. In *Nahj al-Balāghah* and other hadith collections, the intellect and knowledge are described as such. Sometimes, knowledge is called *al-masmūʿ* (that which is heard from outside of the self) while sometimes it is referred to as *al-matbūʿ* (that which is innate within the self). That is, one type of knowledge is described as *ʿilm* while the other type of knowledge is described as *ʿaql.* The difference is this: the former is called *al-matbūʿ,* which implies that it is innate and natural, while the latter is called *al-masmūʿ* implying that it is a type of acquired (*iktisābī*) knowledge and not innate. It is greatly emphasized that the "heard intellect" and "innate knowledge" are useful when they both function in their own respective ways. Meaning, people who are passive recipients function simply as storage vessels for pieces of information, and are strongly censured in *aḥādīth*.

What Bacon Says

In a famous and excellent quotation, Francis Bacon is reported to have said that learned men are of three types. Some are like ants. They always bring grains from the outside and store them. Their minds are like storage rooms. In reality, they are like tape recorders. They record whatever they hear. A second type are those who resemble silk-worms. They weave their own thread from within themselves. They are not really learned men because they do not acquire anything from the outside. They want to produce something out of their imagination. Their impending end, however, is suffocation inside their own cocoons. A third type are those who are like honeybees. They extract the juice of flowers and they produce honey from it.((Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, Book 1, Aphorism 95.))

This question of the "heard intellect" and the "innate intellect" is mentioned in the hadith. "Heard knowledge" is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by its "innate" counterpart. That is, one must digest whatever he or she has acquired from outside through this inward power–this analytical faculty–so as to produce something useful.

Then the Imam (ʿ*a*) said:

يا هشام! ثم بيّن أن العقل مع العلم

O Hishām! It is clear that the intellect (ʿ*aql*) is in alliance with knowledge (ʿ*ilm*).

As such, it is stated in the Qurʾanic verse:

وَتِلْكَ ٱلْأَمْثَٰلُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ ۖ وَمَا يَعْقِلُهَآ إِلَّا ٱلْعَٰلِمُونَ

> And We draw these parables for mankind; but no one grasps them except those who have knowledge.((Qur'an, *al-ʿAnkabūt* (29):43.))

That is, one must digest whatever he or she has acquired from outside through this inward power–this analytical faculty–so as to produce something useful.

That is, one must have knowledge at the outset. He must procure the raw material and then have the intellect to analyze it. For example, if I have a strong intellect like that of Abū ʿAlī ibn Sīnā, and the Qurʾan says that history gives very good moral lessons, but I do not have any knowledge of history, what can my intellect understand? Or, we are told that there are divine signs and symbols in this entire world of creation and at the same time I have an excellent intellect, yet I do not know the raw materials of this creation. What can I understand with my intellect, and how can I discover those divine signs? I must discover them through knowledge and understand them through my intellect.

The Question of *Taqlīd*

يا هشام! ثم ذم الذين لا يعلمون فقال: وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ ٱتَّبِعُوا۟ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ قَالُوا۟ بَلْ نَتَّبِعُ مَآ أَلْفَيْنَا عَلَيْهِ ءَابَآءَنَآ ۚ أَوَلَوْ كَانَ ءَابَآؤُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ شَيْـًٔا وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ

> O Hishām! Allah has further censured those who do not exercise their reason with the words, "When they are told, 'Follow what Allah has sent down,' they say, 'We would rather follow what we found our fathers following.' What, even if their fathers neither applied reason nor were guided?"((Qur'an, *al-Baqarah* (2):170.))

We have heard a lot about *taqlīd*. The Qurʾan has strongly opposed what is known today as "traditionalism," or the acceptance of whatever was in the past. This sheep-like attitude in man; this blind imitation of predecessors, forefathers, or ancestors merely on the basis of their being forefathers or ancestors. I have noticed that whenever a Prophet (ʿ*a*) encountered his people, there was one thing given emphasis and to which he called his people, but there were two or three common issues encountered by every Prophet (ʿ*a*). Some were positive while others were negative. For example, t*awḥīd* is something positive presented by every Prophet (ʿ*a*). One of the common things encountered by every Prophet (ʿ*a*) and which every nation dealt with was the imitation of predecessors: "We do not accept what you say because it is something new and we are accustomed to the way of the past generation

and our forefathers and we follow their path." This state of submission to those who were in the past is something against reason. The Qurʾan wants man to choose his way according to his intellect. Thus, the campaign of the Qurʾan against imitation or the so-called "traditionalism" is a campaign in favor of the intellect.

Following the Majority

Another issue is that of number. Just as the sheep-like individual follows his predecessors, man wants to be identified with the majority. As the saying goes, "If you do not want to be disgraced, then join the majority."

If the majority is a disgrace, then joining it is a disgraceful act. However, man has a strong inclination to join the majority. There are many such cases among the *fuqahāʾ*.((*Fuqahāʾ* (sing. *faqīh*) refers to the class of Islamic jurists.)) A *faqīh* infers an issue but he has no courage to express it. He would investigate and see whether or not there is a jurist or jurists who share his opinion. It is very rare for a jurist to express his *fatwā* (legal opinion) after he finds out that no jurist before him had issued such an edict before. That is, he is frightened when he finds out that he is alone. The same is true in other fields. These days, however, it is as if to be individual has become the fashionable thing, perhaps as the Europeans have inspired. Meaning, the situation has tilted to the other extreme. Everyone strives to be unique and to be known to have a new idea. It is the exact opposite of our predecessors. If they had something to say, our predecessors were reluctant to do it alone. In order to give the impression that they were not alone, they would mention others who share their views. Abū ʿAlī ibn Sīnā thus explained: "Whatever I say, I would quote from Aristotle because if I claim it to be my own, no one would believe it." Mulla Sadra persisted on quoting his predecessors and explaining his ideas through their words because, at the time, following the majority was in vogue. Today, the case is the opposite. If someone says something which is already said by someone else, it no longer has value. In any case, the Qurʾan condemns taking the majority as the criterion for something being true.

The Imam (ʿ*a*) states that the Qurʾan condemns the majority when it states:

وَإِن تُطِعْ أَكْثَرَ مَن فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ يُضِلُّوكَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ إِن يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا ٱلظَّنَّ وَإِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَخْرُصُونَ

If you obey most of those on the earth, they will lead you astray from the way of Allah. They follow nothing but conjectures and they do nothing but surmise.((Qurʾan, *al-Anʿām* (6):116.))

That is, if you follow the majority of people, you will be misguided because they do not follow reason; they follow conjecture and speculation. They follow whatever they speculate. Since most people are like that, you must not trust the majority.

This is in itself another way of giving independence to the intellect and an invitation to the fact that the intellect is the criterion for something being correct.

Not Following the Whims and Caprice of People

The Imam (ʿ*a*) continued in the hadith, saying, "O Hishām! Do not trust what people say. Do not trust their judgement. The judgement must be yours. O Hishām! If there is a walnut in your hand and people say that what is in your hand is a pearl, you should not be deceived by them, since you know that it is indeed a walnut. On the contrary, if you have a pearl in your hand and everyone you meet says that it is a walnut, you should not believe them. If all people say that it is a walnut where in fact it is not, you must follow your own judgement, intellect, and reason as your guide."

The discussion on intellect ends here for now…We have many citations from the Qurʾan and the *sunnah* regarding the intellect, and I think we have discussed enough as it relates to education. Islam advocates nourishment, development, and independence of the intellect, and does not advocate its suppression, undermining, or extinction.

A Drop in the Sea: The Life and Character of Mirza al-Shirazi

How do we live a life of both knowledge and piety, of critical investigation and a profound faith in the Unseen? Traditionally, Muslims would listen to and share anecdotes from the lives of their eminent scholars, to draw inspiration on how to combine the seemingly conflicting virtues of scholarship and devotion. In the process, they would keep alive the memory of those pious figures, and connect themselves to the legacies those scholars bestowed to the larger community.

One such exemplary scholar was Sayyid Muhammad Ḥasan al-Shīrāzī, also known as Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī, whose piety and scholarship were revered far beyond the confines of the seminaries of higher learning. Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī was born in 1230 A.H./1814 C.E., to a scholarly family in Shiraz, and began his studies from a very young age in that city. He traveled first to the city of Isfahan, then to the seminaries of Iraq to continue his education. He was one of the most distinguished disciples of the singular marjiʾ *of his time, Shaykh Murṭaḍā al-Anṣārī, who he succeeded as the primary* marjiʿ *of the Shiʿi world. Later, Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī moved to the predominantly Sunni city of Samarra, establishing that city as a center of Shiʿi learning for generations of scholars after him. It was in Samarra that he issued his famous decree banning tobacco use, so as to oppose the Qajar Nasir al-Din Shah's 1889 concession to a British corporation. The concession had given the British a monopoly on all tobacco produced, sold, and exported from Iran. This decree of Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī was one of his lasting legacies, not only because of its*

effectiveness in ending the concession in a matter of months, but also for its later social and political ramifications in Iranian society. Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī died in 1312 A.H./1895 C.E., and is buried in Najaf.

The following anecdotes are reported by the contemporary marjiʿ*, Sayyid Mūsā al-Shubayrī al-Zanjānī, and collected in his book,* Jurʿeh-yi az Daryā*. They are presented in a casual yet authoritative tone. On the one hand, they mirror the tradition of hadith-reports that begin by mentioning a chain of narrators; on the other, they are accounts by some of Mīrzā's closest students and devotees of his personal virtues and erudition. We hope that these anecdotes can inspire ways of living a life of virtue, and can renew a memory and connection to those pious scholars within the Shiʿi tradition.*

Transliteration note: This article was translated from Persian, and will reflect the original language of the author. It will generally not reflect the Arabic-specific transliteration standards, for example the definite article (al-) before names, e.g. "Mīrzā Shīrāzī".

The Four Pillars

All four pillars of a true scholar—characteristics which if found in someone indicate that he is worthy of the status and rank of *marjiʿiyyah*—were present in the person of Mīrzā Shīrāzī. These characteristics are: an unparalleled scholarship and knowledge, piety and fear of God, a completely virtuous character, and, finally, an unmatched intellect. These four characteristics were present in their most perfect form in the person of Mīrzā Shīrāzī. No one can doubt the scholarship and knowledge of Mīrzā. Even if there were no evidence of his knowledge other than his students and disciples, they would suffice in proving his scholarship. The very fact that every true thinker and scholar after Mīrzā was trained by him proves the greatness of his scholarship. This is similar to Waḥid Bihbahānī, who trained students like the great Baḥr al-ʿUlūm, Ṣāḥib al-Rīyāḍ, Kāshif al-Ghiṭāʾ, Mīrzā Mahdī Shahristānī, Sayyid Muḥsin Aʿrajī and Mulla Mahdī Narāqī. The caliber of these students testifies to the excellent level of Bihbahānī's own scholarship.

In Shiʿi history, there are two scholars—two true masters—whose students were the most important scholars of their [respective] eras: one is Waḥīd Bihbahānī, the other, Mīrzā Shīrāzī.

A Father's Test

Additionally, Mīrzā Shīrāzī truly loved scholarship. Meaning, in addition to the fact that he was a profound thinker and master-scholar, he also had a special affinity for learning. I have heard the following examples in support of this:

One such case is the following: Sayyid Ḥājj Mahdī Rūḥānī narrates from his uncle, the late Sayyid Aḥmad, who in turn narrates from the late Sayyid Abd al-Hādī, and he from the late Mīrzā ʿAlī Shīrāzī, the son of Mīrzā [Shīrāzī], who was a *marjīʿ al-taqlīd* in his own right. Mīrzā ʿAlī said, "Towards the end of Mīrzā's final illness, his health had deteriorated to such an extent that it wasn't clear whether he had

passed or was still alive. We had to somehow determine his state. One person said to Mīrzā, 'A dignitary on behalf of the Ottoman government has come to visit your graciousness.' The signs of life did not appear in Mīrzā's body. Another said, "The Iranian ambassador has come to pay his respects.' But there was still no effect."

Mīrzā ʿAlī then said, "I know how to test my father's state of consciousness." He then whispers in the ear of Mīrzā Shīrāzī, "What is the ruling of burnt bread?" Mīrzā stirs. Then he says, "How shall we determine its ruling? Insofar as it falls under the category of eating the repulsive (*khabīthah*), should we say that it is forbidden? Or should we say that it is forbidden insofar as it is harmful? Or do we say that if we were to prohibit it, then the unburnt bread that is mixed with the burnt would also be wasted? The corollary of this prohibition, therefore, would be the prohibition of another thing [that was not originally prohibited], and this causes a conflict in act. From this respect then, should we say that the prohibition is not in effect?" Mīrzā analyzed all those derivations while in that state on his deathbed.

Unbroken Silence

I heard from the late Shaykh Riḍā Zanjānī, who narrated from the late Shaykh [Abd al-Karīm Hāʾirī,] who said, "We were sitting in Mīrzā's lecture, when one of Mīrzā's top-tier students began a side discussion (I believe it may have been Sayyid Muḥammad Fishārakī or someone else who was also among his most prominent students). In the middle of his lecture, Mīrzā says to Sayyid Muḥammad, "Sir, please be quiet." Sayyid Muḥammad is dismayed, and says, "Sir, we were both talking. Why do you single me out for reproach? Why do you only direct your criticism to me? Why do you only address me?" (This next section was reported by Shaykh Murtaḍā Ḥāʾirī.) It is at this moment that Mīrzā says, "These issues that you are just now considering, we thought about and resolved 40 years ago. We even considered other issues [that you have not even thought of.]" Mīrzā becomes upset. He falls into a total and unbroken silence, and no one else would dare speak. (This next section was also narrated by Shaykh Riḍā Zanjānī.) After a long while, Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī Shīrāzī tried to break the silence. He asked a question about a passage from Shaykh [Anṣārī's] book on ritual purity. He asked, "Sir, what does this statement of the Shaykh mean?" And Mīrzā proceeds to explain the text.

[The late Shaykh Abd al-Karīm Ḥāʾirī]((It should be noted that Shaykh ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Hāʾirī was one of the preeminent *marājiʿ* of his time, and reestablished the Qumm seminary in the 20th century. Shaykh al-Hāʿirī's own intellectual achievement is what makes his following statement so exceptional.))said, "I am so full of regret that I did not write what [Mīrzā] said in response. Afterward, however much we tried to make sense of that passage, we could not decipher it. We simply could not understand what Shaykh [al-Anṣārī] was attempting to convey. It seems that [the passage] was not clear for Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī either."

This anecdote provides an insight into how astute but critical Mīrzā was of his own intellectual positions. At times, when we approach a tradition as long lasting and intricate as Islamic law or legal theory, it is difficult to appreciate how critical scholars can be of that tradition's received conclusions. As this anecdote shows, eminent Shiʿi scholars are constantly engaged in the process of reconsidering the fatāwā *and conclusions of their forebearers. At the same time, those scholars understand their*

precarious position as stewards of God's law, and recognize their own intellectual limitations. Thus, they are careful to not reach hasty conclusions or overrule fatāwā *of their predecessors, particularly those that have passed the test of time, lasting the critical scrutiny of multiple generations of previous scholars. There are some parallels here to other academic disciplines, like the various fields of science or law, where the consensus of a community of scholars is treated with value and thoughtful consideration. These two qualities, of critical renewal but also of a reluctance to diverge from received wisdom, characterize the internal logic that animates Islamic law, a logic that can be difficult for a person not steeped in the Islamic legal tradition to decipher.*

In addition, the anecdote is telling of Mīrzā's self-restraint. His measured response to his student's unfounded criticism is telling not only of his erudition, but of his total command of his behavior; in the face of a frustrating situation, he chose silence.

Adults and children recite the Qur'an in the sanctuary outside the holy burial site of Imam Husayn (ʿa).

Intellectual Acuity

In terms of his thinking, he had an incredibly astute and dexterous mind. In general, Najafi-style discussions and Samarra'i-style discussion are fundamentally different; they abide by two entirely different methods. Conclusive statements are a hallmark of Najafi scholars, whereas uncertainty and

inconclusive statements are the signature method of Samarraʾī scholars. Shaykh Mujtahidi used to phrase it in this way: the quintessential word of Najafis was “Indeed,” (*innamā*) whereas the quintessential word of Samarrāʾī scholars was “Perhaps” (*laʿalla*).

Anyway, because Mīrzā’s mind was so adroit, he would frequently reconsider his scholarly positions. He was also a very pious and God-fearing individual. If he wanted to simply present his juridical decree (fatwā) quickly and without due consideration, he would fall in dubious legal territory. Hence he would frequently say, “Obey precaution [in this issue],” and would rarely present his juridical decree. Sometimes arguments are made against a jurist who calls to precaution (iḥityāṭ), namely that it causes undue burden and is difficult to abide by. Some jurists defend the call to legal precaution by stating, “Mīrzā fulfilled the role of *marjī-i taqlid* for a very long time, and he would call his followers to abide by precaution. And yet, this call to precaution did not cause any major problems or conflicts.”

Both in terms of his knowledge and scholarship and in terms of his piety the Mīrzā was unanimously revered and deferred to by all the eminent students and scholars of his time, all of whom were exceptional in their own piety and other qualities. Take, for example, Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī Shīrāzī. Even Fāḍil Ardakānī—who was a peer of Shaykh Anṣārī and then held the same rank as Mīrzā Shīrāzī—called others to follow Mīrzā’s juridical opinions. He would take issue with anyone else who would write their own legal manuals (and declare their marjiʿiyyah), saying, “Has it been somehow ordained that every other person will write a legal manual? The Mīrzā is a great scholar and is also very pious.”

Mīrzā’s Forbearance

Hajj Sayyid Abū al-Faḍl Zanjānī would narrate the following from his father, Ḥājj Sayyid Muḥammad Zanjānī, “I once visited Mīrzā, and he was busy responding to a legal query (istiftāʾ). A sayyid entered, and requested some (financial) assistance. Mīrzā didn’t attend to him. The sayyid then snapped, “On the Day of Judgment, all this gold and silver will become snakes and scorpions. It will all become fire, and will be hung from your neck!”

Mīrzā’s acquaintances and servants wanted to force the man out because of his disrespectful behavior, but Mīrzā, who had the highest level of *adab*, did not permit them to do so, and forbade them from bothering the man. He called the man back, and when he returned, Mīrzā apologized, saying, “I was in the middle of responding to a legal query and didn’t notice your request.” He then gave the man some money, and the man left. As he was leaving, the only response that Mīrzā uttered was, “It is clear that this gentleman’s utter desperation has caused him to lose his patience.” This is all that Mīrzā said in response [to that man’s disrespect.]

Don’t Involve Yourself!

Mīrzā Shīrāzī’s intellectual genius is universally accepted. Many anecdotes are reported in this regard. For example, there was a time (in Samarra) when tensions between the Shiʿa and Sunni were very high, to such an extent that it led to some violent and fatal conflicts. The situation was so dire that the late

Shaykh Mujtahidi Tabrizi narrates from Hajj Shaykh Abd al-Karim Ha'iri, who said, "There was some furniture and wares in our basement that needed to be moved and relocated to a different house. We called a porter, and however much we urged him to come and assist in moving the wares, he would refuse. He was afraid that if he were to enter the basement, he would be held and then killed. Anyway, the situation in those days was that difficult and tense.

It was during such circumstances that the British sent an envoy to Mīrzā to assist him. The envoy said, "We will provide you with whatever assistance you request. We are at your service." Mīrzā responded, "This is a domestic dispute. Two brothers are having a disagreement. It is not right for an outsider to involve himself. We will resolve this ourselves; the situation does not call for your involvement."

In short, he did not accept their offer. The Ottoman sultan got wind of this event. He, in turn, sent the following notice: "Mīrzā is to be obeyed in whatever issue he ordains. Act according to his decree." But Mīrzā does not permit this (either).

Mīrzā's Acuity and Astuteness

Mīrzā was an incredibly intelligent person, and was profoundly perceptive and discerning. Ḥājj Sayyid Riḍā Ṣadr narrated a story from the famous public lecturer, Ḥājj Shaykh Ansari,((This is not the famous Shaykh Murṭaḍā al-Anṣārī, who was a teacher of Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī.)) who in turn narrated from Shaykh ʿAbd al-Karīm Hāʾirī, who said:

Towards the end of Mirzā's life, when Mīrzā's authority and legitimacy were both extensively acknowledged, it was hard to get an audience with him, because of the large number of meetings people requested. Of course, he was very advanced in age, and there were many issues for him to attend to. Therefore, every few days or so, he would hold a public audience so as to attend to the concerns of all the people who wanted to visit him. During one of these public sessions, some individuals noticed that Mīrzā is paying attention to a particular individual. Regardless of whoever else proceeds to pay their respects to Mīrzā, he still has his attention set on that individual. Until finally, it is that individual's turn to step forward and pay his respects to Mīrzā. Mīrzā asks him, for example, "Where are you from?" The man responds, "From Karbala." Mīrzā asks, "Why have you come here?" He says, "I have come to study here in Samarra." Mīrzā then says, "I command you return to Karbala immediately. I will provide for you the same stipend and privileges of the students who study in this city, but in Karbala. You must return to Karbala immediately."

Mīrzā then calls his servant and asks him, "When does the [next] train depart?" He says, for example, "Half an hour from now." Mīrzā then says, "Take this man to the train [station] immediately, and wait there until he is able to embark for Karbala. Then, you may return."

Half an hour or so later, Mīrzā continues to ask, "Why has the servant not returned?" He was anxiously waiting as he counted down the minutes until his servant's arrival. Finally, the servant returned, and Mīrzā says, "Did you send him on his way?" He says, "Yes." Mīrzā replies, "Were you personally there when the train departed?" He responds, "Yes." Mīrzā asks, "So his departure is final?" He says, "Yes."

Mīrzā would continuously ask until it was certain that the individual had returned to Karbala.

Later, some of those close to Mīrzā asked him, “Why did you have this individual return to Karbala with such determination?” He responded, “I deciphered from this individual’s appearance that if he were to remain in Samarra, he would disrupt all the work we have done here by just reciting certain curses.((Mīrzā was concerned here that the student would recite curses against individuals revered by other Islamic schools of thought.)) All the work we have done and all the difficulties we have endured in successfully quelling the disputes between the Sunnis and the Shiʿa so that this city may become a center for the Shiʿa, these would all be ruined because of one such act. All that effort would be for naught if he were to recite a single curse in the ḥaram [of Samarra].”

Later, some people reported meeting that individual, and he said, “What a decent man Mīrzā is! He didn’t even let me recite a single [curse!]”

This story is telling of the incredible sagacity and astuteness of Mīrzā. He was aware and sensitive to such issues, and could discern the attitudes and behaviors of people simply by seeing them.

The Perfection of Virtues

In short, Mīrzā was an incredible person. One could dare say that such an individual, who has acquired all these disparate perfections within himself, is rare among our scholars. He was a person who was both at the peak of scholarship, and was also an exemplar of virtuosity; he had both immense piety, and a profound intellect.

The Heritage of Scholars: A Review of Agha Buzurg al-Tihrani’s al-Dhariʿah

One way of uncovering the intellectual depth of a community is to look at the scholarly works that community has produced since its inception. In the following detailed synopsis, Dr. Aun Hasan Ali explores a renowned work in bibliographical studies, al-Dharīʿah ilā Taṣānīf al-Shiʿah, *by Aqā Buzurg Tihrānī, a unique and indispensable work that provides us a glimpse into the vast intellectual legacy of Shiʿi scholarship.*

Aqā Buzurg was born in 1293 A.H./1875 C.E. to a scholarly family in Tehran, Iran, and studied in Tehran, Najaf, and Samarrā under the most eminent scholars of his time, including Mīrzā Husayn Nūrī, Ākhūnd

Muḥammad Kāẓim al-Khurāsānī, and Muḥammad Taqī al-Shīrāzī, all students of the famous Mīrzā Shīrāzī.((For more information regarding Mīrzā Shīrāzī's life and personality, see A Drop in the Sea: The Life and Character of Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī.)) He died in the year 1389 A.H./1970 C.E., and is buried in his personal library in Najaf.

Al-Dharīʿah ilā Taṣānīf al-Shīʿah by Muḥammad Muḥsin, known as Āqā Buzurg Tihrānī (d. 1970), is a comprehensive bibliographical study of Imāmī Shiʿi works written before its composition in 1958. The Beirut edition (1983) is comprised of 25 parts in 28 volumes. It contains 53,510 entries on a broad range of subjects, including Qurʾanic exegesis, hadith, law, theology, science, history, poetry, and belles lettres. Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu titles are listed in alphabetical order.

But *al-Dharīʿah* is more than just a list of works. Āqā Buzurg added informative introductions to major topics and also discussed the history and transmission of texts. Works that are known by more than one title are cross-referenced, and the sources of references to works that are no longer extant are mentioned. Individual entries range in length from just a few lines to several pages. Many entries include a summary of the contents of the book and a list of manuscripts and printed editions. Volumes 9/1 to 9/4 contain material on poetry. Volume 16 and onward contain author indexes. A separate index of authors called *Muʿjam Muʾallifī al-Shīʿah* by ʿAlī al-Fāḍil al-Qāʾīnī was published in 1984. Volumes 17 onwards include titles of Ismāʿīlī works listed in Ismāʿīl b. ʿAbd al-Rasūl's (d. 1769 or 70) *Fihrist al-Kutub wa-l-Rasāʾil*, on which W. Ivanow based his *A Guide to Ismaili Literature*. In cases where the identity of an author is not clear, Āqā Buzurg reviews the evidence and at times offers his own valued opinion. However, some people have criticized the attribution of particular works. Āqā Buzurg's son ʿAlī Naqī Munzavī has noted these criticisms in the entry on his father in *Ṭabaqāt Aʿlām al-Shīʿah*.

Al-Dharīʿah is said to have been written in response to *Taʾrīkh Ādāb al-Lughat al-ʿArabīyah* by Jurjī Zaydān (d. 1914), which slighted the contribution of Shīʿīs to Arabic literature. Āqā Buzurg began working on it in 1911 in Sāmarrā in Iraq. At the time of his death, twenty-four volumes had been published. Volume 25 was published in 1978, and a supplement entitled *Mustadrakāt al-Muʾallif* was published in 1985. With the exception of volumes thirteen and fourteen, which were edited by Muḥammad Ṣādiq Baḥr al-ʿUlūm, the entire work was edited by Āqā Buzurg's sons, ʿAlī Naqī and Aḥmad Munzavī. The contents of *al-Dharīʿah* are based on Āqā Buzurg's own research, his visits to private and public libraries all over the Middle East, and the catalogues of libraries in Europe, Turkey, and South Asia.

There are a number of mistakes in the published edition. Much of the responsibility for these mistakes falls on the shoulders of the editors, who made changes to the original manuscript. Recently, several scholars have undertaken the task of correcting these mistakes. Al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Azīz al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī al-Yazdī (d. 1995) wrote a supplement to *al-Dharīʿah* that has been published; al-Sayyid Saʿīd Akhtar al-Riḍawī al-Hindī (d. 2002) wrote *Takmilat al-Dharīʿah*,((*Nuskhah Paẓūhī,* 2 (1426 A.H.): 537-93)) which

includes works written after 1958, particularly works by South Asian *ʿulamāʾ*; al-Sayyid al-Riḍawī also wrote *al-Taʿlīqāt ʿalā al-Dharīʿah*((*Nuskhah Paẓūhī* 3 (1427 A.H.): 627-82)) in which he corrected several titles and biographical details; and al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī al-Ishkawarī made a number of corrections in *ʿAlā Hāmish al-Dharīʿah*.((*Nuskhah Paẓūhī,* 3 (1427 A.H.): 597-661.))

Qurʾanic Taʾwīl: Comparing the Views of Ibn ʿArabī and ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī

In this article, Shaykh Hamid Raza Fazil explores two central issues regarding the Qur'an: how do we understand the words of the Qur'an? And how do those words point us towards the ultimate goal of the Qur'an, the ethical and metaphysical realities that underlie and compose our existence? Shaykh Fazil explores these questions through the views of two major Qur'anic mufassirs *in Islamic history: the 6th-century mystic, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī, and the 20th-century mufassir and philosopher-sage, ʿAllāmah Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī.*

This article is translated by Dr. Syed Rizwan Zamir, associate professor of religion at Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina. The Qurʾanic translations are loosely based on Arberry's The Koran Interpreted: A Translation.

Introduction

God Almighty says: "It is He who sent down upon thee the Book, wherein are verses clear that are the Essence of the Book, and others ambiguous. As for those in whose hearts is swerving, they follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation; and none knows its interpretation, save only God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say, 'We believe in it; all is from our Lord'; yet none remembers, but men possessed of minds."((Qurʾan, *Āl ʿImrān* (3):5.))

In this brief article, we will explore the reality of *taʾwīl*, a Qurʾanic concept about which there is significant disagreement among scholars. First, however, the difference between the related terms *tafsīr* and *taʾwīl* needs to be clarified. Although some scholars consider these two terms to be the same, and have in fact themselves engaged more in *taʾwil* instead of *tafsīr*, more precise scholars (*muḥaqqiqūn*) affirm a difference between the two.

Tafsīr

Dictionaries define *tafsīr* in the following way: (1) to discuss and explain something (*fassara al-bayān*); (2) to lift a veil (*kashf al-qinā'*); and (3) to lift a veil from the face of someone (*kashf al-mughaṭṭā)*.((*Lisān al-'Arab*, s.v. "f-s-r."))In its technical usage, *tafsīr* refers to "the meaning of Qur'anic verses, and the discovering what is intended by them and what they are referring to." (*Wa-huwa bayānu ma'ānī al-ayāt al-qur'āniyyah wa-l-kashf 'an maqāṣidiha wa-madālīliha*)((*Tafsīr al-Mīzān*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-A'lamī li-l-Maṭbū'āt, 1390 S.H.), p.4.))In other words, to discuss the meaning of the Quranic verses and to lift veils from its hidden purport (*madlūlāt*) is called *tafsīr*. Therefore, translation pertains to the outward meaning, whereas *tafsīr* deals with a veiled meaning.

Ta'wīl

Dictionaries define it as, "to return a thing [to its origin]," (*al-awl: al-rujū'—awwala illayh al-shay'—raja'ahu*).((*Lisān al-'Arab*, s.v. "a-w-l."))From this general meaning, our discussion pertains specifically to *ta'wīl* of Qur'anic verses. Well-known exegetes and religious scholars explain its technical meaning as any act or statement taken to its finality and end. For example, if a verse has various meanings, the one that becomes the final meaning will be called its *ta'wīl*. Similarly, if a person carries out an act without clarity about its final goal and only determines its goal afterwards, it will be called *ta'wīl*.

Examples include: (1) the story of Moses ('a) and Khidr ('a), where, Khidr ('a) carried out some acts in Moses's company—acts whose goal was unclear, and faced objections from Moses ('a). In the end, Khidr ('a) explained his objectives, namely, that the reason for boring a hole in the boat was to protect it from an unjust and oppressive ruler. He said, "As for the ship, it belonged to certain poor men, who toiled upon the sea; and I desired to damage it, for behind them there was a king who was seizing every ship by brute force." (Qur'an, *al-Kahf* (18):79.). (2) If a person sees a dream, and its meaning is unclear, then it is called *ta'wīl*. For example, when Joseph ('a) saw a dream and found it occurring in the outside world (*khārij*), he said, "'See, father,' he said, 'this is the interpretation of my vision of long ago; my Lord has made it true.'"((Qur'an, *Yūsuf* (12):100.))

Similarly if there are specific meanings and secrets hidden in the speech of the speaker that constitute his or her final goal and objective, they are called *ta'wīl*. This is the same meaning of ta'wil that the Qur'an refers to, namely the deeper meanings of God's words and their final aims which are disclosed to the human person.

***Ta'wīl* According to Ibn 'Arabī**

In Ibn 'Arabi's view, *ta'wīl* can be of two types:

2. *Blameworthy*: When theologians and philosophers attempt to explain away the outward aspects of a verse when it appears contradictory to reason. This is blameworthy *taʾwīl* because they employ their deficient reason to explain the verse.
4. *Praiseworthy*: The way of the folk of Allah and the gnostics (*ʿurafāʾ*), which he also names a "sign" (*ishārah*). Gnostics employ their unveiling (*kashf*) and witnessing (*shuhūd*) to understand Qurʾanic verses; the hidden meaning (*maʿānī bāṭiniyyah*) that is bestowed to them by Allah, the Most Exalted, through inspiration is called *taʾwīl*. For Ibn ʿArabī, it is this *taʾwīl* that is praiseworthy.

The first type of *taʾwīl* is the way of the theologians and philosophers. Ibn ʿArabī does not deem it valid. Attempting to avoid the term "people of *taʾwīl"* (*ahl al-taʾwīl*) for himself, he instead calls them [i.e., theologians and philosophers] the people of *taʾwīl*. [That said], he ascribes the particular *taʾwīl* to gnostics, referring to the verse, "[A]nd none knows its interpretation (*taʾwīl*), save only God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say, 'We believe in it; all is from our Lord'; yet none remembers, but men possessed of minds." ((Qurʾan, *Āl ʿImrān* (3):7.))

For Ibn ʿArabī, "those firmly rooted in knowledge" are the gnostics, because human thinking does not intervene in their teachings. He also calls them "people of signs." In his view, just as the descent of the Qurʾan is from God, the Most Exalted, similarly, the understanding of the Qurʾan also descends from God, the Most Exalted, upon the hearts of the believers. Hence understanding also comes from God. However, the text of the Qurʾan is not limited by these esoteric meanings. Rather, new meanings are always found.((Muḥyi al-Dīn ibn al-ʿArabī, "Maʿrifat al-Ishārāt," in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, vol. 10 (n.p., n.d.), p. 279. See also, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Falsafat al-Taʾwīl* (al-Markaz al-Thiqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2014), p. 267-8.)))

Taʾwīl According to ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī

ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī, in his book, *Tafsīr al-Mizān,* mentions the following regarding the reality behind *taʾwīl*:

الحق في تفسير التأويل أنه الحقيقة الواقعية التي تستند اليها البينات القرانية من حكم او موعظة او حكمة... وأنه ليس من قبيل المفاهيم المدلول عليها بالافاظ

The reality behind explaining the *taʾwīl* (*tafsīr al–taʾwīl)*, is that it is true (extra-mental) reality, and the Qurʾanic verses, whether those that convey Islamic

laws, exhortations, or some intellectual wisdom, all are based and sourced in that reality…this reality is not a purely conceptual one that can be referred to by words.((*al-Mīzān*, vol. 3, p. 49.))

المراد بتأويل الآية ليس مفهوما من المفاهيم تدل عليه الآية...بل هو من قبيل الأمور الخارجية...

What is meant by the *taʾwīl* of a verse is not a type of concept that can be completely indicated by or contained within that verse…rather it is of a type that refers to an external reality.((*al-Mīzān*, vol. 3, p. 46-7.))

وتاويل القران هو المأخوذ الذي يأخذ منه معارفه

The *taw'īl* of the Qurʾan is derived. From it, in turn, is derived profound understanding and knowledge.((*al-Mīzān*, vol. 3, p. 23.))

For ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *taʾwīl* is not a question of words and meaning, but instead refers to an objective reality. Words, after all, provide signification (*dalālah*) to bring the mind closer to this reality. But it is not possible for words to encompass and exhaust that reality's scope. Words only indicate. The reality of the Qurʾan is contained in the protected tablet (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūẓ*), which is with us is the form of words in the book. These words and their meanings are not *taʾwīl*; rather *taʾwīl* is that true objective reality from which all knowledge/gnosis, Qurʾanic prescriptions, injunctions, and wisdom draw their life. The words of the Qurʾan are reflections of this reality, which is the esoteric Qurʾan; access to this reality and *taʾwīl* is for God, the Most Exalted, and the Pure Infallibles.

Who are these Infallibles? Allah has mentioned them in *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*: "People of the House, God only desires to put away from you abomination and to cleanse you." Therefore, only *Ahl al-Bayt* can carry out the *taʾwīl* of the Qurʾan. It is this meaning of *taʾwīl* that helps us understand the Qurʾanic verse, "All that is wet and dry is within the Qurʾan,"((Qurʾan, *al-Anʿām* (6):59. "Not a grain in the earth's shadows, not a thing, fresh or withered, but it is in a Book Manifest.))and that is possible only when we place the *Ahl al-Bayt* alongside the Qurʾan. It is so because according to the Qurʾan and hadith-reports the Noble Prophet (ṣ) and his *Ahl al-Bayt* are the only Holy Beings (*dhawāt muqaddasah*) that have access to the Qurʾan. This also clarifies those *aḥādīth* that declare, "Without us, the *Ahl al-Bayt*, you cannot understand the Qurʾan."((Comparable a*ḥādīth* include the following hadith from Imam al-Bāqir (ʿa): "Only a liar will claim to have collected the entire Qurʾan as it was revealed [other than the Ahl al-Bayt.] None have compiled, memorized, and preserved [the Qurʾan] exactly as Allah revealed except for ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the Imams after him." (Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1407), hadith #1, p. 228) And: "…only he who is addressed by the Qurʾan truly knows it." (Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol 8, hadith

#485, p. 311.) For more such *aḥādīth*, see Muḥsin al-Fayḍ al-Kāshānī, "Towards the Sacred Text: The Importance and Value of the Qurʾan in the Life of a Believer," translated by Azhar Sheraze.))Therefore, *Ahl al-Bayt* are needed in every era to understand the Qurʾan. The reality of the Shiʿi interpretive tradition is also made clear through this meaning of *taʾwīl*. They claim that they derive religion and its teachings from *Ahl al-Bayt*. No companion of the Prophet, other than the *Ahl al-Bayt*, has claimed a special access to the true reality of the Qurʾan. This claim is only made in the Shiʿi tradition, whose source is the teachings of *Ahl al-Bayt*.

Synthesis and Conclusions

There are three stages to understanding the Qurʾan: (a) *tarjamah* (translation), relating to the outward words and their meaning; (b) *tafsīr*, explaining the meanings of the verses; and (c) *taʾwīl*, about which three views have been presented. They are:

2. The popular view, that some meanings of [particular Qurʾanic] words and/or the ultimate meaning sought is *taʾwīl*;
4. Ibn ʿArabī's view, that the hidden meaning that is bestowed by God Almighty is *taʾwīl*;
6. ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī's view, that Qurʾanic words and meanings are derived from reality and that reality is *taʾwīl*.

According to the popular view, *taʾwīl* is not related to the whole of the Qurʾan, but only to certain verses, namely, those that are ambiguous. According to Ibn 'Arabi's view *taʾwīl* is possible for the whole of the Qurʾan, regardless of whether they are ambiguous or clear verses. This is so because the whole of the Qurʾan has hidden meanings that are bestowed from God, the Most Exalted. According to ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī as well, *taʾwīl* of the Qurʾan belongs to the entire Qurʾan, because the reality of all verses exists independent of their words.

According to the popular view and that of ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī, knowledge of *taʾwīl* is with God and those firmly rooted in knowledge (i.e., *Ahl al-Bayt*). However, according to Ibn 'Arabi, those rooted in knowledge are all gnostics, whether they are of *Ahl al-Bayt* or not.

According to the popular view and that of Ibn 'Arabi, *taʾwīl* is related to Qurʾanic words and their meaning. However, according to ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *taʾwīl* is not related to words, but rather to reality and objective existence.

The meaning of the Qurʾanic verse, "nor is there a single grain in the darkness of the earth, or anything, fresh or withered, that is not written in a clear Book"((Qurʾan, *al-Anʿām* (6):59.))is best understood if we accept ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī's view. That is to say, in every age and era the reality of the words of the Holy Qurʾan can only be explained by *Ahl al-Bayt*. It is so because only these personalities are truly deserving of the title, "those who have knowledge of the Book."((Qurʾan, *al-Raʿd* (13):43.))Hence, in every age, *Ahl al-Bayt* are needed to understand the Qurʾan, regardless of whether the particular science in question regards legal rulings, wisdom, or exhortations. Only *Ahl al-Bayt* can explicate the

Qurʾan’s true meaning and purpose, for only they fully know the reality of things.