

A Meeting with the AI Ulama' (The Learned Men)

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

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

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

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

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

They did not know that in the modern world of Islam we have changed the Qur'anic schools to kindergartens supervised by Christian nuns so should I tell them that they are considered by us as being "backward"? One of the boys asked me, "Which Madhhab (religious school) is followed in Tunis'?" I said, "The Maliki madhhab." And noticed that some of them laughed, but I did not pay much attention. He

asked me, "Do you not know the Jafari Madhhab?" I said, "What is this new name? No we only know the four Madhahibs, and apart from that is not within Islam."

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

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

I was surprised by the intelligence of that young boy who seemed to have learnt what he was saying in the same way that one recites a Surah from the Qur'an. I was even more astonished when he started telling me some historical references which he knew the number of their volumes and chapters, and he continued with his discussion as if he was a teacher teaching a student.

In fact I felt weak before him and wished that I had gone with my friend instead of staying with the young boys. I was not able to answer every question connected with jurisprudence or history that they asked me.

He asked me, "Which of the Imams I followed?" I said, "Imam Malik." He said, "How do you follow a dead man with fourteen centuries between you and him. If you want to ask him a question about current issues, would he answer you?" I thought for a little while and then said, "Your Jafar also died fourteen centuries ago, so whom do you follow?" He and other boys answered me quickly, "We follow al-Sayyid al-Khu'i, for he is our Imam."

I did not know who was more knowledgeable, al-Khu'i or Jafar al-Sadiq. I tried my best to change the subject so I kept asking them questions such as, "What is the population of al-Najaf? How far is al-Najaf from Baghdad? Did they know other countries beside Iraq?"

And every time they answered, I prepared another question for them to prevent them from asking me, for I felt incapable of matching their knowledge. But I refused to admit it, despite the fact that inside myself, I accepted defeat. The days of glory and scholarship in Egypt had dissipated here, especially after meeting those youngsters, and then I remembered the following wise words:

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

I thought the minds of those young boys were greater than the minds of those Shaykhs whom I met in

al-Azhar and the minds of our Shaykhs in Tunisia.

Al-Sayyid al-Khu'i entered the place, and with him came a group of Ulama who looked respectable and dignified, and all the boys stood up, and me with them, then each one of them approached al-Sayyid to kiss his hand, but I stayed rigid in my place. Al-Sayyid did not sit down until everybody sat down, then he started greeting them one by one, and he was greeted back by each individual until my turn came, so I replied in the same way.

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

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

Al-Sayyid remained silent for a little while, with his head down, then he looked at me and said, "We believe that there is no other God but Allah, and that Muhammad (saw) is the Messenger of Allah, and that 'Ali was but a servant of Allah." He turned to his audience and said, indicating to me "Look at these innocent people how they have been brain-washed by the false rumors; and this is not surprising for I heard more than that from other people, (so we say) there is no power or strength save in Allah, the Highest and the Greatest."

Then he turned to me and said, "Have you read the Qur'an?" I answered, "I could recite half of it by heart before I was ten." He said, "Do you know that all the Islamic groups, regardless of their sects agree on the Holy Qur'an, for our Qur'an is the same as yours?" I said, "Yes I know that." He then said, "Have you not read the words of Allah, praise be to Him the Sublime:

"And Muhammad is no more than a messenger, the messengers have already passed away before him." (Holy Qur'an 3:144)

"Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and those with him are from of heart against the unbelievers." (Holy Qur'an 48:29)

"Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is the Messenger of Allah and the last of the Prophets." (Holy Qur'an 33:40)

I said, "Yes I know all these Qur'anic verses." He said, "Where is 'Ali then? If our Qur'an says that Muhammad (saw) is the Messenger of Allah, so where did this lie come from?"

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

Al-Sayyid al-Khu'i added, "I would like to inform you that the Shi'a is the only group, among all the Islamic groups, which believe in the infallibility of the Prophets and Imams; so if our Imams, may Allah grant them peace, are infallible, and they are human beings like us, then how about Gabriel, who is an angel favored by Allah and He called him "The faithful spirit"?

I asked, "Where did all these rumors come from?" He said, "From the enemies of Islam who want to divide the Muslims into groups that fight each other, otherwise Muslims are brothers, whether they were Shi'a or Sunnis, for all of them worship Allah alone and do not associate any other God with Him, and they have one Qur'an, one Prophet and one Qiblah (Direction to which Muslims turn in praying i.e. Kabaa). The Shi'a and the Sunnis only differ on issues regarding jurisprudence, in the same way that the different schools of jurisprudence in the Sunni school differ among each other; as Malik did not agree all the way with Abu Hanifah who himself did not agree all the way with al-Shafii and so on."

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

My friend Munim said, with a smile, "Including the existence of a grave for the Imam 'Ali?" I winked at him and said, "In fact I have learnt many new things even from those young lads and wish I had had the opportunity to learn as they do in this Religious School."

Al-Sayyid said, "Welcome, if you want to study here, then there will be a place for you in this school." Everybody welcomed the suggestion, especially my friend Munim whose face was full of joy.

I said, "I am a married man with two boys." He said, "We will take care of your accommodation and living and whatever you need, but the important thing is learning."

I thought for a little while and said to myself, "It does not seem acceptable to become a student after having spent five years as a teacher and educationalist, and it is not easy to take a decision so hastily."

I thanked al-Sayyid al-Khu'i for his offer and told him that I would think about the matter seriously after I came back from al-Umrah, but I needed some books. Al-Sayyid said, "Give him the books."

A group of learned people stood up and went to their book cabinets and after a few minutes each one of them presented me with a book, so I had more than seventy. I realized that I could not carry all these books with me, especially as I was going to Saudi Arabia, where the authorities censor any book entering their countries, lest new ideas get established, in particular those ideas which do not agree with their creed.

However, I did not want to miss the chance of having all these books which I had never seen in all my life. I said to my friend and the rest of the people that I had a long journey ahead of me, passing through Damascus, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and on the way back my journey would be even longer for I would travel through Egypt and Lybia until I reached Tunisia, and beside the weight of these books was the fact that most of the countries prohibit the entry of these books to their territories.

Al-Sayyid said, "Leave us your address and we will send them to you." I liked the idea and gave him my personal card with my address in Tunis on it. Also, I thanked him for his generosity, and when I was about to leave him he stood up and said to me, "May Allah grant you safety and if you stand by the grave of my forefather the Messenger of Allah please pass my greetings to him."

Everybody, including myself, was moved by what al-Sayyid had said, and I noticed that tears were coming from his eyes, and then I said to myself, "God forbid that such a man could be wrong or a liar; his dignity, his greatness and his modesty tell you that he is truly a descendant of the Prophet." I could not help myself but to take his hand and kiss it, in spite of his refusal.

When I stood up to go, everybody stood and said farewell to me, and some of the young lads from the religious school followed me and asked me for my addresses for future correspondence, and I gave it to them.

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

Munim left us shortly after the dawn prayers and we went to sleep. I benefitted so much from these students and was surprised about the variety of subjects they study in the Religious School. In addition to the Islamic studies which include Jurisprudence, Islamic Law (Shariah) and Tawheed (Islamic Theology); they study Economics, Sociology, Politics, and History, Languages, Astronomy and a few more subjects.

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