

SPIRITUALITY AND PRAYER IN SHIITE ISLAM

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Introduction

In the first place, it should be understood what is meant by the terms in the title. Therefore, we shall take a brief look at the concepts “*Shi’a*”, “spirituality” and “prayer”.

Shi’a

The word *Shi’a* literally means “follower” and comes from the expression “*shi’at-u ‘Ali*” = a follower (partisan) of ‘*Ali* – a prominent companion of the Prophet Muhammad. Technically, this term is applied to one of the two major branches of Muslims; the other larger branch is called *Sunni* Islam. The *Shi’a* Muslims believe that the Prophet of Islam like the other prominent prophets, has successors (*awsia*, plural of *wasi*) whom God appoints and the prophet introduces to people. According to the traditional sources of *Shi’a* and *Sunni*, the Prophet, Muhammad, in the last year of his life ordered his close followers to call all the people in different places to join him on his final pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca. This was the first time that the Muslims, in this magnitude had gathered in one place in the presence of their leader. On the return journey to Medina, the following verse was revealed¹:

O Messenger! Proclaim the (message) which hath been sent to thee from thy Lord. If thou didst not, thou wouldst not have fulfilled and proclaimed His mission. (Q.5:67)

The verse was received at a place called Ghadir e-khum. This was the place where people from different provinces used to say their farewells before taking various routes to their homes. Having received the revelation, the Prophet gave the pilgrims a long lecture and at that point held up the hand of ‘*Ali* and said:

For whomsoever I am his Leader, ‘*Ali* is his Leader.²

It was just after this event that the following verse was revealed³:

Today I have perfected your religion for you, and completed My favour towards you, and have consented to grant you [Islam] as a religion: a commitment to live in peace. (Q.5:3)

Nevertheless, following the demise of the Prophet, Abu Bakr, another prominent companion of the Prophet was selected by a group of people as the Prophet’s successor. Seeking the unity of the early Islamic community, Imam ‘*Ali* kept silent and cooperated with Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman, the three caliphs after the Prophet. Finally, after the death of the third caliph, a large number of people rushed towards ‘*Ali*’s house, wanting him to accept leadership of the Islamic community. ‘*Ali* accepted even though he believed that the community had strayed far from genuine Islam and to some extent had returned to tribal traditions.

Muawiyah, the son of Abu Sufyan, who was appointed by Uthman as ruler of Damascus, rejected 'Ali's Rule and launched a long war against him and weakened his authority. However, 'Ali ran the Islamic community with justice and spirituality for nearly five years and finally, whilst he was praying in a mosque he was murdered by a fanatic Muslim man.

It is interesting to note that thirty years after the death of Muhammad, 'Ali, the one who had been the first to follow Muhammad; his closest companion; the writer and interpreter of the Quran; and the most loyal of Muslims against the enemies of Islam, was killed in a mosque when he was praying to God by a man who accused 'Ali of unbelief. The destiny of the Islamic community was then placed in the hands of Muawiah and his offspring (Umayyid), even though their chief, Abu Sufyan had led the largest wars against Islam and the Prophet of Islam! We (the *Shi'a* Muslims) believe that if the circumstances of the early Islamic community had allowed the Prophet's descendent to guide people according to genuine Islam, Islamic society would have historically had an even more brilliant background and the Islamic world be in a better situation than it is nowadays. 'Ali would not tolerate that in an Islamic community, any human soul, human dignity or human possessions be disrespected or damaged by anyone. One day when he was informed that some soldiers of Mu'awiya had attacked and robbed two women: a Muslim and a Jew, he addressed his followers saying:

I have come to know they attacked a Muslim woman and a Jewish woman and stole the ornaments from their legs, arms, necks and ears. If any Muslim dies of grief after all this he is not to be blamed but rather there is justification for him before me.⁴

We are witnesses of the oppression of dictator governors in Islamic communities throughout history and right now, who have not allowed people to live under freedom, mercy and spirituality. Whereas 'Ali in his significant words to Maalik Ashtar, his beloved commander wrote:

Maalik! You must create in your mind kindness, compassion and love for your citizens. Do not behave towards them as if you are a voracious and ravenous beast and as if your success lies in devouring them. Remember, Maalik, that amongst your citizens there are two kinds of people: those who have the same religion as you have; they are brothers to you, and those who have religions other than that of yours, they are also human beings like you.⁵

The principles of religion in Shiite Islam are five:

- (i) *tawhid* (belief in Divine Unity);
- (ii) *nubuwwah* (prophecy);
- (iii) *ma'ad* (resurrection);
- (iv) *imamah* (the imamate, i.e. belief in the appointed Imams as successors of the Prophet);
- (v) *'adl* (Divine Justice).

In the first three basic principles (Unity, Prophecy and Resurrection) *Sunni* and *Shiite* Islam agree. It is only in the other two that they differ. The *Shiite* Muslims believe that the Prophet's successors must be appointed by God, and according to prophetic traditions (*hadiths*), there are twelve imams, starting with Imam 'Ali and ending with Imam Mahdi. It should be remembered that the number of Imams, their qualities and even their names have clearly been specified in a number of the *Sunni* and *Shi'a* traditions that are considered as authentic by Islamic scholars.⁶

Shiism did not undergo any divisions during the imamate of its first three imams ('Ali, Hasan and Husayn), but after that, throughout history, groups of people have separated from the majority of *Shi'a*. The *Isma'ili* and the *Zaydi* are the most important sects of *Shi'a* after

'*Twelvers*' (who are the majority), and remain active until now. The *Isma'ilis* share with *Twelvers* (Twelve Imam *Shiism*) the first six Imams. They are identified with esoteric and gnostic religious doctrines.

The *Zaydi*, are followers of Zayd, son of the fourth Imam, who claimed to be the rightful fifth imam instead of Muhammad al Baqir. The other minor sects, which separated from the majority of *Shi'a*, all dissolved in history within a short period.

Today, *Shi'a* represent about ten percent of all Muslims. They are the majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Oman, and also have substantial populations in Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Syria, India, Afghanistan, Yemen, Jordan, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Tajikistan.

Spirituality

With a view to the fact that there are various understandings and definitions of 'spirituality', it is necessary to mention the intended meaning of spirituality in this paper. The equivalent of "spirituality", in Islamic terminology, are the two words; *ruhaniyyt* and *ma'naviyyt*, the first comes from *ruh* = spirit – as opposed to body, and the second comes from *ma'na*, meaning immaterial. In Islamic terminology the word 'spirituality' suggests every state that leads the human spirit to reach the immaterial experience of a Supreme Power. In other words, spirituality means experience of communion with a Higher Power. The ultimate aim of spirituality in Islam is nearness to God. In this paper, we shall take a short look at the spiritual character of the *Shiite* Imams and its various dimensions, and then examine the spiritual relationship between *Shi'a* Muslims and their Imams.

Prayer

The word 'prayer' generally suggests two concepts of Islamic terminology;

- (i) *al-Salat*, the specific practice that five times a day a Muslim stands in the presence of God and worships Him.
- (ii) *al-du'a* that literally means 'calling', and technically means 'remembering God and calling upon Him'. The English word 'prayer' is therefore, used for both. The focus of this paper is on the latter.

Aside from the prescribed daily prayers, Muslims are encouraged to call upon God for forgiveness, guidance, and to ask for what they wish and desire in their own words, in any language and any time of the day and night. Addressing the Prophet Muhammad, God says in the Qur'an:

When My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close (to them): I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when he calleth on Me: Let them also, with a will, Listen to My call, and believe in Me: That they may walk in the right way. (Q.2:186)

The Qur'an relates many statements from the prophets of God where they call on their Lord and ask Him for their needs. Muslims are encouraged to imitate the behaviour of the prophets and from them we learn how to pray. Moreover, the *Shiite* benefit from a precious heritage of prayers, composed by their Imams, some of which must be considered as literary and mystical masterpieces in religious literature.

In this article, we shall briefly speak of these priceless spiritual sources.

The spiritual character of an *Imam*

The word '*Imam*' in Arabic means "leader". *Shiite* apply it mostly to the twelve successors of the Prophet starting with Imam 'Ali and ending with Imam Mahdi.⁷ The distinctive characteristic of an '*Imam*' in *Shiism* in comparison with '*Caliph*' in *Sunni* Islam, lies in the spiritual dimension of an Imam.

According to the early *Sunni* theologians, the *Caliph* is the leader of the Islamic community, and his function is to enforce the revealed Law or *Shari'ah*. The *Shiite* maintains that the Imam has not only the responsibility of enforcing the *Shari'ah*, but is also a spiritual guide of Muslims. According to the Qur'an, God bestows the office "*imam*" to one He chooses. Referring to Abraham the Qur'an says:

And remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commands, which he fulfilled: He said:

I will make thee an Imam to the Nations. (Q.2:124)

And about Abraham's offspring the Qur'an says:

And We made them Imams, guiding (people) by Our Command, and We sent them inspiration to do good deeds, ... and they constantly served Us (and Us only). (Q.21:73)

Therefore the *imamate* is a divine office like that of the prophets. *Shiite* Muslims believe that there was one imam in every age. They believe that Muhammad's offspring as well as Abraham's offspring were bestowed with the responsibility and honour of being imams, although they were definitely not prophets.

The most significant beliefs of the *Shiite* about their imams are three, that they:

1. Are immune from sin
2. Have secret knowledge
3. Are able to perform miraculous deeds

Regarding their immunity from sin the Quran says:

God merely wants to remove any blight from you [since you are] People of the [Prophet's] House, and to purify you thoroughly. (Q.33:33)

This verse was revealed, according to sound traditions, specifically with regard to the family of the Prophet.⁸

Regarding the second point (secret knowledge): The Qur'an tells us that all events that will happen in the world were recorded in a book even before they are brought into existence (Q.57:22)⁹. The book, which some commentators interpret as a metaphor for God's knowledge of absolutely everything: past, present and future, is known by three names: *umm al-kitab* – the mother of books (Q.43:4, 13:39)¹⁰, *Lowh-e mahfuz* – well-preserved tablet (Q.85:22)¹¹ and *kitab-e maknun* – well-guarded book (Q.56:78)¹². However, according to the Qur'an, none save the purified may access the real truth of that book. (Q.56:78-79)¹³. With a view to the fact that the Imams of the Prophet's family are the purified, as the Qur'an mentioned, they therefore have a way towards the secret knowledge recorded in *umm al-kitab* (the mother book).

The numerous miraculous deeds performed by imams, one of which is healing the sick, are clear proofs of the power given to imams by the Divine.

It is worth remembering that a large number of healings occurred and continue to happen in the holy shrines of *Shi'a* imams.¹⁴ These miraculous cures are exemplified by an interesting case, which I experienced from Imam Reda, the eighth *Imam* of *Shi'a*.

I was six years old when I went to an old-fashioned primary school to learn reading the holy Quran. Our school was located at the end of a long, narrow, blind alley. One day when we were on our way home, my classmates and I decided to compete each other in running along the alley. Eventually I sped ahead of my friends, regardless of the fact that I was reaching a main road and junction. I kept thinking about winning the race. Suddenly a motorbike that was being driven along the main road hit me. The rider of the motorbike ran away. Witnesses did not recognise him. Some people took me to our house and informed my family about the incident. The bones of my chest had been injured. One bone was dislocated. My mother took me to a number of local doctors and surgeries, but they told her that my chest needed a surgical operation that was possible only in Tehran. As a matter of fact, it was very difficult for my family to take me to Tehran, therefore my mother was very sad and constantly crying about my condition and praying for a cure from God. One day, when I was asleep, I saw in a dream that I was in a place associated with Imam Reza. While I stood there I saw a handsome man wearing green clothes who called me to go toward him. I walked forward and he placed his hands on that part of my chest where the bone was most damaged. Having anointed the injured place, he told me, "Now you are in perfect health!"

Immediately, I woke up, loudly called my mother and told her "I have just recovered! I do not see the bulging bone on my chest!" At that time, due to the miraculous cure, my mother and I were both weeping whilst thanking God.

It should not be assumed that Imams share in divinity with God, but they attain the situation of Divine friendship (*Wilayat* –U- Allah) and become *awliyaallah* (friends of God).

The status of Divine friendship (*wilayah*)

One who reaches the status of *wilayah*, forgets himself and finds God in himself. The deeds and attributes of a *wali* become the actions and attributes of God. Not that he becomes God, nor that God shares His deity with him. Rather, due to the intensity of the purity and sincerity attained by the servant, he emerges from his metaphorical and imaginary being to become full of the Divine Essence. The *wali's* existence, reality and inner becoming a clear mirror and a complete reflection of the Perfection, Beauty and Glory of the Essence of the One, so that he becomes Godlike.

One who attains such a position has removed from his heart, and all aspects of his life, any impurity. The *wali* sees the face of His Lord in the mirror of his heart without any veil or curtain. Therefore, the servant of God reflects the beautiful face of God and becomes the perfect manifestation of attributes associated with his Lord. The Imams of *Shi'a* frequently repeat this supplication:

My God, grant me the utmost absorption in thee and illuminate the vision of our hearts with the light of thy vision, until the sight of the hearts can penetrate the curtains of light and reach the source of greatness and until our spirits get anchored to the threshold of thy sanctity.¹⁵

The questions that arise here are:

What is this illumination of the heart's vision that the friends of God (*awliya'*) beseech of Him and seek to attain?

What are those concealing curtains of light that our infallible imams spoke about?

What is that source of greatness, glory, sanctity and perfection, which is the cherished goal of those sacred souls and which always lies beyond the ken of our theoretical knowledge, to say nothing of our experiencing and witnessing?

It can clearly be understood that a servant on his way towards God, encounters two types of veils or curtains. These need to be passed if we wish to visit God;

- (i) The dark veils
- (ii) The light veils.

The first refers to corporal nature, sins and impurities. As long as one remains imprisoned in the dark veils, one is deprived of experiencing the spiritual states in one's life. After leaving behind the dark veils, the *awlia'* of God ask God to help them to penetrate the light veils so that they may look at the glorious face of God. Our Imams in some supplications ask God to see His noble face:

And bestow upon me the vision of thy noble face.¹⁶

When a servant spends all his effort in attaining God's love and seeking God's face, due to the fact that the servant is nothing except a pure mirror, he may reflect the beautiful face of God and consequently becomes the face of God per se. Therefore, the *Shiite* Imams remark:

We are the face of God¹⁷.

And referring to the twelfth Imam (al-Mahdi) we read in the *du'a-e nudbah*:

Where is the face of God towards which the friends of God turn?¹⁸

It should be noted that the Bible and the Islamic traditions say:

God created man in His own image (Genesis, 1:27).

In the *Shiite* traditions, this image of God is presented by the expression

waj-hullah, the face of God.

This face reflects all the beautiful names and glorious attributes of God.

God created humans from His spirit and made them the mirror of His names and attributes, that humanity might reflect all God's names and attributes. By this action, God prepares for humanity its office of Divine Caliphate (*khalifat u-allahi*). Due to humanity's likeness to God, all angels were ordered to prostrate before man, even though prostration is basically exclusive to God. The great Islamic mystic Muhyi al-din ibn 'Arabi said:

Hence all that which was in the divine form of the names was manifested in this human existence, and so it (humanity) acquired the station of all-inclusiveness (al-ihatah wa al-jam') with this existence, and with it was established God's argument against the angels.¹⁹

I invite you now to listen to an excerpt from the Quran. It is taken from the story of Adam. This story, according to a number of Islamic scholars, is a symbolic story that is in fact an indication of the position of humanity in general.

When your Lord told the angels: "I am placing an overlord on earth", they said: "Will You place someone there who will corrupt it and shed blood, while we hymn Your praise and sanctify You?" He said: "I know something you do not know." He taught Adam all the names ... So He told the angels: Prostrate yourselves before Adam, they fell prostrate, all save Iblis. (Q.2:30,31,34)

In other words, we can describe the position of *wilayah* (friendship with God) as release from all the ranks of servitude and as absolute annihilation of self and dissolution in God's Sacred Essence. Hence a *wali* of God is the one who has no desire, will or choice of his own. Whatever the *wali* desires, wills or chooses is identical with the glorious attributes and names of God, which are manifest in the *wali*. On this basis, all the will, knowledge and power of a *wali* are identical to the will, knowledge and power of God.

With this understanding, Shiite tradition states:

The wali of God hears, sees, and holds by God, and God sees, hears and holds by him.²⁰

It should be understood that *wilayah* does not mean obtaining Divine attributes in a state of independence nor the concept of sharing God's attributes. Rather, it means that there is no will in reality except one, and that is the will of God.

According to some traditions, servitude is a reality whose essence is Lordship.²¹ It means that if a servant of God can clean the mirror of his heart and position this clean mirror vis-à-vis (to) the face of God without there being any veils between him and his beloved God, then he becomes the face of God.

The spiritual relationship between *Shi'a* and the Prophet's family

The foundation of the relationship between a *Shi'a* Muslim and *ahl al-bayt* (the family of the Prophet) is based on love. God revealed to Muhammad that he should ask people to give him a precious reward for all his effort and trouble during the twenty-three years he led them. But what was the reward? Muhammad's reward was nothing but love; a loving relationship with his kin. Addressing the Prophet, God said:

Say: No reward do I ask of you for this, except the love of those near of kin. (Q.42:23)

Indeed, the Faith of Islam includes loving the Family (*ahlul-bayt*) of God's Messenger.

On this basis, in addition to accepting Islamic theology and following the prescriptions of the *Shariah* (Islamic law), *Shiite* Muslims have an affectionate and loving relationship with the Prophet's descendants. Of course it should not be assumed that our *Sunni* brothers and sisters do not like *ahl al-bayt*. They also respect members of the Prophet's family. Some eminent scholars of *Sunni* even expressed that it is incumbent upon every Muslim to love them.²² However, the love that *Sunni* Muslims have for the family and descendants of the Prophet is not manifested as much as in the *Shi'a* community. *Ziyarat* and *Tawassul* are two spiritual manifestations of the loving relations that *Shi'a* have with the Prophet and his pure family.

***Ziyarat* (visiting)**

Ziyarah literally means visiting and in religious terms it means visiting a holy grave or shrine of a saint. The people of *Shi'a* Islam are fond of visiting the holy shrine of the Prophet in Medina, also the shrines of his descendants, located in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran. It should be noted that of the twelve Imams, in *Shiite* belief, the last is believed to be alive and hidden; six are buried in Iraq; four in Medina and one in Iran.

Because the majority of the population in Iran and Iraq are *Shi'a* Muslims, in those countries there are buildings with a golden arch and minaret around the holy tombs dedicated to the glorious memory of the Imams. The most magnificent holy shrine amongst them is the shrine of Imam Reda, the eighth Imam. It is in Mashhad, the holy city of Iran located in the east of the country. In Iran almost every family tries to travel to the holy shrine of Imam Reda at least once a year. It is a fact that nearly fifty million individuals go to Mashhad every year. During holidays, such as New Year, the summer vacation and particularly on the anniversary of the Imam's birth and death, the number of travellers and visitors reaches more than one million. Pilgrims will be found at the shrine every day and night of the year.

The holy shrines in Iraq, especially the holy shrine of Imam 'Ali, the first Imam, which is in Najaf and the holy shrine of Imam Husayn, the third Imam, which is in Karbala are also very popular although during the rule of Saddam Husayn, Iranian and Iraqi people were mostly deprived of freely performing the ceremony of *ziyarah* (visiting).

A proper and perfect *ziyarah* has particular rules, but the core of *ziyarah* is that the visitor offers a warm greeting to the one whose body is in the grave believing that the saint's soul is alive and knows the pilgrim and hears his voice. Usually there is a particular text that is called "*Ziyarat namah*" which is prayed at each shrine. The most famous text for *ziyarah* in *Shi'a* is dedicated to Imam Husayn and it is called *Ziyarat of 'Ashura*, ('Ashura is the tenth day of the month *Muharram* the date upon which Imam Husayn was martyred).

It should be noted that in some of the *ziyarat* manuals, the visitor offers a warm greeting to all of God's prophets and saints before offering a greeting to the one being visited in the tomb.

In addition to the holy shrines of the Prophet and the Imams, the tombs of the children and descendants of Imams are also respected. They are known as *Imam-zadah*, and the tombs of many of them have become holy shrines. The holy shrines of Zaynab, the sister of Imam Husayn, which is in Damascus and Ma'sumah, the sister of Imam Reda, which is in Qom, are the most popular holy shrines of all *Imam-zadah*.

In short, holy shrines are places for prayer and for the honouring of God's saints. A fact that is worth remembering is that the holy shrines, in addition to having a religious significance, also possess psychological and sociological functions. In regard to the psychological function, visitors feel a special calm and confidence. As for the sociological function, adults and particularly young people spend their leisure time in a spiritual way, thereby avoiding the negative potential for society that other, more secular pastimes have. It is interesting to note that in the precincts of holy shrines there is usually a museum, library, park and amusement facilities for children and teenagers.

***Tawassul* (appealing)**

Tawassul literally means 'nearness' or a 'means' by which to reach a certain goal. In *Shiite* terminology, the practice of *tawassul* is seeking a means of approaching God by making saints intercessors to God. In other words, it is the supplication of God by means of an intermediary – prophets, Imams or other saints, whether it be a living person or the soul of a dead person. It is common that *Shi'a* individuals in difficulties, appeal to the souls of the Prophet and his pure family to ask God for deliverance from their problems. Some *Sunni* Muslims question this *Shi'a* act, asking how a reasoning person can seek assistance, when in need, from creatures other than their Creator, God Almighty. Some, such as *Wahhabi* Muslims who are financially supported by Saudi Arabia, even consider this practice to be polytheism. According to them, *Shiite* Muslims are polytheists. But *Shi'a* Islam says that not only it is not a prohibited act, but also that it is a recommended practice. *Shiite* Muslims do not believe that the Prophet and the Imams have any power of their own, but that they are the intermediary for God's grace and power. Getting help from humans or the souls of deceased human beings does not conflict with monotheism. If it did, a real monotheist should never go to a doctor when sick because it could be interpreted as polytheism! Going to a doctor is simply seeking help from a specialist in a particular subject.

The *Wahhabi* response to such reasoning is that they do as God allows. As *Shi'a* we say that God told us to seek nearness to him by means of his beautiful names and glorious attributes, and as we previously pointed out, the saints of God are manifestations of God's names and attributes. Moreover, as we are allowed to take help from the living, surely we can get help from the souls of saints when their lives have ended. The *Sunni* scholars have narrated that in the time of the Prophet, people wanted Muhammad to pray to God requesting favours for them. Why cannot we want the Prophet's soul to pray to God for us? Tirmidhi and Ahmad ibn Hanbal the two famous scholars of *Sunni* Islam related that:

Once when a blind man asked the Prophet to pray to God to grant him eyesight, the man was told to pray to God using the following supplication:

O God! I request you and I have turned to you through Your Prophet, the Prophet of Mercy; O Messenger of God! I have turned to you as a means towards My God for fulfilment of this wish of mine; O God! Accept his intercession (shafa'at) for me.²³

Furthermore, very many experiences in *Shi'a* testify to the success of *tawassul* (intercession). There is a famous supplication in *Shi'a* known as the *Du'ah of tawassul*, which *Shi'a* people recite on many occasions. In this supplication we pray to God by means of the Prophet, his daughter, Fatima, and the twelve Imams. In fact, we ask God, for the sake of spiritual dignity and the prime position of the Prophet and his descendents to forgive us our sins. Here is the first part of this supplication:

O God, I beseech Thee, and turn towards Thee, through Thy Prophet, the Prophet of Mercy, Muhammad, may God bless him and his Progeny, and grant them peace.

O Muhammad, O Messenger of God O guide of mercy, O intercessor of the community, O our chief, O our master, We turn towards thee, seek thy intercession and advocacy before God, we put before you our open need; O intimate of God, Stand by us when God sits in judgement over us.

O Abul Hasan, O Commander of the Faithful, O 'Ali, son of Abu Talib, O decisive argument of God over mankind, O our chief, O our master, We turn towards thee, seek thy intercession and advocacy before God, we put before you our open need, O intimate of God, Stand by us when God sits in judgement over us.

O Fatima Zahra, O daughter of Muhammad, O Joy to the eye of the Prophet, O our chief, O our mistress, We turn towards thee, seek thy intercession and advocacy before God, we put before you our open need, O intimate of God, Stand by us when God sits in judgement over us.²⁴

It is worth quoting an experience concerning *tawassul* from a reliable authority:

Grand Ayatullah 'Abd al-Karim Ha'iri, the founder of the Islamic Seminary of Qom in the twentieth century had an interesting experience that his student, Grand Ayatullah Muhammad 'Ali Araki, one of the most pious, contemporary scholars in Qom, recorded in a journal published in Tehran. According to the account of Araki, when Ha'iri lived in Karbala, there was an occasion when he fell mortally ill. In the agony of death, Ha'iri saw the souls of Shiite Imams at his bedside. He requested one of them, Imam Husayn, to ask God to allow him to live. Imam Husayn, in the vision, replied that God had given him another fifteen years of life. Araki said that Ha'iri died in Qom fifteen years after that event.

Araki said that in the same way as the postponement of Ha'iri's death was miraculous; so was his birth also extra-ordinary. According to Araki, the story is that:

Ha'iri's parents failed to have a child. After many years of prayer and making vows, God gave them a child. They named him 'Abd al-Karim (the servant of the Most Beneficent). Ha'iri had told Araki that he was a naughty boy in his childhood, thus his father often said to his wife, "How could we expect a good child when we forced God to give us this one by our prayers and vows?!"

The Shiite heritage of prayer

An examination of the works of our Imams concerning *du'a* shows the high level of their mystical attitudes. Some of the Imams taught their prayers of supplication (*du'a*) to their children or students and they have passed them on to following generations for recitation on various occasions. Most of the prayer manuals in *Shi'a* are attributed to three Imams: Imam 'Ali – the first Imam, Imam Husayn – the third Imam, and Imam Sajjad – the fourth Imam. As Imam Sajjad possesses a particular position in this respect, it is worth elaborating somewhat, on his life and his works.

Imam 'Ali ibn al-Husayn- the fourth Imam of *Shi'a*, is known as Zayn al-'Abidin (the adornment of the worshippers) and Sajjad (the one who constantly prostrates to God in prayer). He was the son of Imam Husayn, the grandson of Imam 'Ali and the great grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. He accompanied his father, Husayn on the journey to Karbala, but fell mortally ill. When the group was intercepted on its way and the Umayyid force killed all the male members of the Prophet's family, Sajjad survived. After the tragedy, the Umayyad force took him and the women of the Prophet's household as captives to Damascus where Yazid, son of Muawiyah, ruled over various Islamic areas. The Umayyad Rule held a celebration in Damascus indicating their victory over Husayn. They set the heads of Husayn and his followers on spears and displayed the women and children of the Prophet as their captives. Despite being threatened with death by Yazid, both Zaynab, Husayn's sister, and Sajjad gave a short sermon, clarifying what had happened in Karbala, for the people to know the truth of what happened.

Sajjad was influenced by the tragedy of Karbala until the end of his life. The story is told that one day his servant said to him,

O son of God's Messenger! Is it not time for your sorrow to come to an end? Sajjad replied, 'Woe upon you! Jacob the prophet had twelve sons, and God made one of them disappear. Jacob's eyes turned white from constant weeping, his hair turned grey from sorrow, and his back became bent in gloom even though his son, Joseph, was alive.²⁵ Sajjad explained to his servant: "I watched while my father, my brothers, my uncles, and seventeen members of my family were slaughtered all around me. How could my sorrow come to an end?"²⁶

After the tragedy of Karbala and following associated events, Sajjad returned to Medina and lived there until his death. He dedicated his life to erudition and worship and became an authority on prophetic traditions and Islamic jurisprudence, but he was known mostly for his spiritual and mystical character and his piety.

Amongst his works, Sajjad's book of prayers has an eminent position. It is known as *al-Sahifat al-Sajjadiyyah*. It contains 54 supplications that he taught his son Muhammad al-Baqir, the fifth Imam.

The *Shiite* Muslims consider this book to be the most precious, spiritual heritage after the Qur'an and *Nahj al-balagha* (the book within which the sermons, letters and sayings of Imam 'Ali were collected). The *Sahifah* has been given various honorary titles, such as "Sister of the Qur'an" and "Psalms of the Prophet's Household" (*zabur-u Al-e Muhammad*). Although the *Sahifah*, contains many of the prayers of Imam Sajjad, others are recorded in other *Shiite* sources. It should be noted that most *Shi'a* prayer manuals were collected in a book entitled '*Mafatih al-jinan*, "Keys to the Gardens of Paradise". Nowadays it is the most widely used of the comprehensive prayer manuals. It contains a wide variety of supplications from all the Imams and for every occasion. It can be said that almost every *Shi'a* home has a copy of this book.

A cursory glance at prayer texts

The prayers created by the Prophet's household possess various dimensions that are worth a closer examination. These prayers mostly consist of beautiful literature with a deep, mystical meaning. We shall take a very brief look at some prayer texts, most of them composed by Imam Sajjad.

It should be understood that *Du'a* (prayer) itself can be divided into three forms:

- (i) Supplication: in this kind of prayer, one calls upon God and asks Him for something, whether it is earthly or heavenly.
- (ii) *Munajat*,
- (iii) *Dhikr*

I shall briefly explain the last two.

Munajat

Munajat means "whispered prayer". In this kind of prayer, the servant of God talks with God privately, as one talks to a friend or to oneself thus the believer feels free and can tell of his grievances, he confesses his own sins and asks God for forgiveness and assistance to go the right way. The following are typical of *munajat* prayers written by Imam Sajjad:

My God, offences have clothed me in the garment of my lowliness, separation from Thee has wrapped me in the clothing of my misery. My dreadful crimes have deadened my heart; so bring it to life by a repentance²⁷ from Thee! O my hope and my aim! O my wish and my want!²⁸

My God, let the cloud of Thy mercy cast its shadow upon my sins and send the billow of Thy clemency flowing over my faults!²⁹

My God, though the sins of Thy servant are ugly, Thy pardon is beautiful.

My God, I am not the first to have disobeyed Thee, and Thou turned toward him, or to have sought to attain Thy favour, and Thou wert munificent toward him.³⁰

My God, what thinkest Thou? Wilt Thou chastise me after my faith in Thee, drive me far away after my love for Thee, deprive me while I hope for Thy mercy and forgiveness, forsake me while I seek sanctuary in Thy pardon? How could Thy generous face disappoint me?!³¹

My God, dost Thou blacken faces which fall down in prostration before Thy mightiness?

Dost Thou strike dumb tongues which speak in laudation of Thy glory and majesty?

Dost Thou seal hearts which harbour Thy love?

Dost Thou deafen ears, which take pleasure in hearing Thy remembrance according to Thy will?

Dost Thou manacle hands, which expectations have raised to Thee in hope of Thy clemency?

Dost Thou punish bodies, which worked to obey Thee until they grew thin in struggling for Thee?

Dost Thou chastise legs, which ran to worship Thee?³²

My God, plant in our hearts the trees of Thy love, complete for us the lights of Thy knowledge, give us to taste the sweetness of Thy pardon and the pleasure of Thy forgiveness, gladden our eyes on the day of meeting Thee with the vision of Thee.³³

My God, who can have tasted the sweetness of Thy love, then wanted another in place of Thee? Who can have become intimate with Thy nearness, then sought removal from Thee?³⁴

My God, place us with him whom Thou hast chosen for Thy nearness and Thy friendship, purified through Thy affection and Thy love, given yearning for the meeting with Thee, made pleased with Thy decree, granted gazing upon Thy face.³⁵

My God, place us among those within the gardens, of whose breasts the trees of yearning for Thee have taken firm root, and the assemblies of whose hearts have been seized by the ardour of Thy love! They seek shelter in the nests of meditation, feed upon the gardens of nearness and disclosure, drink from the pools of love with the cup of gentle favour, and enter into the watering-places of warm affection. The covering has been lifted from their eyes.³⁶

Dhikr

Dhikr, the third form of *du'ā*, literally means 'remembrance' or 'mention', and technically, means 'remembrance of God' which is frequently translated as 'invocation'. The Qur'an emphasises the necessity of *dhikr* and its role in providing for spiritual wants and psychological needs. The most famous expressions for *dhikr* in Islam are four:

- (i) There is no god but God,
- (ii) Praise belongs to God,
- (iii) Glory be to God,
- (iv) God is great.

Although supplications usually contain one or more of these kinds of "*dhikr*, remembrance" along with the servant's wants; some prayer texts, such as the following, have exclusively been classed as *dhikr*.

Glory be to Thee, O God, and I beg Thy loving care!
Glory be to Thee, O God, and high art Thou exalted!
Glory be to Thee, O God, and might is Thy loincloth!
Glory be to Thee, O God, and mightiness is Thy cloak!
Glory be to Thee, O God, and magnificence is Thy authority!
Glory be to Thee, All-Mighty! How mighty Thou art!
Glory be to Thee, Thou art glorified in the highest! Thou hearest and seest what is under the soil!
Glory be to Thee, Thou art witness over every whispered conversation!
Glory be to Thee, the place where every complaint is put down!
Glory be to Thee, present in every assembly!
Glory be to Thee, object of great hopes!
Glory be to Thee, Thou seest what is at the lowest depth of the water!
Glory be to Thee, Thou hearest the breaths of the fish in the lowest depths of the oceans!
Glory be to Thee, Thou knowest the weight of the heavens!
Glory be to Thee, Thou knowest the weight of the earths!³⁷

Al-Zuhri, a famous Sunni scholar, related from Sa'id ibn al-Musayyib, a well-known figure of Islam, that sometimes 'Ali ibn al-Husayn (Sajjad) glorified God in his prostration in such a manner that it was as if there was no tree and no clod of earth that did not glorify along with him so that all those praying with him were in absolute awe of God.³⁸

As can clearly be seen, the most important feature of the above mentioned prayers is 'love'. Our Imams' teachings have taught us that indeed religion is nothing but "love". The ultimate aim of prophets and religions is to make their followers full of love; love for the Creator and love for all creatures. In one of his prayers, Imam Sajjad said:

O My God! Even if you placed me in the midst of Hell and burned me, I would tell the people of fire that I love my God.

Imam 'Ali said:

"My God! [If you placed me in Hell], Even if it be supposed that I would be able to bear your chastisement, how shall I bear the pain of separation from Thee?"³⁹

According to Nahj al-balagha, Imam 'Ali classified worshipers of God into three types. He said: There are people who worship God to gain His Favours, this is the worship of traders; while there are some who worship God to keep themselves free from His Wrath, this is the worship of slaves; and there are a few who obey Him out of their sense of gratitude and obligation, this is the worship of the free and noble of heart.⁴⁰

Probably the element of 'love' in Islamic mysticism has originated from the teachings of the Prophet's household, particularly the teachings of Imam 'Ali and Imam Sajjad. It is narrated about Rabi'ah, one of the few famous women Islamic mystics that one day a number of her disciples saw her running with a bowl of water in one hand and a torch in the other. They called to her, asking what she was doing, and she called back that she was going to set the torch to Paradise and pour water on Hell so that both these veils would disappear and cease to hinder pilgrims. Then they would know if their purpose was sure and their motive right. In reference to love of creatures, the Imams' prayers guide us to behave with people in such a way that leads to a loving relationship between all. Imam Sajjad has a long dua' known as "the supplication on noble moral traits" within which he says:

O God,
bless Muhammad and his Household
and point me straight to
resist him who is dishonest toward me
with good counsel,
repay him who separates from me
with gentle devotion,
reward him who deprives me
with free giving,
recompense him who cuts me off
with joining,
oppose him who slanders me
with excellent mention,
give thanks for good,
and shut my eyes to evil!⁴¹

O God,
bless Muhammad and his Household,
adorn me with the adornment of the righteous,
and clothe me in the ornaments of the God fearing, through
spreading justice,
restraining rage,
quenching the flame of hate,
bringing together the people of separation,
correcting discord,
spreading about good behaviour,
covering faults,
mildness of temper,
lowering the wing,
beauty of conduct,
gravity of bearing,
agreeableness in comportment,
precedence in reaching excellence,
preferring bounteousness,
refraining from condemnation,
bestowing bounty on the undeserving.⁴²

Conclusion

The *Shiite* understanding of Islam strongly possesses a deep, spiritual dimension that would be worth re-examination by those who are interested in Islamic studies.

Finally, I would like to end my paper by quoting the American Professor William Chittick. In the introduction to his translation of *al-Sahifat al-Sajjadiyyah*, he writes:

Islamic civilization as a whole is much like a traditional Muslim city: The outer walls make it appear dull and sombre, and it is not easy to gain access to the world behind the walls. But if one becomes an intimate with the city's inhabitants, one is shown into delightful courtyards and gardens, full of fragrant flowers, fruit trees, and sparkling fountains. Those who write about Islamic history, political events, and institutions deal with the walls, since they have no way into the gardens. Some of the gardens are opened up through the study of Sufism, art and architecture, poetry, and music, but since all of these have appeared in specific historical forms influenced by the surrounding environment, their deep Islamic roots can easily be lost to sight. The most traditional and authentic gardens of the city, and the most difficult of access, are the hearts of the greatest representatives of the civilization. It is here that the supplications handed down from the pillars of early Islam can open up a whole new vision of Islam's animating spirit, since they provide direct access to the types of human attitudes that are the prerequisite for a full flowering of the Islamic ideal.⁴³

NOTES

1. See, *Tusi, al-Tibyan fi tafsir al-Quran* (Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi), vol.3, p.588; *Tabarsi, Majma' al-bayan fi tafsir al-Quran* (al-A'lami, Beirut, 1995), vol.3, p.382; *Ayyashi, Kitab al-tafsir* (al-Maktabat al-Ilmiyya al-Islamiyya, Tehran, 1380 A.H.), vol.1, p.331.
2. See, *Muhammad Ibn 'Isa Tirmidi, Sunan- e Tirmidi* (Dar al-Fikr, Beirut, 1403 A.H.), vol.5, p.297; *Muhammad Ibn Yazid Qazwini, Sunan- e Ibn Majah* (Dar Sadir, Beirut), Vol.1, p.45; *Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Musnad- e Ahmad* (Dar Sadir, Beirut), vol.1, p.84.
3. See, *Tusi, al-Tibyan fi tafsir al-Quran*, vol.3, p.435; *Tabarsi, Majma' al-bayan fi tafsir al-Quran*, vol.3, p.274; *Ayyashi, Kitab al-tafsir*, vol.1, p.292.
4. *Imam 'Ali, Nahj al-blagha* (Beirut, 1997), pp.69-70 (Sermon.27).
5. *Ibid.*, p.427 (Letter.53).
6. See, *Bukhari, Sahih- e Bukhari* (Dar al-fikr, Beirut, 1401 A.H.), vol.8, p.127; *Muslim Ibn Hajjaj, Sahih e-Muslim* (Dar al-fikr, Beirut), vol.6, p.3; *Shaykh-e Saduq, 'Uyun al-akhbar al-Reza* (al-A'lami, Beirut, 1404 A.H.), vol.2, p.54; *Shaykh-e Mufid, al-Irshad* (Muassisat al-Ahl al-bayt, Qom), vol.1, p.351
7. In *Sunni Islam*, an Imam is the leader of ritual prayer, a teacher-preacher who delivers the Friday sermon in the mosque.
8. See, *Muslim Ibn Hajjaj, Sahih- e Muslim*, vol.7, p.130; *al-Tabarani, al-Mu'jam al-awsat* (Dar al-haramayn, Saudi Arabia), vol.4, p.134.
9. No disaster ever happens on earth nor to yourselves unless it is[contained] in a Book even before We brought it into existence. That is easy for God [to do], so that you should not feel sorry about what may have escaped you, nor yet rejoice in what He has given you. God does not love every conceited boaster who is miserly and orders people to be miserly. For anyone who turns away from it, God is Transcendent, Praiseworthy. (Q.57:22).

10. By the Clear Book, We have set up as an Arabic reading so that you may (all) use your reason. It is [comprised] in the Mother of the Book [which exists] in Our presence, so lofty, wise! (Q.43:2-4).
11. Still it is a majestic Reading (a Glorious Qur'an), [preserved] on a guarded tablet! (Q.85:21-22)
12. That this is indeed a Qur'an Most Honourable, In a Book well-guarded. which none but the purified may touch. (Q.56:77-79).
13. Furthermore I call to witness the setting of the Stars,- And that is indeed a mighty adjuration if ye but knew,- That this is indeed a Quran Most Honourable, In a Book well-guarded, Which none shall touch but those who are clean: A Revelation from the Lord of the Worlds. (Q.56:75-80).
14. For example see, www.imamreza.net
15. *Shaykh 'Abbas Qomi, Mafatih al-jinan* (Nubugh, Qom, 1375 A.H.), p.283. This passage from the *munajat sha`baniyyah* (a famous prayer narrated by the *Shi'a* Imams) which is accepted as authentic by *Shi'a* scholars and whose very content bears witness to the authenticity of its origin in those sacred personages (i.e. the Imams of the *ahl al-bayt*, the Prophet's household).
16. *Ibn Tawus, Iqbal al-a'mal* (Maktab al-'lam al-Islami, Qom, 1416 A.H.), vol.3, p.127.
17. *Shaykh-e Saduq, al-Tawhid* (Jama'at al-mudarrisin, Qom, 1387 A.H.), p.150.
18. *Shaykh 'Abbas Qomi, Mafatih al-jinan*, p.964. (*Du'a-e Nudbah*).
19. *Muhi al-Din Ibn al-'Arabi, al-Futuhat al-Makkiyyah* (al-Maktabat al-'Arabiyyah, Cairo, 1988), vol.12, pp.253, 286, 521.
20. See, *Muhammab Ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni, al-Kafi* (Dar al-kitab al-Islamiyyah, Tehran, 1365 A.H.), vol.2, p.352.
21. *al-Imam al-Sadiq, Misbah al-shari'ah* (al-A'lami, Beirut, 1400 A.H.), p.7.
22. See, *al-Imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, al-Tafsir al-kabir* (Dar Ihya' al-Turath al- 'Arabi, Beirut), vol.27, p.166.
23. *Mahmud Alusi, Ruh al-Ma'ani* (Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, Beirut, 1405 A.H.), vol. 6, p.128.
24. *Shaykh 'Abbas Qomi, Mafatih al-jinan*, p.198 (*Du'a al-Tawassul*).
25. In the Quranic account of this story Jacob knew that Joseph was still alive and would be found. See, Q.12: 83-87. Jacob's grief was because he missed his son. How much greater *Sajjad's* grief who had seen his family murdered.
26. See, *William C. Chittick*, Introduction to *The Psalms of Islam (Sahifat al-Sajjadiyyah)* (Ansariyan, Qom, 2001), p.xvi.
27. Here the word 'repentance' does not mean, "regret". It means, "returning". It should be noted that the Arabic word *tawba* (that is usually translated into 'repentance') originally meant, 'returning', not 'repentance'. Therefore, when we use the word dealing with a servant, it means 'repentance', but when we use it concerning God, it means the returning of God towards His servant.
28. *Imam Sajjad, The Psalms of Islam (al-Sahifat al-Sajjadiyyah)* (Ansariyan, Qom, 2001), p.232 (The Whispered Prayer of Repenters).
29. *Ibid.*, p.233.

30. Ibid., p.234.
31. Ibid., p.239 (The Whispered Prayer of the Fearful).
32. Ibid., p.237.
33. Ibid., p.259 (The Whispered Prayer of the Abstainers).
34. Ibid., p.248 (The Whispered Prayer of the Lovers of God).
35. Ibid., p.248.
36. Ibid., p.253 (The Whispered Prayer of the Knowers).
37. See, *Imam Sajjad, The Psalms of Islam (al-Sahifat al-Sajjadiyyah)*, p.211 (One of His Glorifications).
38. Ibid., 212.
39. *Shaykh 'Abbas Qomi, Mafatih al-Jinan, Dua' al-nudbah*
40. *Imam 'Ali, Nahj al-balaghah*, p.526 (Sayings, No.237).
41. *Imam Sajjad, The Psalms of Islam (al-Sahifat al-Sajjadiyyah)*, pp.69-70.
42. Ibid., p.70.
43. *William C. Chittick*, introduction to *The Psalms of Islam (al-Sahifat al-Sajjadiyyah)* (Ansariyan, Qom, 2001), , pp.xlii-xliii.

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