

Unity of the Islamic Schools of Thought According to Imam Musa Sadr

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‘Abd al-Rahim Abadhari

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Abstract

Even at a young age, while still studying in the Islamic seminary in Qom, Imam Musa al-Sadr was concerned about the plight of the Muslim Ummah. As soon as he moved to Lebanon and became the religious leader for the Shia communities in the region, one of his first tasks was to establish strong relations with many of the prominent Sunni personalities within the country, including the then mufti of Lebanon, Shaykh Hasan Khalid.

In a historical letter to the mufti, Imam al-Sadr laid out his vision of a unified ummah that was supplemented with various practical measures towards this goal. It was not long before he became a symbol of unity not only for the different groups within Islam, but also for the various Christian denominations in Lebanon. This article explores the thought and activities of Imam al-Sadr pertaining to the issue of unity and the important role he occupied as one of the leading figures within the Islamic unity movement.

Keywords: Imam Musa al-Sadr, Lebanon, unity, Shia-Sunni relations, Shia-Christian relations, unity of *fiqh*, leaders of Islamic unity movement.

Biography

Sayyid Musa al-Sadr was born on the 15th of May, 1928 in the holy city of Qom, Iran. After having completed his primary education, he moved to the capital city of Tehran where in 1956, he earned his degree in Islamic jurisprudence. Returning to Qom, he busied himself over the next few years with lecturing at the various religious centers in the city. He also launched the publication of the periodical entitled *Maktab-e Islam (The School of Islam)*.

In 1960, following the death of Sayyid ‘Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din, al-Sadr moved to Lebanon to hold the principal position of the Islamic Shi’a religious leader in the southern city of Tyre. After witnessing the social and living conditions of the community, he became an advocate for the plight of the Shi’a population in Lebanon. In 1969, the Grand Assembly of Shias in Lebanon was founded and al-Sadr was elected as its president for a duration of six years. It was during this time that he became known as “Imam Musa”. When his term ended in 1975, he was re-elected for a further eighteen-year period (of which he was only able to serve three).

Imam Musa founded many social institutions, vocational schools, medical clinics, and literacy centers. His activities gained national interest when he warned of the dangers of Israeli aggression into Lebanon—particularly into its Shi’a-dominated southern region. The Imam was careful, however, not to limit his struggle to a sectarian movement. In 1971, he established a committee that incorporated all the religious leaders in Southern Lebanon (including the Maronite Christians) in an attempt to coordinate their social and political activities in the region.

In 1974, al-Sadr organized a series of demonstrations to protest the government’s negligence of the deteriorating conditions of the rural areas. This led to the founding of the *Harakat al-Mahrumin* (Movement of the Deprived), which adopted as their slogan: “Continuous struggle until there are no deprived people left in Lebanon.” During the civil war, al-Sadr founded the *Afwaj al-Muqawimat al-Lubnaniyyah* (Brigades of the Lebanese Resistance) or more popularly known by its acronym ‘Amal’, as the military wing of the *Harakat al-Mahrumin*. Initially it fought alongside the Lebanese National Movement and the Palestinian Resistance against the projects of partition and Palestinian settlements in Lebanon.

Among his contemporary religious and political leaders, al-Sadr stood out for his willingness to work with other groups, and in particular the Christians of Lebanon. He co-founded the Social Movement with the Catholic archbishop Grégoire Haddad in 1960, participated in the Islamic-Christian dialogue in 1962, and lectured in a Capuchin Christian church during the Easter fast of 1964. He was a prominent intellectual who had mastered many languages and played an all-important role in Lebanese political life. Towards the end of August 1978, he mysteriously disappeared during a visit to Libya.

The Essence of Unity

One of the deep hopes and inner yearnings of Imam Musa Sadr was for the Islamic ummah to become united in all corners of the world. From the onset of his youth while still occupied with his studies in the seminary in Qom, he used to reflect over this quite seriously. In various gatherings of the seminary he would bring up the topic, often in the presence of senior teachers. In 1947, while not having reached his twentieth birthday, when he was informed of 'Allamah Amini's arrival to Tehran from Najaf and the fact that he would be residing there for a few days, he took the opportunity to hurry to Tehran with a close friend in order to visit the 'Allamah. In the midst of discussing various scholarly matters with him, Imam Musa Sadr began to speak of unity between the Shias and the Sunnis, particularly in the face of a common enemy. In expounding on this topic, he defended his own positions for his teacher.¹ It is as if God had placed this yearning within his core being as a gift for the Islamic ummah.

Accordingly, years later, when Imam Musa Sadr entered Lebanon in 1959, as soon as the opportune moment presented itself in the very same year, he laid the foundations for friendship with the Ahl al-Sunnah scholars. As an example, one can mention the lasting relationship that he established with Muhyi al-Din Hasan (the Mufti of the Ahl al-Sunnah in Lebanon). This relationship became so dear and cordial that people became used to seeing the two of them together on most auspicious occasions such as the Eid of Ghadir, the nights of the month of RamaDhan and the days leading up to 'Ashura. The two of them would ascend the pulpit² in a shared location such as the Qadim Mosque or the Nadi of Imam Sadiq, and the people would listen to the talks of both a Shia and a Sunni. It was such that if someone from a different city entered the gathering and was not aware of the denominational backgrounds of these two speakers, they would not be able to distinguish which of the two was Shia and which Sunni.

Imam Musa Sadr used to say, "There is no inconsistency or difference between the Shia and the Sunni. They are both the followers of one united religion."³ With this philosophy, he intensified his conciliatory activities in Lebanon. During his two-month visit to the countries of North Africa in the summer of 1963, in a historical and original initiative, he was able to establish long-lasting and beneficial relationships between the different Islamic centres in Egypt, Western Africa, and the Gulf states and the Shia denominational centres in Lebanon.

A Historical Letter

After the establishment of the 'Grand Assembly of the Shias of Lebanon,' the official inauguration day of this Assembly took place on Friday, May 23, 1969. After having welcomed and thanked the participants, Imam Musa Sadr sketched out, in a fervent speech, his program and overall plans for the Assembly. The ceremony was attended by many great academic, political, cultural, denominational, and religious personalities of Lebanon, including the then president, Mr. Charles Helou. Imam Musa Sadr laid particular emphasis on two areas of his program.

1. Fundamental measures in order to eliminate the divisions within the Muslims and an increase in the efforts to achieve at a thorough unification, and
2. Collaboration with all of the denominational groups of Lebanon and the attempt to preserve national unity.

In the first proclamation that was issued by the Grand Assembly after one week [of its inauguration], this program and course of action was once again stressed and publicized. It was published in most of the newspapers and distributed to all parts of Lebanon. Not sufficing himself to his speech and the issuance of this proclamation, however, Imam Musa Sadr immediately took practical steps towards this aim. In October of 1969, he wrote a historical and unparalleled letter to the then Mufti of Lebanon, Shaykh Hasan Khalid. In it, while outlining the precise and subtle points regarding unity between the schools of thought, he proposed practical and serious measures towards the advancement of this important and fateful issue. Here, we review the entire text of this letter:[4](#)

In the Name of Allah, the all-Merciful, the all-Compassionate

Dear Esteemed Brother, Shaykh Hasan Khalid, Respected Mufti of the Republic of Lebanon,

Peace be upon you, and the mercy of God and his grace,

With pure benedictions ... In these difficult days in which our ummah has been consumed with deep anxiety, is confronted with dangers that have surrounded its every part, and whose present and future finds itself before a storm, we sense—in a clear and increasing manner with the passing of each day—the pressing need of an all-embracing, penetrative unity—a unity that brings together the broken ranks of the Muslims as well as their scattered efforts in such a way that they can clearly see what is before them. Through it, they can regain trust in themselves in shaping their own future and history and in carrying out their own responsibilities. Speaking with one voice, bringing together resources, and developing [mutual] talents is not only the most noble of religious objectives and the order of our great Prophet (s), but it is truly that which our very existence and honour depends on, as well as the existence of our future generations. Yes, it is certainly a question of life and death. However, this unity of voice must not become just an inflated slogan or a written catchword; rather, it must be a radiation of thought, a pulsation of the heart, a course of action to follow, and a step in shaping our future. This will not be possible except through extraordinary intellectual struggle, exceptional efforts from within, and sleepless nights in toil and trouble. It is only then that we will achieve unity, a true model that others can learn from.

My brother, let me share with you my humble experience. Before my visit to Dar al-Ifta' fur months prior, I had stated that establishing a united voice between Muslims within their minds and hearts—or to be more precise, to deepen the unity of Muslims and to establish it on an enduring intellectual and cordial basis—can be achieved in two ways:

1. Amalgamating the fiqh (canonical law)

The Islamic fortress—in its foundations—is a single entity, and the Islamic ummah—in its beliefs, divine book, and origin and end—is also one; hence, this calls for unity even in its particulars. Establishing unity in these particulars—or rather bringing them together—is an idea which our upright predecessors and righteous scholars had also taken upon themselves. We see that Shaykh Abu Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Hasan Óusi writes the book *Khilaf* a thousand years ago on the subject of comparative *fiqh*. 'Allamah Hilli (Hasan ibn Yusuf ibn MuTahhar) followed in the footsteps of Óusi by writing his book *al-Tadhkirah*.

Comparative *fiqh* is the very blessed seed that jurisprudential unity is tied to and which is completed with the unity of canonical law. In our times, the indefatigable and leading learned figures from the great Islamic scholars set up a centre in Egypt thirty years ago under the name 'Dar al-Taqrīb bayn al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyyah' (The House of Bringing Together the Islamic Schools of Thought). Among them were the great teacher, the late Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut and the head of the Religious Studies at Al-Azhar University, the late Muhammad Madani. As for the great Islamic scholars from Lebanon, Iran and Iraq, one can name Sayyid 'Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din, the late Ayatullah Sayyid Husayn Burujardi who was the grand *marja'* of the Shias, the great 'Allamah Shaykh Muhammad Taqi Qummi who was the permanent secretary of Dar al-Taqrīb, and finally 'Allamah ÓabaTaba'i in Qom.

The Institute of Dar al-Taqrīb, in addition to its many activities, wanted to implement a plan which my late father, Imam Sayyid Sadr al-Din, initiated by writing *Liwa' al-hamd fi al-akhbar al-khassah wa al-'ammah* (*The Standard of Praise in the Narrations of the Shia and the Sunni*), which was an effort towards the compilation of all the *ahadith* that the different Islamic schools of thought had narrated from the noble Prophet (s) pertaining to all the doctrinal and jurisprudential fields. His aim was that it would act as the second source—after the noble Qur'an—for the Muslims.

In more precise terms, it is an endeavour to materialize the amalgamation of the pure Prophetic *sunnah* (way). On this level, some of these scholars as well as others have presented researched studies and works pertaining to *fiqh* and the Islamic schools of thought. Later, the time came to write an encyclopaedia of *fiqh*. The University of Damascus has begun the writing of *al-Mawsu'ah al-fiqhiyyah* (*Encyclopaedia of Jurisprudence*) while Al-Azhar University that of *al-Mawsu'ah 'abd al-Nasir al-Islami* (*Islamic Encyclopaedia of 'abd al-Nasir*).

Also, the great teacher, Sayyid Muhammad Taqi Hakim is in the process of compiling a valuable book on the complete principles of comparative *fiqh*. We are clearly witnessing the first fruits of these creative endeavours in the jurisprudential verdicts of the Islamic schools of thought—a sign which shows that we have been blessed with the help of God in taking steps towards bringing together the *fiqh*.

2. Mutual Efforts

This way is more appropriate in exceptional conditions, such as those which apply in Lebanon, and

which gives expedited results. It involves the very mobilization of our common resources in order to accomplish various goals. It is a way that will bring about, on its own, the achievement of a flowing unity. The mutual efforts to join the two groups and comrades in one field will result in increased trust and confidence, the tranquillity of the hearts, and the display of one of the examples of the unity of thoughts and feelings. As examples, let us name a few of these goals:

A. Religious Goals: This includes making the holidays and religious rituals one and the same such as the acts of worship like the call for prayers, congregational prayers, etc. For example, with regard to the sighting of the new crescent moon, we can study a proposal to see if we can determine, through scientific precision, the day of Eid by relying on new scientific ways and fixing the angle for sighting the crescent on the horizon, so that all Muslims can have their Eid on one day. This will economize many difficulties in terms of holidays and family visitations so that we do not have the issues that arise from having separate days for Eid. Also, we can look into whether or not there is a form for the call to prayers that is acceptable to everyone.

B. Social Goals: Of the mutual efforts, there are those that can take shape in the form of combating illiteracy, eliminating homelessness, supporting orphans, and raising the standard of living of the working class. It is very easy for us to establish institutes with these goals in mind or to further develop the institutes that already exist.

C. National Goals: Is there any doubt regarding our united national sentiments: the necessity of actively participating in liberating Palestine; the duty of supporting Lebanon against the voraciousness of deceptive enemies; the duty of backing the freedom fighters of Palestine; the need of a state of alertness and complete cooperation with our fellow Arab countries in the face of an offensive that can be expected at any time; the issue of securing southern Lebanon and all parts of Lebanon, so that like a permanent fortress, it can repel Israeli infiltrations in its encounter with it, and through it, can make them consign their own insatiable colonialism to oblivion.

These are all goals for which there are no differences of opinion [amongst the schools of thought], even regarding the smallest of them. In this condition, it is necessary to attach ourselves to these goals, to study them more closely, to determine our duties, to establish cooperation of the efforts of all the children of this country—first, amongst themselves and amongst the country officials, and then between them and the Arab countries in order to mobilize the resources of all the Muslims of the world and all those who have a conscience that is awake and well-intentioned wherever they may be.

By wholeheartedly participating in these responsibilities—in other words, freely giving to them to the extent we can—it behoves us that in order to actualize these matters, we must jointly study its procedures and manners of execution so that the cooperation in its implementation becomes apparent and its challenges easy to deal with. These were examples that I have proposed to your Excellency with the hope that the issue gets studied from all its aspects and that you instruct the formation of a joint committee of experts which can immediately set to work.

My elder, before signing off on this letter, I direct your intention to the arrival of the blessed month of Ramadhan. As you know, the blessed month is an incomparable opportunity to create a spiritual and energetic atmosphere so that the Muslims are able to revive once again their eternal historical memories and to renew the scene of their own great history in these days.

For this reason, I hope that you commission the custodians of Dar al-Ifṭā' as soon as possible to establish contacts with the members of the Committee of Publication and Propagation of the Grand Assembly of Shias in Lebanon. Also, it should be such that a few of the active and expert *mu'minin* participate in the official offices of propagation so that in the end, a complete program can be created that can generate an atmosphere in line with this great month—one that can set alight in the hearts, flames of goodness, truthfulness, and heroism. I pray for your wellbeing in the service of Islam and all that is good, as well as for your brothers in the Grand Assembly of Shias, and for your devoted brother,

Musa Sadr.

27 Rajab, 1389

19 October, 1969⁵

Unifying the Fiqh

There are two perspectives—affirmative and negative—that exist at the base level amongst the prominent Islamic personalities (both Shia and Sunni) related to the idea of unifying the followers of the different schools of thought. The belief of those who subscribe to the negative perspective is based on the idea that there is absolutely no point of commonality between the Shia and the Sunni. All that is found in these two schools of thought is completely at odds with one another in every respect. Hence, there is no plausible reason for unity. The proponents of this idea are in the extreme minority even though they may have chosen this perspective with good intentions and sincerity.

However, the reality is that this perspective has always been misused throughout history by the enemies of Islam and the colonialists of both the East and West. It has left many problems for the Islamic world; we shall not elaborate on these since they are quite obvious.

However, those who subscribe to the positive perspective regarding this topic have differed in terms of its means and methods; they can be divided into a few groups. The first group is of the following opinion: This topic has absolutely no relation to the unity of the “schools of thought”; each of these schools of thought must preserve their own fundamental and subsidiary doctrines. It is only the followers of the schools of thought that, while preserving the fundamental and subsidiary doctrines of their own school, must unite with the followers of the other schools. This perspective was considered necessary by Imam Musa Sadr, but never sufficient. Moreover, at the level of action, it would bring about a series of obstacles and challenges that would inhibit the materialization of unity.

Another group is of the belief that all of the Islamic schools of thought are obliged to do the following: while safeguarding their own denominational essence, they should endeavour in the points of

commonality between the different schools. Of course, many great and blessed strides have been taken in this direction: the late Shaykh Óusi (*r*) composed the valuable book, *Khilaf*, ‘Allamah Hilli authored the book, *Tadhkirah*, and today important books on the topic of ‘comparative *fiqh*’ are being written by capable Shia and Sunni thinkers. This perspective, however, with all the importance that it carries, primarily involves the scholars and thinkers and is contained within scholarly gatherings; it does not have a reality within the masses of people whose numbers range in the millions.

The third group, whose vanguard is most probably Imam Musa Sadr, while respecting the proponents of the previous perspectives and their followers, consider them as necessary but insufficient. It is for this reason that Musa Sadr raises the idea of unifying the *fiqh*. He says, “The Islamic fortress—in its foundations—is a single entity, and the Islamic ummah—in its beliefs, divine book, and origin and end—is also one; hence, this calls for unity even in its particulars.”^{[6](#)}

In March of 1970, Imam Musa Sadr attended the annual conference of ‘Collective Discussions on Islam’ in Egypt, during which, in a detailed speech in the presence of scholarly personalities, he emphasized this very point. He presented a codified plan on this topic to the conference forum and it was well received by most of the attendees. It resulted in the surfacing of the permanent members of the Assembly. Moreover, during an interview with the Egyptian newspaper *al-Musawwir*, in his response to the interviewer regarding the unity of the schools of thought, he stated:

... this topic is possible after accepting the unity of *fiqh*; it cannot come about simply through empty dialogue and superficial conversations of the leaders of the schools of thought. These schools have been crystallized in the depth of being of their own followers. I hope that this important goal will materialize with this Assembly, which is composed of the great scholars of the Islamic world. Moreover, considering the opportune position that Egypt occupies in the Islamic world, it can play an effective role in actualizing this goal...^{[7](#)}

In every opportunity and gathering that he had with jurists and scholars of the Islamic schools of thought, Imam Musa Sadr would bring up the topic of the unity between the schools of thought, and in particular the explanation and elucidation of unifying the *fiqh*. The following year, on April 19, 1971, after having participated in the sixth congress of the ‘Collective Discussions on Islam’ in Egypt, he met with military personnel in the Suez Canal and the battlefronts of the Egyptian war. While outlining the importance of fighting against the Israeli occupiers, he emphasized the topic of unity of the Islamic ummah, and in particular of religious rituals.^{[8](#)} Likewise, in 1973, on the occasion of the seventh annual conference of ‘Knowledge of Islamic Thought’ in Algeria, he once again brought up this topic in an interview with the Algerian magazine *al-Mujahid*.^{[9](#)}

Of course, what Imam Musa Sadr meant with unifying the *fiqh* was not that the difference of opinions amongst the jurisprudents of the schools of thought should end and that all of them should issue one common verdict for each law and issue; on the contrary, he believed that these differences of opinion were actually what allowed *fiqh* to progress, jurisprudence to become dynamic, and the jurist to excel [in

his field]. He used to say that so long as this difference of opinion was on the theoretical level—i.e., in the form of an academic theory—it would always be a source of goodness, blessing, progress, flowering, and growth. However, the moment it changed into a verdict for action or a religious slogan within society, the multitude of the verdicts and slogans would inevitably lead to the dispersal of the followers of each verdict and slogan. Hence, all of these perspectives should end with one verdict and with one slogan so that they do not result in division, multiple factions, and the dispersal of the Islamic ummah. Imam Musa Sadr used to give examples of the rituals of the *hajj*, the call for prayers, Islamic holidays, and the crescent moons for the months of Ramadhan and Shawwal; he used to say:

... For example, with regard to the sighting of the new crescent moon, we can study a proposal to see if we can determine, through scientific precision, the day of Eid by relying on new scientific ways and fixing the angle for sighting the crescent on the horizon, so that all Muslims can have their Eid on one day. This will economize many difficulties in terms of holidays and family visitations so that we do not have the issues that arise from having separate days for Eid. Also, we can look into whether or not there is a form for the call to prayers that is acceptable to everyone...[10](#)

Imam Musa Sadr's recommendation of unifying the *fiqh* was brought up for the first time in his letter to the Grand Mufti of Lebanon, Shaykh Hasan Khalid on the 27th of Rajab, 1389 AH/1969 (on the Eid of Mab'ath). Since then, around 40 years have passed, and today more than ever—while the whole world, and particularly the Islamic one, has become like a small village—the need to put into practice the concept of the unity of *fiqh* is deeply sensed. In a world in which America leads a global hegemony and each day brings a new unfounded pretence for starting a quarrel with Islam and all too often, one of the Islamic countries becomes the target of its encroachment, transgression, and means of profit—it is completely irrational and impermissible that in street after street of this small Islamic village, the voices of division and conflict be heard and the movements of disharmony and dissonance be seen.

Of course, materializing such an important ideal is not a simple matter; it requires thought, contemplation, and the determination of the great jurists and the concerned thinkers of the Islamic world. Imam Musa Sadr was aware of this reality and it is for this reason that in another part of the same letter he writes:

In this condition, it is necessary to attach ourselves to these goals, to study them more closely, to determine our duties, to establish cooperation of the efforts of all the children of this country—first, amongst themselves and amongst the country officials, and then between them and the Arab countries in order to mobilize the resources of all the Muslims of the world and all those who have a conscience that is awake and well-intentioned wherever they may be. By wholeheartedly participating in these responsibilities—in other words, by freely giving to it to the extent we can—it behoves us that in order to actualize these matters, we must jointly study its procedures and manners of execution so that the cooperation in its implementation becomes apparent and its challenges easy to deal with.

Relationship with Christian Ministers

In addition to unity between the Islamic schools of thought, Imam Musa Sadr also believed in a type of union and dialogue between the divine religions. For this reason, from the onset of his arrival in Lebanon, he began efforts to establish links and dialogue with the country's Christian religious and political denominations, and with each day, he increased the depth and breadth of this relationship. In a short period, he became acquainted with all of the Christian ministers and personalities and established formal cordial relations with most of them, particularly with bishop Yusuf al-Khuri (Maronite archbishop) in March 1960.^{[11](#)}

However, Imam Musa Sadr never sufficed himself to just these relationships; he continued his relations with the rest of the Christian masses. In fact, he commissioned some prominent Christians as associates in his social works and charitable activities. In the summer of 1961, one of the famous Christians by the name of Rafiah Mansad endowed one-third of the shares of his ice-factory to the charitable society, *Mu'assisah Birr wa Ihsan* (Institute of Goodness and Benevolence)—an institute managed by Imam Musa Sadr with the aim of tending to the dispossessed in southern Lebanon. Moreover, he made two Christian physicians official members of the same institute.^{[12](#)}

Defence of Oppressed Christians

In July 1962, in the city of Sur, a Muslim ice-cream seller ill-treated his Christian neighbour, who was also an ice-cream seller. The Muslim began to spread the word that based on the teachings of Islam, Christian ice-cream was *najis* (ritually impure) and Muslims should not buy and consume it. This propagation was effective and the Christian neighbour suffered loss as a result. While this was transpiring, a fellow Christian complained to Imam Musa Sadr and sought his intervention. When informed about the incident, Imam Musa Sadr appeased the Christian and sent a message to the Muslim shop-keeper to abstain from such unworthy acts.

The Muslim, however, did not heed his advice. A few days later, Imam Musa Sadr issued a clear *fatwa* (verdict) acknowledging the ritual purity of the *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book—i.e., Christians, Jews, etc.). Moreover, he personally went to the ice-cream store of the Christian, along with a few other people, and in another act of conciliation, purchased some ice-cream from him to consume. With this act, he defended the rights of a Christian citizen who had been the target of ill-treatment.

This incident became the focus of attention for a few days, and was covered by many of the leading Lebanese newspapers such as *al-Nahar*, *al-Hayah*, and *Lisan al-Hal*.^{[13](#)} It also led to the strengthening of Muslim-Christian relations under the leadership of Imam Musa Sadr. In fact, in the very same year, with the invitation of the archbishop Grégoire Haddad and other prominent members, Imam Musa Sadr became a member of the 'Central Council of the Social Movement.'^{[14](#)} Subsequently, he was invited by Christian leaders to a number of Christian religious centres—such as churches and monasteries—in

order to speak on various topics, particularly on “the coexistence of religions.”

Coexistence with Christians

On this issue, he took great strides and has said:

... I am for the establishment of one united Islamic front that can allow us, from a position of strength, to extend our hands of cooperation towards our fellow Christians and that can make way for the coexistence of Muslims and Christians. Israel insists on projecting this as a futile attempt in the world. They think that it is impossible to create an independent Palestine wherein Jews, Muslims, and Christians all live next to each other... [15](#)

He was of the belief that the coexistence of Muslims and Christians was an important asset that must be utilized in order to solve many social problems and issues. [16](#) In this regard, he strove and made advances to such an extent that he was accepted by the Christian societies as an ethical role model. Imam Musa Sadr used to say on this topic:

... One of the Christian institutes in Lebanon by the name of ‘*al-Mukhallid* Monastery’—their seminary in which they train clergy—invited me to speak ... a while after my speech, the head of the monastery said to the Director General of Propagation of Lebanon, who was also a Christian: ‘that spiritual talk that Sayyid Musa gave us in the monastery in a matter of one hour was more than the spiritual talks that we give them [seminary students] in a matter of six months.’ This has nothing to do with me, but it has to do with the pure religion of Islam ...” [17](#)

One of the other important Christian gatherings that he would attend regularly and where he would speak to the Christian youth, university students, and academics was in the grand, historical church—St. Maroon Church—in the city of Tripoli. Another city which is the centre of Maronite Christians is Bsharri. In this city, thousands of youth and Christians from all walks of life would gather, with indescribable excitement and enthusiasm, to listen to the talk of Imam Musa Sadr. [18](#) These youth were so enamoured by him that most of them would bring their marriage vows to him and he would solemnize their marriages. [19](#)

Establishing Annual Conferences

In yet another essential step forward, Imam Musa Sadr embarked on establishing a scholarly conference entitled ‘Broad Dialogue between Islam and Christianity’ in May, 1965, with the assistance of various Muslim and Christian intellectuals. This conference, which was held in the Lebanese Symposium, was attended by well-known Muslim and Christian personalities such as Nasri Sulhab, George KhaDHar, Francois Dubarahatur, Yusuf Abu Halqah, Hasan Sa’b, Yuwakil Mubarak, and Subhi Salih each of whom addressed the audience. In this gathering, Imam Musa Sadr gave a detailed talk on “Twentieth Century Islam and Culture,” which the participants found quite innovative. [20](#)

The interactive round-table sessions of this conference as well as the speeches, presentations, and views of Muslim and Christian thinkers continued till June with the aim of determining the techniques for deepening and expanding interfaith dialogue. The first part of these talks concluded with the issuance of a joint-manifesto, in which the following essential points were emphasized:

1. Striving towards worshipping one God through common religious practices;
2. Efforts in preserving ethical and human values;
3. The exceptional role of Lebanon in expanding the culture of dialogue between Islam and Christianity;
4. The important role of interfaith dialogue in order to strengthen and unify Lebanon;
5. The establishment of a higher-education institute to conduct comparative studies of the divine religions; and
6. The necessity of cooperation between all Muslim and Christian thinkers in order to deepen the culture of dialogue.

In subsequent years, this conference continued its activities under various conference titles such as 'Justice in Islam and Christianity.' It included the participation of various academic, cultural, and political personalities—both Muslim and Christian.

The Flag-Bearer of Coexistence

In his effort to strengthen the ties with well-known Christian personalities, Imam Musa Sadr—as a Shia Imam and scholar—did not suffice himself only to having official sessions with them; rather, during the days of Eid and various other occasions, he would pay them visits in their homes, attend their funerals, and participate in their joyous and sad ceremonies. It reached a point where Christians would respect and honour him in the same way they did their own leaders. In fact, at times, they would rely on him more than their own leaders.

In an interview with *Monday Morning* on August 22, 1977, Imam Musa Sadr sketched out his position among the Christians in the following manner:

... And I don't think that anyone in Lebanon has raised the flag of the coexistence of religions and the unity of the country and has kept it raised as I have. I became a code for national unity more than I could be my own self. From the point of view of the conspirators, I should have been done away with. In addition to the political, cultural, and social relations that I had with all the heads of the various religious denominations, I had attained such a level of trust that three years ago, I had delivered the sermon of the Easter fast (a particular Christian occasion) for the Christian faithful in the Kabarshiyin Church; this perhaps was unmatched in history. In order for you to understand the extent of this claim, let me explain:

What I did would be similar to a Christian religious leader delivering the *khuTbah* (sermon) of the Friday prayers to Muslims gathered for the prayer. Hence, I became the peaceful code for national unity and the brotherhood of monotheistic religions as well as the flag-bearer of the coexistence of the various groups in Lebanon. Due to this, they began a propaganda war against me as a means of character assassination, and probed into all of my political works and associations...[21](#)

One of the Christian denominational leaders, by the name of Minister Yawakim Mubarak, writes his views about Imam Musa Sadr in an article in the Beirut *al-Nahar* newspaper in the following manner:

... Of course, no one can deny that Sayyid Musa Sadr is a Shia who began his activities in order to fight for the rights of the Shias in this country. However, these current activities [of his] encompass a much greater vision and one must not forget that the Shias in Islam have always been a group of intellectuals and the promoters of justice; in this way, they have devoted their lives and offered many sacrifices. It is for this reason also that the well-being of Lebanon lies with them. In the same way that in the past periods of history, the Maronite and Druze movement was believed to be important, and they saw aspects of seeking freedom and humanity in these movements, now as well, they should support the movement of Musa Sadr, particularly since this movement is connected and in collaboration with the Palestinian cause...[22](#)

Professor Ilyas al-Diri, a prominent Christian commentator in Lebanon, regarding this aspect of the personality of Imam Musa Sadr has this to say:

... May God preserve Imam Musa Sadr for a hundred and one years; may He make him live as long as possible so that a roaring bell and resonating cry remain on earth and a conscience that vexes the dead who are drowned in their sleep when creation refuses to close its eyes and cries out in distress. May God preserve him [as a hope] for the dispossessed ones of his own people and the rest of the dispossessed in Lebanon throughout history... In this Lebanon, how many are the number of dispossessed and oppressed and how many in need of a hand to remove the oppression and to eliminate deprivation? Many indeed! How many of them are in dire need of a voice like the voice of this man and a heart like his heart ... Perhaps, it is for the first time that the movement of one religious man is free from the taint of sectarianism and empty of any sign of partisanship. The reason for this is that the movement of this Imam and leader of the Shias has earned the respect, praise, and consensus of the Maronites, the Sunnis, and the Orthodox ... in short, this is Imam Musa Sadr and this is his position—one which is based on clear and certain realities and sources whether in the view of the innocent faithful masses or the leading intellectuals, whether in the eyes of his own people or the greater Lebanese nation.[23](#)

[1.](#) Nameh Mufid, no. 16, p. 13 as narrated by Āyatullah Musawi Ardabili who was present in this gathering.

[2.](#) al-Imam al-Sadr wa al-hawar, Markaz al-Imam al-Sadr li al-Bahath wa al-Darasat, Beirut, 1418 H., p. 29.

[3.](#) Ibid.

[4.](#) The Arabic text of this letter has been published through the efforts of Husayn Sharaf al-Din in Abjadiyyat al-hawar, p. 159.

- [5.](#) Journal of Surush, No. 161, Year 4, p. 34.
- [6.](#) From the letter to Shaykh Hasan Khalid.
- [7.](#) The entire text of this interview was printed in the Lebanese newspaper al-Anwar on March 7, 1970.
- [8.](#) al-Mahrur Newspaper, Beirut, April 20, 1971.
- [9.](#) al-Mujahid Magazine, no. 687, Rajab 13, 1393/1973.
- [10.](#) From the letter to Shaykh Hasan Khalid.
- [11.](#) RK: Imam Musa Sadr, The Hope of the Deprived, p. 278.
- [12.](#) Guftar-e Mah Yearbook, Year 2, p. 39.
- [13.](#) Sajin al-Òahra, p. 426.
- [14.](#) Ibid., p. 432.
- [15.](#) Narrated by Imam Musa Sadr in 'Ali Hujjati Karmani, Lebanon, p. 86.
- [16.](#) Hawarat Òahfiyyah II: al-wahdah wa al-tahrir, the Imam Musa Sadr Center for Study and Dialogue, Beirut, p. 26.
- [17.](#) Simaye Islam Yearbook, p. 90.
- [18.](#) 'Izzat Shi'ah, p. 142, as narrated by Hujjat al-Islam, Sayyid Abu Dhar 'Àmuli.
- [19.](#) Imam Musa Sadr: The Hope of the Deprived, p. 281.
- [20.](#) The entire text of this speech can be located in Abjadiyyat al-hawar: Anthology of Imam Musa Sadr's speeches, compiled by Husayn Sharaf al-Din, p. 43.
- [21.](#) Tarjuman Magazine, p. 42.
- [22.](#) "The Helpers of Imam," Imam Musa Sadr Special Edition, vol. I, Savak News report on December 14, 1974.
- [23.](#) Surush Magazine, no. 161, p. 33. The entire text of this article was published in the Today's column of the widely circulated Lebanese al-Nihar newspaper on April 1, 1975—three years prior to his disappearance.

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