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Glimpses into the Life of Shaykh al-Muzaffar

His Family

The family of al-Muzaffar(1) has been known as one of the scholarly and well-versed families of the holy city of al-Najaf since the middle of the twelfth century (AH). Some of the members of this family settled in the al-Jaza'ir Quarter in al-Basrah.

Shaykh Muhammad ibn `Abdullah, the well-versed jurisprudent and father of the author of this book, was one of the well-known scholars and religious authorities (*marji*` *al-taqlid*) of al-Najaf where he "grew up and, in the early years of his youth devoted himself diligently to scholarly education. He dedicated himself to worshipping and teaching (religious knowledge) until he became an expert in Muslim jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and was introduced as one of the skilled researchers in this field. He compiled an estimable encyclopedia on jurisprudence, which comprised his explanations and commentaries on the famous book of '*Shara'i*` *al-Islam*.'(2) In this book, which he entitled '*Tawdhih al-Kalam*', Shaykh al-Muzaffar has left no single item of jurisprudence unexplained."(3)

His Birth

Shaykh Muhammad Ridha al-Muzaffar was born on the fifteenth of Sha`ban, AH 1322, five months after his father's demise. Hence, Almighty Allah did not decide for this infant to see his father nor did He decide for the father to see his newborn. Shaykh `Abd al-Nabi, the elder brother who died in AH 1337, adopted him and provided him with custody and compassion that compensated for his father's missed custody and compassion.

Intellectual Growth

Shaykh al-Muzaffar grew up in the religious environment of the holy city of al-Najaf and moved among its seminars, assemblies, gatherings, classes, and schools. He attended the seminaries of high studies and was trained at the hands of major religious authorities and mentors as he grew up in the house of

al-Muzaffar, which was one of the deep-rooted learned families in al-Najaf and was under the supervision and custody of his two learned brothers; Shaykh `Abd al-Nabi and Shaykh Muhammad Hasan.

Like the other religious students of al–Najaf, Shaykh al–Muzaffar began his scholarly life by attending the lectures of literature, jurisprudence, fundamentals of jurisprudence (*'Ilm al–Usul*) and intellectual sciences. In the field of literature and *'Ilm al–Usul*, he studied under Shaykh Muhammad Taha al–Huwayzi and could distinguish himself in these fields as well as in poetry. Simultaneously, he studied the preliminary studies of jurisprudence (*sutuh*) and other fields of religious studies under other mentors, in all of which he excelled.

Having finished the preliminary stage, Shaykh al-Muzaffar applied himself to higher studies in jurisprudence, '*Ilm al-Usul*, and philosophy. He, along with his younger brother Muhammad Husayn, attended the classes of his brother Shaykh Muhammad Hasan. He also joined the classes of Shaykh Agha Aiya' al-Din al-`Iraqi in the field of '*Ilm al-Usul*, and the classes of Shaykh Mirza Muhammad Husayn al-Na'ini in the fields of jurisprudence and '*Ilm al-Usul*. He also studied, yet distinctively, the theses of Shaykh Muhammad Husayn al-Isfahani in the fields of jurisprudence, '*Ilm al-Usul*, and supreme theo-philosophy.

In these three fields of knowledge, Shaykh al-Muzaffar was much influenced by the opinions of Shaykh al-Isfahani, so he imitated his course of research in his book of 'Usul al-Fiqh' in chaptering and indexing the fundaments of jurisprudence—a fact which the author has referred to in his introduction to this book. As is noticed from the accomplished parts of his book of 'Usul al-Fiqh', Shaykh al-Muzaffar acted upon his mentor's private basics of jurisprudence. He also had great regard for his mentor, al-Isfahani, and showered him with the most respectful words whenever he would refer to or mention him and show his love and admiration for him more than any other student who sincerely admired his mentor.

This feeling towards his mentor and loyalty to him manifests itself to the reader from his writings in the introductions to his jurisprudential and philosophic books, theses, and essays, such as the introduction to his book of 'al-Asfar'.

Shaykh al-Muzaffar also graduated under his mentors in jurisprudence, `*Ilm al-Usul*, and philosophy although he had his idiosyncratic views, inferences, and researches to which his mentors confessed. In the midst of all that and apart from his remarkable efforts in the schools and faculties of *Muntada al-Nashr* (Forum of Publishing), he engaged himself with teaching the highest levels of preliminary and higher education in the fields of jurisprudence, '*Ilm al-Usul*, and philosophy.

As for his clear-cut helping hand in the establishment of *Muntada al-Nashr*, he dedicated his entire life to developing and building up this forum in various aspects. He thus taught arts, logic, philosophy, jurisprudence, and `*Ilm al-Usul* from the primary to the highest levels of study, forgetting about his eminent status in the Seminary (*hawzah*) and his superlative intellectual competence. Many times was

he seen delivering lectures in the primary classes of the schools of *Muntada al-Nashr*, receiving simple questions of the pupils with large-heartedness, prompting them to search, study, and think, and wedging himself in the middle of them as if he was talking to his classmates, not his pupils. Above all, he was distinguished by profundity, accurate gesture, good taste, and prescience as is obvious from his approach in jurisprudence, '*Ilm al-Usul*, and philosophy.

In the beginning of his scholarly life, Shaykh al-Muzaffar acquainted himself with the sciences of mathematics, astronomy, physics, and prosody.

In the early years of his youth, it once happened that Shaykh al-Muzaffar's sight fell on an aspect of modern thought he found worth inspecting, so he attempted to open the way to this new culture with others who also agreed with him. On corresponding with some scientific magazines, such as 'al-Muqtataf', and other publications, he asked for issues of these papers and copies of books that were engaged in this new color of thought. Afterwards, Shaykh al-Muzaffar carried on in this manner, went along with this innovatory intellectual movement, and received an abundant share of these so-called "modern sciences". He was greatly influenced by this tendency besides jurisprudence, 'Ilm al-Usul, and philosophy.

His Scientific Revenue

Scientific activities, writings, authorship and publication of books—these three endeavors form a significant part of Shaykh al-Muzaffar's mission and movement. If we add his reformative activities at both the general and academic levels to these three activities, we will touch upon the great efforts that he exerted throughout his lifetime.

In his writings, there is an apparent intermixture of a fine mode of expression, soundness of performance, faculty of composition, splendor of display with fecundity of the subject, precision of the idea, profundity of the theme and gravity of the content. The result is thus a mixture of literature and scientific material that satiates the intellect and satisfies the sentiments of the reader.

Just like the flowing of water, Shaykh al-Muzaffar's hand used to flow in writing without showing any affectation or artificiality; just like water flowing down a slope, the readers of his writings drifted along with him without anything hindering their progress, since the Shaykh never used useless rhetoric that detracted a reader from the main theme.

Shaykh al-Muzaffar used to deal with purely scientific subjects, such as the fundamentals of jurisprudence, logic, and philosophy, and it was not easy for an author to present them in a literary style or a formal mode of expression. However, Shaykh al-Muzaffar succeeded in combining excellence of expression with profundity of material. The best example of such a combination can be seen in his book of 'Ahlam al-Yaqazah (Daydreams)' in which he talks to Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi (known as Mulla Sadra or Sadr al-Muta'allihin) and discusses his premises concerning supreme theo-philosophy with him and

receives expounding replies, all penned down in a handsome narrative style.

It is not an exaggeration to say that this book is a big triumph for philosophical writings because the major problem of philosophy is that its tools cannot find styles of writing that can express it suitably. Shaykh al-Muzaffar has thus attempted to make styles of writing submit to the material of philosophy or make philosophy submit to styles of writing. He has attempted to bring together these two things in his book.

Furthermore, the pen of Shaykh al–Muzaffar displays excellence of communication and coordination in the sense that he attempts to make each point of discussion occupy its natural place without losing its private position, which may cause disorder to the areas of discussion and, as a result, confusion may appear to the points under discussion. The best example of such coordination can be seen in Shaykh al–Muzaffar's book of 'al–Mantiq (Logic)', in which the topics of the book follow each other smoothly in a natural sequence without any need to refer the reader to another topic outside the book or another chapter inside the book.

In addition to the other two books of 'al–Usul (Fundaments of Jurisprudence)' and 'al–Falsafah (Philosophy)', which have not been granted the opportunity to be published completely, Shaykh al–Muzaffar's book of 'al–Mantiq' is considered a revolution in the authorship of books of curricula and a new triumph in this field. We thus pray to Almighty Allah to guide some people to follow the footsteps of Shaykh al–Muzaffar in this domain.

In the books of Shaykh al–Muzaffar, a researcher can easily sense the fecundity of research and analysis, which has become a distinctive feature of all of his books. This feature is clearly visible in his book 'al–Saqifah', in which he critically examines the meeting of the Muslims under the shed (Saqifah) of Banu–Sa`idah and the events that took place therein. He analyzes the attitudes of the Muhajirun(4) and the Ansar(5)concerning the question of succession (khilafah) after the Holy Prophet (s), and the situation of Imam `Ali (`a) vis a vis the caliphs.

In his book 'al-Mantiq', such fecundity in analysis can be sensed when the author makes use of mathematical signs for the four ratios in his discussion of 'Division'. Besides this, excellence of expression and cohesion of approach is apparent in every part of this book.

His Poetry

In his youth and once in a while, Shaykh al-Muzaffar used to compose poetic verses, which are marked by substantiality and elegance of style. The reader of his poetry, published in some books and newspapers, can point out charming poetic images and meet novel artistic horizons.

However, Shaykh al-Muzaffar turned away from composing poetry to engage in constructive intellectual affairs.

His Role in Developing Curricula and in Reformation

Having reached the peak in reformative activities in the holy city of al-Najaf, Shaykh al-Muzaffar played an effective role in all the reformative movements that he attended and was the most eminent member of all of these movements. However, the reformative approach lacked intelligibility and methodical thought in treatment despite its effectiveness and its holders' conviction in the necessity of applying it to the Seminaries.

Thanks to his extensive experiments, Shaykh al-Muzaffar arrived at a perfect conception about reformation and the methodology of study and propagation; and by virtue of the genius and sagacity that he enjoyed concerning such issues, he arrived at the primary roots of the problem. He then invited his brothers-in-faith and sons to cure the roots of this problem.

According to Shaykh al-Muzaffar, the problem needed treatment on two fronts: study and propagation.

As for study, he noticed that teaching in the Seminary of the holy city of al-Najaf was ordered in two stages:

- (1) The preliminary level (al-Muqaddimat wa'l-Sutuh), and
- (2) Higher education (al-Bahth al-Khariji).

The former level was considered preliminary while the latter was arranged for specialization in *ijtihad*.(6) The problem is that the nature of the latter stage rejected any transformation or revolution in its shape and contents and it could not be submitted to any specific methodical order. In plain words, study in this stage did not adopt any system and it could hardly compete with the methodical and general definition of study.

Furthermore, due to the nature of this stage, discussions and research could not be restricted or regulated to a certain rule nor exams act as incentives to study and research. Hence, the only stage that could be reformed and required guidance and ordering was the primary stage.

Shaykh al-Muzaffar also realized that the reasons for the existence of such problems were shortage of material and weakness of style.

As for material, a primary stage student of the Seminary of al-Najaf was given lessons that were restricted to studying (Arabic) grammar, morphology, rhetoric, logic, exegesis of the Holy Qur'an (*tafsir*), Muslim jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), and fundaments of jurisprudence (*'Ilm al-Usul*) although there was some expansion in the study of the last two subjects.

It is true that these materials played a major role in the composition and growth of the students' mental capabilities, but they alone could not promote all their duties of guidance, propagation, preaching, and

education. Hence, a student could not limit himself to the material that he received at this stage of study in order to fulfill his duty of guidance and propagation on a wider scope.

As for style, Shaykh al-Muzaffar noticed that, in addition to disorganization in the field of research, obscurity and complication were still prevailing on the curricula given to the student of the Seminary of al-Najaf at this stage of study. This fact would make the student exert great effort in order to understand a certain statement and decode the obscurity and complication that encompassed such statements.

As for propagation and guidance, Shaykh al-Muzaffar discovered that oration and writing were the favorite tools of propagation and propagation for Islam had suffered weakness in these two domains.

As for oration, Shaykh al-Muzaffar pointed out that the current style of oration in al-Najaf was not satisfactory. A Muslim orator would not be able to fulfill his Islamic mission unless he had a sufficient idea about the horizons of modern thought and the methods of experimental knowledge, in addition to a thorough comprehension of the issues of Islamic ideology in such fields as jurisprudence, exegesis of the Holy Qur'an, narration, history, and the like.

As for Islamic writings, Shaykh al–Muzaffar noticed that the religious status of al–Najaf required greater contribution to the propagation of Muslim thought than before, and it should ensure all Islamic propagation by means of writing, authoring, printing and publishing on a much wider scale. Additionally, the ideological aspect, which was the foundation of such campaigns of propagation for Islam, needed to carry with it the principles of faith and reformation in their most obvious shapes to embrace the entire globe and reach every point in which a human being might be living. Nevertheless, the Seminary of al–Najaf was in most cases in no need for materials of writings and research.

On the other hand, it was noticeable that individuality was the feature that distinguished the writings and research in al-Najaf. In plain words, theses and research presented by a writer from al-Najaf were the result of individual efforts more than collective.

A third point is that al-Najaf, at that time, lacked well-equipped printing machines and publications that would befit the fertile scientific material that this city could present to the press.

With complete objectivity and comprehension, Shaykh al-Muzaffar had the opportunity to investigate these conditions in al-Najaf. Meanwhile, he knew that the presentation of this problem would lead to nothing unless honest efforts would cooperate in order to meet these needs. He also knew for sure that negative thinking would be a waste of time and of no use unless there was an establishment to manage the efforts. He also concluded that reformative work under such circumstances would also be worthless unless matched by an objective and comprehensive investigation of the situation, deliberation upon it and gradual treatment.

Shaykh al-Muzaffar had realized all that and thought of it for a considerable time. Having embarked upon the practical aspect of the problem, he pushed himself into the field of performance although he

knew that there would be strenuous obstacles to pass in order to continue in this path. The first step was to find a conscientious group of virtuous personalities of the Seminary who understood the surrounding conditions of life in al-Najaf and comprehended the actuality of the huge intellectual mission that was imposed on this city.

On the fourth of Shawwal, AH 1353 corresponding to January 10, 1935, a group of scholars of religious studies, including Shaykh al-Muzaffar, submitted a statement to the Ministry of Interior demanding the establishment of a religious association in the holy city of al-Najaf carrying the name of *Muntada al-Nashr* (Forum of Publishing). Along with this statement, they submitted a copy of the foundational system of this Forum. After great effort, the Ministry licensed the establishment of this Forum. (7)

Afterwards, attempts were made to organize the study, simplify the curricula, and expand the books of study. Shaykh al-Muzaffar found that the first step in this regard would be to methodize the study irrespective of how important and useful individual study might be. He suggested that a special system of study must complement the one prevailing. Thus, Shaykh al-Muzaffar attempted to achieve a part of the reformation.

In AH 1355, he "put a plan for establishing a high school for religious studies or a faculty for *ljtihad*, by starting the first class in which he taught four fields of religious knowledge; namely, Argumentative Jurisprudence (*al-fiqh al-istidlali*), Exegesis of the Holy Qur'an (*tafsir*), Fundamentals of Jurisprudence (*'ilm al-usul*), and Philosophy. The latter would be studied in the form of separate lectures in a plain, easy-to-understand language. Shaykh 'Abd al-Husayn al-Hilli volunteered to teach the first two materials, and Shaykh 'Abd al-Husayn al-Rashti to teach the two others.

In fact, these two master scholars' volunteering to teach these materials systematically was one of the most important events in the history of al-Najaf, since it signified such unique sacrifice that history would record in appreciation and admiration for their reformative spirits. In the summer holidays, these classes stopped in order to restart again in the next academic year, but "they refused to restart and none except some of the members of the board of directors knew why they stopped; was it due to coquetry, or weariness, or any other reason that was not expected especially from such master scholars? How rare moral courage is! When it is terribly needed, it absents itself!"(8)

In AH 1376, Shaykh al–Muzaffar finally established the College of Jurisprudence in the holy city of al–Najaf after numerous attempts and long–lasting experiments. In AH 1377, the Iraqi Ministry of Education licensed this college in which the following branches of knowledge were taught: jurisprudence of the *Imamiyyah Shi`ah* sect, comparative jurisprudence, fundamentals of jurisprudence, exegesis of the Holy Qur'an and its principles, *hadith* and its principles, education, psychology, literature and its history, sociology, history of Islam, Muslim philosophy, modern philosophy, logic, modern history, principles of teaching, grammar, morphology, and a foreign language.

With sincerity and unprecedented faith, the late Shaykh al-Muzaffar dedicated his whole lifetime to

developing this foundation. He used to teach Muslim philosophy and manage the other classes when the other teachers would be absent. At the same time, he worked on preparing the volumes of his valuable book 'Usul al–Fiqh' to be taught at the College of Jurisprudence. Besides, he would undertake the responsibilities of management, deanship, authorship, and even writing down the documents of the college. On many occasions, I myself saw Shaykh al–Muzaffar write on the registers of the students or type some formal letters on the printing machine. Hence, this foundation came into being by virtue of the efforts of Shaykh al–Muzaffar who dedicated his entire life to it, built it with the particles of his heart, and utilised all his potentials for it.

That was not everything; Shaykh al-Muzaffar also established other foundations and projects of Muslim culture some of which lasted while others failed to continue. In addition, his movement of publishing and writing that he aroused in al-Najaf, such as the publication of 'al-Badhrah' and 'al-Najaf' magazines, cannot be underestimated.

He was indeed the pivot and founder of the different aspects of such activities although neither his discourse nor his pen showed any indication of the huge efforts he undertook, except when the question of responsibility was brought up. Then he would show himself ready to declare the responsibility with firm and unshakable faith.

Too many were the occasions on which Shaykh al-Muzaffar delivered lessons to his fresh students, offered advice and directions, or guided them in spirituality and simplicity.

For such a long time, he never showed any sign of egoism since he believed that egoism brings about Almighty Allah's contempt or causes one to love something other than Him. Shaykh al-Muzaffar's spirit was too great to take in humiliation and too enormous to quarrel or be hostile. Commenting on his situation vis-à-vis his rivals or, more accurately, the rivals of the Foundation, he says, "More than anyone else, I excuse a big group of those who adopted an opposite stance against our project, especially those whose intentions we trust and who trust ours."

Such elevated level of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation for the sake of one's faith can hardly be seen among men of intellect.

I would like to end with the following statement of Shaykh al-Muzaffar, which bespeaks his greatness of character:

"We are ready to offer a new sacrifice and withdraw ourselves from our project once we find others having the desire to undertake it instead of us, especially when such people believe that their involvement in this work will give it publicity. Let them know that we will always be servants of this project wherever we are and whatever shape we take, and we do not intend to prove our good will, since it is unnecessary after all the efforts that we have exerted. The most important point in our view is that this project progresses in such a way that befits the good reputation of al-Najaf and it fulfills its duty completely, no matter how big the price, even if it be our lives. Our lives have no value unless sacrificed

for duty. Very frequently, I have repeated that we have only stepped forward a short step for the sake of the objectives of this project."

Such was the story of a great spirit.

Muhammad Mahdi al-Asifi Holy Najaf

- 1. () This section is guoted from (the book of) 'Madrasat al-Najaf' by His Eminence Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi al-Asifi.
- 2. () An encyclopedic book on Shi`ite jurisprudence written by al-Muhaqqiq al-Hilli: Abu al-Qasim Najm al-Din Ja'far ibn al-Hasan [602-672 AH].
- 3. () Quoted from 'Al al-Muzaffar' by Shaykh Mahmud al-Muzaffar.
- <u>4.</u> () Muhajirun (singular: muhajir, migrant) is a title exclusively given to the people of Makkah who followed the Holy Prophet (s) and had to migrate to Yathrib (later al-Madinah) because of the persecution they suffered at the hands of the polytheists of Makkah.
- 5. () Ansar are the people of Yathrib (al-Madinah) who accepted, supported, and received the Holy Prophet (s) and the emigrants of Makkah (Muhajirun).
- <u>6.</u> () Ijtihad is a polysemous term in Muslim jurisprudence. Lexically, it means the exertion of efforts in the attainment of a matter. In the initial emergence of Ijtihad, it took the meaning of dependence upon personal views and issuance of personal judgments in religious affairs even if this would violate the sources of Islamic laws since such judgment would agree with public interest.

In Sunnite jurisprudence, Ijtihad means the independent or original interpretation of problems not precisely covered by the Holy Qur'an, the Holy Sunnah, and the other sources of Islamic law from the viewpoint of Sunnite scholars, such as analogy (Qiyas), consensus (Ijma`)... etc. In Shi`ite jurisprudence, Ijtihad means the exertion of all possible efforts in the deduction of religious laws from their sources. To sum it up, the concept of Ijtihad in Sunnite doctrine is different from Shi`ite doctrine. Whilst it stands for personal conclusion in Sunnite doctrine, it has its definite principles and fundaments that cannot be contravened and are based upon Divine texts in Shi`ite doctrine. [translator]

- 7. () Nizam Muntada al-Nashr (The System of the Forum of Publishing), AH 1370.
- 8. () Muntada al-Nashr; Activities and Expectations, pp. 8-9, by Shaykh Muhammad Ridha al-Muzaffar.

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