

**Abdolrahim Gavahi**

**Shia Islam and its approach towards religious dialogue based on the traditions of Ahl al-Bait <sup>1</sup>**

**Introduction**

At the beginning I would like to thank Professor Dr. Khorshide, the president of the Center for Islamic theology of the University, my dear friend Dr. Rahnama, Cultural representative of Iran in Germany, and all of you the professors, students, and distinguished scholars which have participated in this august gathering. I sincerely hope that through such gatherings we can attain a better understanding of the beliefs and rituals of the other side, hence providing the background for more mutual cooperation in solving the many problems of the contemporary world.

Since I have been asked to talk on the subject of the Shia Islam and its view or position on religious dialogue based on the traditions of

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Ahl al-Bait, I will divide my discussions into two parts: the first part dealing with Shia Islam, and the second part elaborating the views of Shia Islam on religious dialogue or debate based on Ahl al-Bait or Shiite Imams traditions.

### 1. Shia Islam

Since I do not know how much this audience is familiar with the Shia school which is one of the two main denominations of Islam, I feel obliged to present a rather short, but very exact and well-documented description of this branch of Islam. In recent years, two of the very learned scholars of Shiite seminaries in Iran and Najaf, Allameh Seyyed Muhammad Husain Tabatabaie, the author of *al-Mizan*, and Allamah Seyyed Murtida Asgari, the author of *Ma'alim al-Madrasatayn*, have tried to introduce Shiism in their valuable works.

Allamah Tabatabaie, in his book called *The Appearance of Shia*<sup>2</sup> states that "we should not assume that Shiites have been a minority of Muslims differing from the majority on religious tenets, the holy Quran and the Prophetic tradition, opposing some of them, challenging and disputing the majority on these issues, thus leading to the establishment of a new branch in Islam. But rather Shiites are a group of Muslims who have opposed and criticized the majority for their obvious deviation from part of the Quran and tradition, persisting on those forgotten and unattended parts and inviting the majority to do so as well. Certainly, a group of sincere Muslims who have endured all kinds of hardships, during the course of history, only because of insisting on such a sacred aim should not

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<sup>2</sup>. Faqih publications, Tehran, 1360 H.S. (1980).

be called heretics, or destroyers of the very principles of religion and the religious community of the Muslims<sup>3</sup>.

He then proceeds with refuting some of the opposition's views on the origin of Shia Islam and states that history testifies that shiism had existed since the lifetime of the Prophet (ص), as a group of Muslims were regarded as Shiites from the very early days of Islam. From the time the holy Prophet's body was being buried by Imam Ali (ع) and a few of the companions of the Prophet, and they were so busy with making preparations for his burial, another group of Muslims who later on won the majority, hurriedly gathered in Saqifah Bain-Sa'idah and appointed a Caliph or vicegerent for the deceased Prophet! They did not inform Ahl al-Bait or family members of the Prophet and especially Imam Ali who was so close to the Prophet of their decision or gathering, forcing them with a "fait accompli" afterwards.

Imam Ali (ع) and a few of his comrades like Salman, Abudar, Miqdad, and the like, once they were informed of such a gathering and their hasty decision, raised their objection and criticism and pointed out that according to the very text (nass نصّ) of vilaya in Qadir-e Khomm they were not authorized to make such a decision, but the only reply they received to their argument was that it was appropriate to do so and that this has been to the benefit of Muslim community!

Anyhow, these protestors, who were the first group of Shiites and the founders of this way, were some of the respected companions of the Prophet (ص) and early Muslims and close associates of Imam Ali (ع) who had shown no torpidity and weakness in their association with the Prophet of Islam (ص) or in following the Book

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<sup>3</sup>. Ibid. P.11.

and Tradition, or pursuing the cause of Islam and fighting its enemies. During the time of Prophetic mission or appointment (bi'thah) they were always pioneers of Muslim ranks. They did not want to replace the newly shaped caliphate but intended to hold firm to a set of indisputable texts and testaments (nass) according to which the "vilaya" (custody or supervision) of the Muslim community after the death of the holy Prophet (ص) was left to Amir al-Mo'menin Imam Ali ibn-e Abitalib (ع), texts according to which Ahl al-Bait of the Prophet (ص) were introduced as religious leaders of the society and true authorities in all practical and conceptual matters of the newly founded Muslim community, the same texts that are frequently narrated in both Shiite and Sunnite sources nowadays<sup>4</sup>.

The next clergy who has dealt with the subject of Shia Islam even in more details is Allamah Seyyed Morteda Asgari who has addressed different aspects of Shiism in his book "Ma'alim al-Madrasatayn" or "the signs of the two schools"<sup>5</sup>.

A brief review of detailed title of these three volumes shows the extended scope of different subjects covered in them:

- Volume 1: the views of the school of khilafah (Caliphate) and the school of Ahl-al Bait on the subject of the Prophet's companions and Imamate.
- Volume 2: The views of the two schools on the religious legislative sources of Islam.

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<sup>4</sup>. Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>5</sup>. Published by Ghism al-Dirasat al-Islammyah, Be'thah Foundation, 1406 A. H. This book has been translated into Persian by M. Sardarnia and published in three volumes in 1996.

- Volum 3: The role of Imam Husain's movement in reviving the tradition (of the Prophet).

In his brief introduction to the book, Allama Asgari first quotes a few verses of the holy Quran on the subject of the unity of Muslim community and then continues: we all Muslims unanimously say "لا اله الا الله" (there is no God but Allah) and "محمد رسول الله" (Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah) and believe that our book, our "Kiblah" (direction of praying) and our Prophetic tradition are the same. The only difference of opinion is that from where (who) we have to take or receive the tradition of the holy Prophet (ص)? From any of the companions, regardless of whoever he is, with the perception that all of the companions of the Prophet are just and pious, or from the very just and righteous of the companions and from the Ahl al-Bait of the holy Prophet (ص)? Is it right and advisable to call someone who has seen the Prophet (ص) for a few hours only a "companion" of the Prophet (ص), or we should be more selective in this regard and include only those who have accompanied the Prophet (ص) rather long and have understood him quite well? Thus, the difference of opinion which exists between different schools of Islam is rather a religious jurisprudential (fiqh) one<sup>6</sup>.

He then proceeds with quoting some texts from the holy Prophet (ص) about Amir al-Mo'menin Ali (ع) on which all Muslims-including Shiite and Sunni schools-agree, texts such as:

"يا علي انت مني بمنزلهها رونا من موسى، الا انه لا نبي بعدي" (Oh Ali! You have the same position near me that Aron had near Moses, except that there is no prophet after me) or "من كنت مولاه فهذا علي مولاه" (whoever I was his master or lord, from now on Ali (ع) is his

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<sup>6</sup>. Asgari, two schools, vol 1, introduction.

master and maula) or different traditions in which the number of holy Imams and the vicegerents of the Prophet (ص) is said to be twelve, a specific number which does not apply but to the Shiite twelve Imams.

Allamah Asgari then states that we have previously discussed and proved that as Adam appointed Seth (Sheis), and Noah appointed Saam, and Abraham appointed Ishmael and Isac, and Moses appointed Joshua, and Jesus appointed Simon, as their deputies and vicegerents, Prophet Muhammad (ص) too has appointed his successors and has named them accordingly. He then concludes by saying that the followers of the school of Caliphs take their religious injunctions or commandments from the holy Quran, the tradition of the Prophet (ص) and the "Ijtihadat" of the Caliphs, while the followers of the school of Ahl al-Bait leave that part of the Caliphs religious opinions which they find opposing to the Book and tradition<sup>7</sup>.

In the light of this background on the definition of Shiism and Sunnism, or the school of the early Caliphs and the school of Ahl al-Bait, we now like to present our own opinion on the Subject matter as well. In our opinion, both the references of the holy Quran to the high place and position of Ahl al-Bait of the holy Prophet (ص), and its attention to the important position of "vilayah" and "visayah" (custody and successorship) of Amir al-Mo'menin is quite clear and evident for whoever is a righteous and unbiased person.

On the first issue, i.e. the high place and position of Ah al-Bait in the holy Quran, please note the following verses:

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<sup>7</sup>. Ibid., introduction, pp. h to z.

1. "انما يريد الله ليذهب عنكم الرجس اهل البيت و يطهركم تطهيراً" (Verily, Allah's Will is to remove away impurity from you, the people of the Messenger's Household and to purify you with a thorough purification)<sup>8</sup>.
2. "قل لا اسئلكم عليه اجراً، الا المودة في القربى" (O Messenger! Say: I ask you no wage for my mission, but I ask your affection towards my near kin)<sup>9</sup>.
3. "انا اعطيناك الكوثر" (O Messenger! We have bestowed upon you Good in Abundance)<sup>10</sup>.
4. "فقل تعالوا ندع ابناءنا و ابناكم و نساءنا و نساءكم و انفسنا و انفسكم ثم نبتهل" (O Messenger! Say: Come and let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, and ourselves and yourselves, and then invokes and lay the course of Allah on those who lie)<sup>11</sup>.
5. "و يطعمون الطعام علي حبة مسكيناً و يتيماً و اسيراً" (And they feed the needy, the orphan, and the captives from their food, because of their love for Allah)<sup>12</sup>.
6. "قل كفي بالله شهيداً بيني و بينكم و من عنده علم الكتاب" (O, Messenger! Say: Sufficient as a witness between me and you is Allah, and the one near him is the knowledge of the book)<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> . Quran, 33/33.

<sup>9</sup> . Ibid. 42/23.

<sup>10</sup> . Ibid. 108/1.

<sup>11</sup> . Ibid. 3/61.

<sup>12</sup> . Ibid. 76/8.

<sup>13</sup> . Ibid. 13/43.

Also on the second issue, i.e. the important position of "vilayah" and "visayah" (custody and successorship) of Amir al-Mo'menin Ali ibn-I Abitalib in the holy Quran, please note the following verses:

1. "انما وليكم الله و رسوله و الذين آمنوا الذين يقيمون الصلوة و يؤتون الزكوة و هم راکعون" (Verify, your guardians are Allah, His Messenger, and those who believe; those who establish prayer and pay alms while they are bowing down in prayer)<sup>14</sup>.
2. "يا ايها الرسول، بلغ ما انزل اليك من ربك، و ان لم تفعل فما بلغت رسالة، و الله يعصمك من الناس، ان الله لا يهدي القوم الكافرين" (O, Messenger! Proclaim the message that has sent to you from your Lord, and if you do not do so, then you would not have conveyed your duty as the Messenger of Allah, and Allah will protect you from the people. Indeed, Allah does not guide disbelievers)<sup>15</sup>.
3. "اليوم ينس الذين كفروا من دينكم، فلا تخشوهم و اخشون، اليوم اكملت لكم دينكم و اليوم ينس الذين كفروا من دينكم، فلا تخشوهم و اخشون، اليوم اكملت لكم الاسلام ديناً" (Today those who reject faith have given up all their hopes (to extinguish Islam), so do not fear them, but fear Me! Today I perfected your religion and completed my favor upon you and chose Islam as your religion)<sup>16</sup>.

Considering the shortage of time and the background of this meeting, I believe so much discussion about the School of Ahl al-Bait and its main difference with the School of Caliphate should be sufficient enough for our purposes, and now we turn to the second part of our subject matter, i.e. the way of dialogue of Shiite Imams with others.

<sup>14</sup>. Ibid. 5/55.

<sup>15</sup>. Ibid. 5/67.

<sup>16</sup>. Ibid. 5/3.

## **2. Religious dialogue from the point of view of Ahl al-Bait**

We all know that dialogue, or what is called "Ihtijaj" in Arabic, which means debating or raising arguments or reasoning against your adversary, a task which Shiite Imams have well engaged in, is rooted in the Quran and the Tradition. Allameh Majlesi, in Bihar al-Anwar which is an encyclopedic collection of Shiite traditions<sup>17</sup>, in volumes 9 and 10 which covers the subject "Ihtijaj" under the title of "احتجاج الله تعالى علي الارباب الملل المختلفه في القرآن الكريم" (The reasoning of the God Almighty against the leaders or masters of different nations in the holy Quran), first quotes all the chapters (surah) of Quran with their relevant verses on "Ihtijaj" with different groups of people at the time of revelation, and then cites different commentaries and interpretations of those verses, followed by what has been transmitted from the holy Prophet (ص) and Shiite Imams - Ahl al-Bait - on the subject matter. It is interesting to note that on the subject of "Ihtijaj", there are only six debated of the Prophet (ص) with pagans, while there are twenty debates with the Jews!

Also in Usul-i Kafi<sup>18</sup>, which is again a master work of Shiite traditions and one of the four books of Imamites on Shiites jurisprudence, especially in the second volume under the title of "Kitab ul-Hujjat" (The Book of Reasoning) some of Imam Sadiq's debates with the leaders of other religious traditions, and with other Islamic branches have been quoted. These debates usually start with a question from the other side and Imam himself does not initiate the discussion, which means the dialogue is shaped according to the doctrinal needs of the other side. For example, the

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<sup>17</sup>. Majlisi, Mohammad Baqir, Bihar al-Anwar le-Dorar al-akhbar al-A'immat al-Athar, 110 volumes, al-Vafa publications, Beirut, 1983.

<sup>18</sup>. Kolehini, Muhammad bin Ya'qub, Usul-i Kafi, Six volumes, translated by M.B.Kamareie, Osvah publications, Tehran, 1996.

first debate or "Ihtijaj" (reasoning) is on the issue of "الاضطرار الي الحجّه" (the necessity of Hujjat, or God's proof on earth) in which one of the heretics or pagans asks: How you prove the existence of the Prophets and messengers of God? which the holy Imam answers him from an instinctive (fitri) point of view, without at all referring to religious texts.

At times we see that the friends and companions of the holy Imams (ع) submit the report of their expostulations and debates to the Ahl al-Bait (ع), seeking their confirmations. Some other times the Ahl al-Bait themselves ask them to present the report of their encounters with the opponents. For example, in a gathering of a group of Shiites around Imam Sādiq (ع), Imam asks Hisham ibn Hakam who was only a teenager at that time to provide a report of his discussions with Amr ibn Obaid, in which Hisham had started his arguments by such simple questions that reminds us of Socrates and Plato<sup>19</sup>.

Still in another account, a very learned theologian from the city of Damascus enters Imam Sadiq (ع) and argues that the existence of God and his Messenger are enough for public guidance and that there is no need for Imams whatsoever, which Imam Sadiq (ع) and his young pupil Hisham answer him in such a polite and solid manner that at the end he believes in holy Imam (ع) and leaves him having become a devout Shiite<sup>20</sup>.

Volume 10 of Bihar al-Anwar, which bears the same name of "Kitab ul-Ihtijajat" or the Book of Expostulations, contains the dialogues of Imam Ali (ع) along with some of his theological and dialectical sermons, and the debates of other Imams in order to

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<sup>19</sup>. Usul-i Kafi, vol.2, PP. 21-25.

<sup>20</sup>. Ibid. PP. 25-37.

explain the principles of religion, or the representatives of other religious traditions, along with a discussion from Shaikh Saduq, the author of al-Tauhid, on the principles of Shiite doctrines and religious beliefs, and other debates of Shiite scholars like Sheikh-i Mufid on the subject of imamate of the holy Prophet's Ahl al-Bait.

As we said earlier, both Bihar al-Anwar (in 110 volumes) and Usul-i Kafi (in six volumes) are encyclopedic references containing almost all of the Shiite traditions including Ahl al-Bait debates and dialogues. Otherwise, there are less volumous books that address the subject of debates and dialogues more specifically, books like "Ihtijaj" of Tabarsi<sup>21</sup> (2 volumes), Tawhid of Saduq<sup>22</sup> (one volume) and the like, which we will examine accordingly. But let us first give a brief review of Ihtijaj contents.

- Chapter 1: The debates of the holy Prophet (ص) on the issue of "Vilaya" and "Khilafa" (successorship) after him, the issue of the unity of God, etc.
- Chapter 2: The debates of Imam Ali (ع) on the same subjects and the miracles of the holy Prophet (ص)
- Chapter 3: The debates of Imam Hasan (ع) with the people of Rome, with Mu'wiyya on Imamate, and with his critics on his peace treaty with Mu'wiyya.
- Chapter 4: The debates of Imam Husain (ع) with Umar and Mu'wiyyah on the imamate and caliphate of his father, with the Kufis on the the issue of Karbala.

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<sup>21</sup>. Tabarsi, Ahmad ibn Ali, al-Ihtijaj, translated by B.Ja'fari, Islamiyyah publications, 2011.

<sup>22</sup>. Saduq, Mohammad ibn Ali, al-Tawhid, translated by M.A.Sultani, Armaghan Tuba publication, 1387 H.S.

- Chapter 5: Debates of Imam Sajjad (ع) and his aunt Zeinab (س), the sister of Imam Husain(ع), with the people of Kufa, Damascus, and with Yazid after the event of Karbala.
- Chapter 6: Debates of Imam Baqir (ع) through Imam Asgari (ع), the fifth through the eleventh Imams, with fellow Muslim, as the well as followers of other religions on different religious and doctrinal issues.
- Chapter 7: Debates of the Twelfth Imam Mahdi (ع), in his childhood and during the lifetime of his father Imam Asgari (ع), in response to the arguments of one of the Shiites, and later on through his four deputies (during the time of minor occultation) in response to the questions of his Shiite followers on the issue of imamate, as well as removing their doubts about his occultation and so on.

Although one can not present even a very brief review of all the subjects addressed in the book "Ihtijaj", yet we deem it necessary to at least cite a few of the more interesting examples.

The first example is the debate of Imam Ali (ع) with a Jewish "hakham" (priest) about the miracles and virtues of the holey Prophet of Islam. The argument of the said priest, who is well-versed in the Old and New Testaments and other sacred books, starts with the simple question that: "You ascribe all the qualities and virtues of the preceding Prophets to Prophet Muhammad (ص)! Now could you tell me if he has the excellence of the Adam (ع), in being the object of prostration of the angels? Imam Ali (ع) says: Yes, although that prostration was a sign of Adam's excellence and not the angels' worshipping him. But, Muhammad (ص) has been

given even more prestige and exaltation, because God along with all his angels has praised him in the Quran<sup>23</sup>. Then hakham said: God forgave the sin of Adam (ع). Imam Ali said: That is true, but Prophet Muhammad is more superior than committing a sin. Yet, the God almighty has said about him: "ليغفر لك الله ما تقدم من ذنبك و ما تاخر"<sup>24</sup> (So that God forgives all your past and future sins). Then the Jewish priest names all of the Prophets and Imam Ali (ع) demonstrates the holy Prophet's superiority over them in a way that he cannot refute. Next, the holy Prophet's life events are compared with those of the other Prophets, followed by a comparison of the nation of Islam with other nations, regarding their duties and obligations against God and how God has eased the Muslims with less religious duties and more mercy and forgiveness, along with multiple future rewards and easier repentance and removal of calamities, etc. It is at the conclusion of this debate that the said hakham embraces Islam. It is interesting to note that Imam Ali (ع) does not reject any of the Jewish priest claims about the past Prophets at all, but with due respect to all of them, proves that Prophet Muhammad's position is higher than each and everyone of them.<sup>25</sup>

The second interesting example of the Ahl al-Bait's debate with other religious scholars is the debate of Imam Ali (ع) with a Jewish scholar during the reign of Umar, who first goes to Umar ibn Khattab and tells him that if you ever answer my questions, I will convert into Islam immediately, but Umar refers him to Amir al-Mu'menin Ali(ع). His questions are generally about the down of the creation, such as which stone was the first to be put on the earth or which tree or spring were the first ones, etc. Imam Ali (ع)

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<sup>23</sup>. Referring to the holy Quran 33/56.

<sup>24</sup>. Ibid. 48/2.

<sup>25</sup>. Tabarsi, Ihtijaj, Vol. 1, PP. 459-505.

answers him all, and he seems very satisfied with what he hears. He then asks some questions about Islam, which he knows their answers in advance, but intends to test Imam Ali (ع)<sup>26</sup>'s level of knowledge and comprehension! Questions such as how many Imams this nation has, your Prophet is in which part of the paradise, who is his successor and how long he lives and how he passes away, etc. which Imam Ali (ع) answers them all through his knowledge of Imamate. According to the traditions, this man too turns into Islam after all his questions are answered.

The third interesting example is Imam Ali's debate with Ibn al-kawwa' whom some have considered to be a devout Shia and a companion of Imam Ali (ع) and some others have considered to be a Kharijite or seceder because of his many antagonistic questions from the holy Imam. Anyhow, in this debate which is quoted in "Ihtijaj", some of the questions are about the meaning of some Quranic verses and the rest are very mysterious questions seemingly for polemical purposes, like this strange question that who is the one who sees day and night? Who is the one who does not see neither day nor night? Who is the one who sees during the day but not during the night, etc. Although Imam Ali (ع) blames him about asking such useless questions and tells him: "Woe! why do not you ask questions which are beneficial to you?". Yet he answers him perfectly and in details, leaving no questions unanswered<sup>26</sup>.

The fourth case concerns Imam Ali's debate with a Greek man who claims that the men are cured by medicine and not by God, which Imam Ali (ع) proves him that, in addition to the drugs, there is also another curing power which comes from the God and is not found in any pharmaceutical products. Then the Greek philosopher and

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<sup>26</sup>. Ibid. 508-515.

physician asks Imam Ali (ع) to show him his miraculous power, and then he accepts Islam. But Imam Ali (ع) tells him to conceal his new religion, so that his life and properties are saved<sup>27</sup>.

Finally, the last exemplary debate of Imam Ali(ع) is with a pagan or atheist who comes to the holy Imam(ع) and says that if there were no contradictions in the verses of the holy Quran, I would have embraced Islam! Then he quotes many verses of Quran which apparently seem contradictory, like the following two verses:

1. "وجوه يومئذٍ ناضره، الى ربها ناظره" (On that day, there are some happy faces looking towards their God)<sup>28</sup>.
2. "لا تدرکه الابصار، و هو يدرك الابصار" (No power of vision can comprehend him, while he comprehends all visions)<sup>29</sup>.

Imam Ali (ع) explains all the ambiguous verses one by one until that heterodox person says so much is enough, and I thank you for saving me from the darkness and blindness of "shirk" (idolatry) and falsehood and hope that the God Almighty will give you good rewards<sup>30</sup>.

Before citing some other examples of Ahl al-Bait (other Shiite Imams) debates from al-Tauhid of Saduq, which is the well-know theological debate of Imam Rida (ع) with Imran the Saebian, I would like to relate another rather long interesting debate from the holey Prophet (ص) with a group of religious leaders of the Jews, Christians, naturalists, dualists, and pagans<sup>31</sup>. This debate is narrated by Imam Asgari (ع) through his father Imam Naghi (ع)

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<sup>27</sup>. Ibid., pp. 515-525.

<sup>28</sup>. Holy Quran, 75/22-23.

<sup>29</sup>. Ibid., 6/103.

<sup>30</sup>. Ihtijaj, Vol 1, pp. 529-578.

<sup>31</sup>. Ibid. 20-38; Bihar al-Anwar, Vol.9, pp. 257-283.

through his father... till Imam Ali (ع) who narrates from the holy Prophet (ص) that one day twenty five leaders of these five groups in a pre-mediated plan enter the holy Prophet (ص) and start challenging him with different questions. First a representative of the Jews starts by saying that we consider Uzair (Ezra) to be the Son of the God. If you agree with us on someone being the Son of the God, then we have the right of precedence or priority over you, otherwise we remain as your enemy! Then the representative of the Christians says that we consider Jesus the Christ to be the Son of the God, and we believe that God the Almighty has unified Himself with him, and if you agree with us... . Then the representative of "dahris" (nature-believers) says that we hold that the world (nature) has no beginning and no end, i.e. it is eternal and ever-lasting, if you agree with us... . Next the representative of dualists (thanaviyya) says that we believe the world is being managed by two contrasting forces of the light and the darkness, if you agree with us... . And finally the representative of idol-worshippers says that we believe idols are our Gods, if you agree with us so much the better, otherwise we remain as your enemy!

At this stage the holy Prophet (ص), confessing his firm belief in Allah and his disbelief towards all idols and any other object of worship except God the Almighty, turned towards the Jewish scholar and asked him: do you want me to accept your claim without any reasoning? He said no. Then the Prophet (ص) asked why you say Ezra (Uzair) is the Son of the God? He said: because Ezra revived Torah! Prophet said: then Moses who has brought Torah is more qualified to be regarded as the Son of God. Also if you mean "the Son of God" is similar to God's being married and having a child, then you have perceived the God to be a material / physical entity which is absolutely wrong. The Jew said: No, we do not mean that. But our intention is to show his respect and dignity

near God. As if when a master says "my son" to his pupil, by that he does not mean a parental relationship but rather affinity and respect. Then Prophet (ص) said: Therefore, if one is more respect-worthy your praise of him should be more respectful. Is not that so? They said yes. The Prophet (ص) continued: Then if God say "My Son" to Ezra, He should say "My Brother", "My Father", or even "My Master - Mawla" to Moses. The Jews felt helpless and asked for a timeout to reconsider the matter! The holy Prophet (ص) said: please do so, but with a clear and just conscious, so that God will guide you.

Then the holly Prophet (ص) turned to the Christians and asked them: you people that say the God Almighty has unified Himself with Jesus the Christ, do you mean that the God has descended from his eternal position and has taken a "muhdath" (someone created or induced into being) position in order to unify with Jesus, or that the created (muhdath) Jesus has been elevated and given an "eternal" status, to be then unified with God? Or you too are saying all of this to show your deep respect for Jesus the Christ? Because the first two cases are impossible through logical reasoning, neither a created being becomes uncreated or eternal, nor an uncreated or eternal being ever becomes created; and regarding the third option it is quite evident that Jesus is one of the "chosen" creatures of God. The Christians replied that, since Jesus has many astonishing miracles that is why we call him Son of the God out of our high respect for him. They also said: you say "ابراهيم خليل الله" (Abraham is the friend of God) and we say "عيسى ابن الله" (Jesus is the Son of God). What difference does it make? The holy Prophet (ص) replied: Those two are not similar to each other. "خليل" (khalil) is from the root of "خُلِّه" (khollah) which also means "افتقار" (need and deficiency). Therefore "khalil" means someone who is in constant need of God, so that when he was thrown into the fire and the

archangel Jibraeel (Gabriel) came to help him, he refused and said I do not need anyone's help except God. At this stage one of the Christians said: Jesus said I go to my father (in the heavens). The holy Prophet (ص) said the correct version of his saying is that I go to my father and your father. Are all the addressee's of Jesus "ibnullah" (the son of God)? Then this qualification of yours is not limited to Jesus the Christ, but rather covers all Christians! You pronounce the word "Jesus", but choose your own impression of the word! Why do not you say that when Jesus speaks of "My father and your father", what he really means is Adam or Noah (Nuh)? The Christians too got silenced at this moment and asked for a time out to think the matter over<sup>32</sup>.

Then the holy Prophet (ص) enters into a serious philosophical and theological debate with naturalists and believer in the eternity of nature on issues of createdness and uncreatedness, and provide examples of the nature, the day, the night, etc. in order to prove that one can not assume the universe to be primordial. Along this very intense and solid discussion the naturalists too fail to provide satisfactory answers and withdraw from the dialogue<sup>33</sup>.

Next is the turn of dualists how believe in a benevolent or good and a wicked or bad creator for the universe, arguing that since the whole world is full of good and evil phenomena, and the single God the creator can not initiate good and evil things simultaneously, therefore, it is necessary that there be two Gods and not just one! The holy Prophet (ص) answers: Look, there are so many different colors in the world, then why do not you assume a separate eternal God for each of them? Did not you say that each opposite entity or substance needs a separate creator? Because they

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<sup>32</sup>. Ihtijaj, vol.1, pp.26-29.

<sup>33</sup>. Ibid. 29-32.

are of opposite natures! Dualists too ask for some time out for reconsidering the matter<sup>34</sup>.

Lastly, against the arguments of idol-worshippers who state that their idol-worshipping is only for bringing them closer to God, or that they consider the idols to be fellow men in which God is incarnated and so they are being praised and respected, the holy Prophet (ص) goes into details of the possibility of incarnation of the creator into the created, absolute imparity of the creator and the created in praise and respect, etc. Until they finally submit and ask for a pause of reconsideration. It is interesting to note that the holy Prophet (ص) does not regard the idolaters as simple-minded stupid persons, but answers them in a very logical and rational manner<sup>35</sup>. It is said that at the end of these debates, after a couple of days, all the twenty-five leaders of the said traditions returned to the Prophet (ص) and converted into Islam.

In "Kitab ul-Tawhid" (the book of Divine Unity) of Shaikh-i Saduq too, there are two rather long debates of Imam Rida (ع) in the presence of Ma'mun, the Abbaside Caliph, with two different groups, one with the religious leaders of different traditions and the famous theologian Imran the Saebian<sup>36</sup>, and the other with Sulaiman Marvazi a great theologian from Khorasan area<sup>37</sup>, which due to time limitation we will only go over the main points of these two debates.

1. That the holy Imam himself is not after having a debate, but another person (King Ma'mun) is arranging them,

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<sup>34</sup>. Ibid. 32-33.

<sup>35</sup>. Ibid., 33-38.

<sup>36</sup>. Saduq, Al-Tawhid, pp. 638-673.

<sup>37</sup>. Ibid., pp. 674-691.

although the Imam seizes the opportunity to present his own right views, and not overrun his opponent.

2. That Imam debates with each person according to that person's own sacred book and shari'a (legal code), with the Christians according to Gospel, with the Jews according to Bible, etc.
3. That Imam is not looking after condemning believes and views of the adversary and proving that he is all but wrong. But only answers him according to his own sacred book and testaments. The holy Imam never refers to Quran in debates with unbelievers.
4. That the holy Imam never insults his opponents for their null and invalid views, but rather tries to show their inconsistencies through sound reasoning. For example, when he encounters a Christian who considers Jesus the Christ to be the God, he simply asks him: Why you consider Jesus to be the God? And then hints that in the Bible there are other Prophets who revived the dead, why do not you consider all of them to be God? Along the same line, when he asks a Jew why you believe in Moses and the Jew replies that because Moses has brought signs that show he is a Prophet, then the holy Imam says Jesus and Muhammad have brought the same signs too, why do not you believe in all three of them and have stopped at the first? The Jew answers I have not seen Jesus and Muhammad's signs! The Imam asks if he himself has seen the miraculous signs of Moses. Which the Jew has no answer to it.

5. That Imam never restricts or limits the scope of the debate and let the opponents to raise whatever they want, but only with Imran the Saebian asks him to be just in his saying and avoid any loquacity or injustice.
6. That only with Sulaiman Marvazi, a renowned Muslim theologian belonging to another Islamic branch than Shiism, the holy Imam refers to the Quran and Prophet's tradition. In this debate Imam's method is as if he is teaching a pupil of his seminary.

### **3. Summary and Conclusion**

1. On our first discussion about the Shia Islam or the school of Ahl al-Bait, Shiites rightly believe that they are the principal group of Muslims who follow the path of Quran and Tradition, and that the Ahl al-Bait Imams are, after the demise of the holy Prophets (ص), true proofs of God on earth and the best interpreters of the holy Quran and Prophet's Tradition. They also believe that according the Tradition, the continued presence of Imam Mahdi (ع) proves that the earth will never be devoid of a "hujjat", be it a Prophet or an Imam.
2. On our second discussion about the debates of Ahl al-Bait with other religious groups and Islamic branches, Shiites believe that the very act of debating is well founded in the revelation<sup>38</sup> and Prophetic Tradition<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup>. For example see Quran 2/111, 16/125.

<sup>39</sup>. Tabarsi, Ihtijaj, vol. 1, pp. 18-146.

3. According to the school of Ahl al-Bait, the pre-requisite of any valid debate is thorough knowledge of the subject matter and eloquence. Thus not everybody is allowed to enter religious dialogue. They also believe that, according to the holy Quran, any debate should be based on " جدال احسن " or the best way of arguing, refraining from any fabrication, accusation, and insult.
4. Also, any debate and argumentation should address the needs of the other side and do not be an abstract theoretical discussion.
5. Ahl al-Bait Imams, in their debates with the followers of preceding traditions, never blame them as believing in invalid or distorted tenets, but criticize them for not accepting the very right and valid subsequent traditions.
6. Ahl al-Bait Shiite Imams are after proving their own school's authenticity and validity and not refuting their adversaries' doctrines.