

Imam Musa Al Sadr: Promoting Unity and Harmony among Sunnis, Shias and Christians in Lebanon; A Model for Religious Leaders

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Introduction

In every country or community are persons or individuals who flourish at moments of crises or difficulties and make great contributions to promoting peace, dialogue and building bridges across religious divides. These are persons who dedicate their life, teachings and encounters, to promoting the culture of peace and dialogue. It is said that, "all human beings are creatures of their own time and space, and reflect the pride and prejudices, the hopes and the glories of their particular time and specific circumstances" (Forward 37). Imam Musa Al-Sadr was the leader of the Shi'ah community in Lebanon who contributed to peace by making his fellow citizens understand that dialogue between Islam and Christianity and between Sunni and Shia was the only way to understanding peace and unity in a country that has suffered from so many conflicts.

Al Sadr advocated and fought for unity between Muslim sects and Muslims around the world, called for a more active role for women in Islamic society, preached tolerance for other religions, advocated dialogue and understanding rather than confrontation and intolerance. As a Muslim cleric, he carried his message of tolerance and peace by going to communities and Churches to preach and make presentations. This study is aimed at introducing Imam Al-Sadr to all those who promote tolerance, dialogue and unity among all religions and peoples. His life, works, speeches, presentations and beliefs changed the face of Lebanon and inspired both Muslims and Christians towards positive change. His contributions show the kind of role that religious leaders could play in promoting social harmony and religious tolerance. The study evaluates the life of Imam and make some recommendations for Christian and Muslim leaders in Nigeria.

The Conditions and the Plight of the Shiah in Lebanon

Imam Musa al Sadr was born in the holy city of Qum, Iran, in 1928. His family originated from Southern Lebanon from the village of Shour in Tyre. The Sadr family had a hard life full of struggle and militancy but had great reputation.

He was invited to Lebanon to become the President of the Supreme Islamic Shi'i council and leader of the Shi'a community in the whole country. In the course of his stay in Lebanon, it did not take him long to find out that the Shi'ah were in a desperate situation. They were uneducated, very poor, politically marginalized and socially disunited. On July 28, 1978, Imam Musa received an invitation to visit Libya and participate in a conference and meet Colonel Gaddafi. It was during that visit when the Imam disappeared. His disappearance was a great loss to the Shiah, Lebanon and all Christians. They lost a theologian, clergyman, a leader loved by all who advocated social harmony and religious tolerance (Naim 69).

Lebanese Shia history shows that Jabal 'Amal was the area in Lebanon when most of the Shia lived. They were mainly uneducated and worked in agriculture. In the Biqa' valley, they were working in farms owned by large landowners and the harvest was sold by the government to pharmaceutical companies in Europe. The Shi'i workers did not benefit much from the enormous profits the crops brought to the government and the landowners. In Jabal 'Amil, over 90% of the population worked in agriculture. Many worked on their lots, but the majority of them were day labourers on huge farms owned by large families (Naim 60).

The situation and plight of the Shia community is best understood through the rule of the Ottoman governor, Ahmad Pashan al Jazaar, whose name literally means the butcher. Prior to the rules of al Jazaar, the Shia community had lived in prosperity, peace and unity. Al Jazaar took Shia books and libraries to the seat of his power in Acre and had them burnt. He was ruthless and brutal to the Shia community and was described as a lion let loose against humanity (Ajami 55). He destroyed the cotton market and took the profits for himself. By the end of al Jazaar's time, a British traveller heard tales of his deeds and recorded the lament of a Shia. "He then said one hundred villages had been entirely ruined, that the country had never recovered from the ravages of Jazaar, that they had no water and had heavy taxes. He hoped better days are coming (56). Citing Urquhart, Ajami describes the Shia as being hated by the Persians as Arabs and the Turks and Arabs as Shiites (56).

Earlier in Shia history, when the Mamluks came to power, they raided Lebanon on many occasions in order to fight the crusaders. After the crusaders were chased out of Lebanon, the Mamluks turned then to the Shia. They sent military expeditions into the Shai'ah populated areas of Kisrawan, in Mount Lebanon. In 1305, the Mamluks sent a major military into Kisrawan and were successful in defeating the Shiah and killing off most of them. The survivors took refuge in various parts of Lebanon mainly Jabal 'Amil and the Biqa' valley (53). When the French took over the region of Lebanon and Syria, they tried to mould the Lebanese according to French tradition and culture. The Shi'i community revolted against the policies of French and so joined their

compatriot in the struggle for independence. The French authority organized a council of deputies from the various religious communities in Lebanon in order to work with them directly. The Shia were given five seats on the 25 seat council, twelve to the Maronites. They demanded that they be classified a separate religious community. The French issued a decree in 1926 that gave Shi'i community legitimacy for the first time. The Shi'i benefitted the most and failed to use their political clout to effect changes in the Shi'i community. They spent most of their time fighting among themselves in search of personal political and financial gains. As a result, Shi'ite cities, towns and villages became even more desperate and neglected than before the Shiah were given political power (Naim 57). The condition of the Shia became so severe that they had to resort to a Shia practice known as *Taqiyya*. "*Taqiyya* is a Shia doctrine that authorizes concealment of one's belief in an environment hostile to that belief. This practice was authorized by their Imams and Jurists" (16).

As at the time of independence in 1943, the year of the country's independence, there were three hundred predominantly Shia villages in Southern Lebanon. "Not a single hospital in all the district, but a health office exists in Sidon, Tyre and Nabatiyya... It is also deprived of irrigation schemes and the bulk of the people drink stagnant water (Ajami 61). Still at this time, two dominant ideas had been brought together in the Lebanese polity: a Maronite concept that stressed Lebanon's Christian identity and a Sunni Arab conviction, upheld by the merchants of Beirut, Tripoli and Sidon, that the country was a piece of a larger Arab world. Both conceptions were alien to the Shia; The Shia were Lebanon's hewers of wood and drawers of water (61). On the eve of independence, Lebanese statistics put the Shia at some 200,000 inhabitants out of a population of a million Lebanese. Numerically, the Shia were behind the Maronites and Sunnis. The disadvantage was not merely numerical. Both Maronites and the Sunnites brought into the new polity large ideas of themselves and their place in a Lebanese republic. The Shia were in an intolerable position. As the Maronites, they were men of Lebanon but unlike them, they had not spelled out a doctrine of independence and autonomy. As the Shia, they were Muslims, but they were schismatics (62).

In the 1950s and 1960s, Shia society was faced with the problem of the corruption and moral depravity of their clerics. According to Ajami, "Shia Lebanon sustained a clerical community that was the whole economically depressed and politically quiescent. No special mystique surrounded the men of religion. Economically vulnerable, they took the world as it came. Better to? leave stones unturned, so long as the men in power paid some homage to the religious institution and its aristocracy" (73). Men with peasant cunning mocked the religious professionals. It was also said that the religious garb was often a cover for men who wanted to hide physical deformities and escape being taunted about them. The learning of the religious professionals was also always the subject of side comments and of gossip. It was not unusual for sharp-tongued laymen to question the learning of this or that Mullah, to doubt

whether the clerics really knew their trade (74). Lamenting the situation of the Shia clerics, Ajami shares the experience of Muhammad Maghniyya; “Some youngsters and some of the elders as well are always complaining that the men of religion, *rajul al Din*, do not fulfil their duties, do not visit and guide the faithful. But when a man of religion comes their way they escape from him as a healthy man avoids a man with a contagious disease” (75). The tradition they transmitted had no bearing on the reality that men knew and lived. They saw every new idea as *bida* (innovation, heresy), as a torch setting fire to sacred realms(76) This was the situation that Musa al Sadr had to deal with and correct.

The Path of Leadership that Musa Al Sadr Took

Imam Musa al Sadr arrived Lebanon from Iran in 1959 and had his work cut out for him. He arrived Lebanon when the country was going through social and political changes, rise in urbanization, the presence of many Television stations and the rise of the automobile industry. At the time of his arrival, many Shia expatriates were returning from exile to Lebanon from Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria and other African countries. He started his work in Tyre, a district with sixty villages and of these sixty, only a dozen had school or paved roads, forty villages were without school, all sixty lacked electricity (86). It took six years before Sadr’s reformist ideas, themes and fame and spark caught on. His leadership style was against the current of the time. Influenced by Jamal al Din al Afghani, al Sadr picked up the themes: compatibility of faith and reason, the openness of Islam to innovations, the need to reform Islam for purposes of self –strengthening (87). An examination of some of the issues that the Imam handled would help us understand the kind of man he was.

Dialogue with Christians: In order to solve the many problems of Lebanon and the situation of the Shia, Imam Musa realized that all groups of people needed to come together in peace and unity. To achieve the reforms he had in mind, he reached out to all groups of people such as the Maronites Sunnis and all stakeholders. He was convinced that good relations with others is necessary for breaking down walls of prejudice, misunderstanding and stereotypes. In an attempt to build a bridge to the Christians, he did something unprecedented.” With the help of his friend, Maronite Patriarch Antonius Bulus Khoreich, the Imam delivered a Lenten sermon at the Cathedral of Saint Louis des Capuchins at Bab Idris in the capital city of Beirut. It is said that he moved the worshippers in attendance to tears and a long ovation at the end of the sermon. He informed the worshippers that, “Lebanon was full of examples of man’s and oppression, and that replacing one form of oppression with another was not the answer. He asked them to get rid of oppression and misunderstanding and unite, unity and equality, he said would ensure a bright

future” (Naim 117). This was the first time in the history of Lebanon that a Muslim leader would do such a thing. Reactions to the sermon were positive and optimistic while others criticized the action. In discussions with close followers and colleagues, al Sadr hinted that “a Muslim woman should be able to marry a Christian man and still stay with the faith. He doubted whether polygamy was really permissible by the lights of Islamic law (Ajami 94). He believed that learning about other sects and religions enriched and strengthened Islam and Muslims. It made them capable of dealing with each other and with the outside world in a more knowledgeable way (Naim 141).

Imam al Sadr continued to establish links and dialogue with Lebanon’s religious and political denominations. He became acquainted with all of the Christian ministers and personalities and established formal cordial relations with most of them particularly Bishop Yusuf al-Khuni, the Maronite archbishop. He had good relations with the rest of the Christian masses. Raflah Mansad endowed one-third of the shares of his ice factory to a charitable society (*Mu’assisah Birr Ihsan*) managed by the Imam (web). On June 21, 1963, al Sadr attended the papal coronation ceremony of His holiness Pope Paul VI; making him the first Muslim cleric then to be invited to such a ceremony. In his meeting with the Pope, he discussed the importance of narrowing the gap of misunderstanding between Islam and Christianity. The trip scored an important point for the Imam among Christians in Lebanon, but many Ulama in Lebanon and around the Muslim world criticized it. Some accused him of giving the pope and Christianity a high status, while others went as far as accusing him of apostasy (Naim 116). In the Cathedral of Strasbourg, he told an astonished Priest who found him praying inside the church: “aren’t we in the house of God? Aren’t we both God’s children? In many of his talks and lectures, he told his audience that Islam and Muslim revere Christ’s prophet hood and miracle, and accept the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Musa knew the gospel and quoted a lot from the gospel freely (114).

Al Sadr and Muslim Unity: Lebanon is a country of various sects and denominations within both Islam and Christianity. Besides the Maronites, there is up till today Sunnis and Shia Muslims living together with certain differences in teachings. Imam had great desire for Muslim unity and used his popularity and fame to preach Muslim ecumenism. After his election as President of the supreme Islamic Shi’i council, he sent a letter to Mufti Hassan Khalid. In the letter he said:

We the leaders of the Muslims need to be role models to our followers. It is our responsibility to encourage Muslim unity and foster trust and understanding between all Muslims. It is the message of our prophet that we stay united and not lose sight of what is important and necessary. The prophet commanded us to abide by the teachings of

God and not let everything or anyone divide us (Naim 139).

In the letter, he pointed out to the Mufti that during the month of Ramadan, he should appoint a few Sunni Sheikhs to meet with some Shi'ah Shaikhs, in order to plan joint events for the month of Ramadan (140). Sunnis and Muslims usually do not start or end fasting on the same days; each group is guided by different religious leaders concerning the sighting of the moon for the month of Ramadan. Sunnis are guided by Al-Azhar and Saudi Arabia, while Shi'ah listen to Iran and Iraq. He called for meetings that included Sunni leaders, Druze community leader with the purpose of getting to themselves and establish lines of communication between the three communities and pursue collaboration and cooperation (134).

Islam and Modernism: Islam, according to al Sadr, has been turned into a ritual. The deviant men of religion have gone along with this tendency (Ajami 90). For him, Islam was once a movement, vitality and work; it now stands for lethargy and abdication. Why have the Muslims fallen behind the caravan of civilization? For him, Islam should be open and adaptable to modernism. The man of religion *rajul al din*, has to be a very open person who is capable of interpreting Islam in such a way as to accommodate changes around the things that affect his people, thus keeping them competitive and innovative. Muslim clerics ought to interpret their reading of the Qur'an and Hadith to help people advance and make progress with the rest of humanity. Musa al Sadr also condemned men of religion whom he said grovelled before power and powerful men. He said, "we must break the triple alliance that brings together the oppressive ruler who calls himself *Zul-u-Allah* (the shadow of God), the exploitative man of religion who calls himself *Amin-u-Allah* (the treasurer of God), and the corrupt man of religion who calls himself *Ayat-u-Allah* (the sign of God). Man has been suffocated by this triple alliance; he has become a prisoner of the ruler's sword, of the loaf of bread, of religious obscurantism (93).

Islam and Science. Imam Musa reasoned that religion and science are not enemies and opposed to each but can be employed for the good of man. In a discourse he opined:

Religion and science were born twins. Together the two determined man's fate and his perfection, science was a natural way that the work of the creator can be seen and can be known. The common birth of science and religion left the two of them with the same ailment during their years of infancy and growth. Both became domains of superstition and myth; as a result man wandered through realms of ignorance and confusion. The God sent his messenger to rescue men, to set free both his science and religion.... Then there came a time

when balance between science and religion was broken. Religion used its power to oppress its twin, to shackle it, to confine knowledge to that which was discovered by the ancestors. Oppressing science as it did, the religions shackled itself: it denied itself the fruits of knowledge. After the middle ages, it was now science's moment and its opportunity for revenge with religion mocked and belittled. The twentieth century has brought a new maturity and science has sobered up and has realized that it cannot alone bring about human happiness (Naim 91-92).

Al Sadr recommends that science and its branches are instruments of creation. Man who created science cannot kneel before his own creations and worship these creations to the exclusion of God (92).

Islam and Women: The status of women in Islam is gradually changing from one country to another. Here in Nigeria, certain issues have dodged the progress of women. Issues bedevilling women include education, veiling, early marriage, lack of access to employment opportunities, the pressure of giving birth to male children, lack of involvement in the social, political and economic life of their communities. Imam al Sadr would not tolerate any form of injustice against women. In one of his speeches, he reminded his listeners that, “during the early days of Islam, women worked even though opportunities for paid work were very limited. Today half of our society is paralyzed. According to him the wife of the prophet, Khadijah, was a businesswoman and great Muslim women throughout were active politically socially and economically in the life of the Muslim society (Naim 135). He advocated for an equal treatment of women like their counterparts in several countries. According to him; “the way women are treated in many Muslim countries around the world does not follow the teachings of the prophet and Islam” (135).

He matched his words with action as he was free with women and shook hands with them. They admired his good looks and his elegance and were pleased that they did not have to scurry out of the living rooms and meetings when he arrived, as they did with Ulama of more conservative outlook (Ajami 94). Imam al Sadr respected women and had a place for them in his idea of social reform.

Persistence of Revenge and the Ba'labakk Oath: In the city of Ba'labakk, there was this pre-Islamic practice of revenge killings. In Pre-Islamic Arabia, one of the moral ideals practised by the Arabs was persistence in revenge and was counted as a virtue. Blood feud was common among the Arabs and it illustrated the place of tribal solidarity. If someone was killed, there were ways of ensuring that the crime would not be committed lightly and irresponsibly. The tribe of the murderer was held responsible for his act and the penalty was 'a life for a life'. This was practised in the city of Ba'labakk in Eastern

Lebanon and for years, hundreds of men were killed from various families with no end in sight. Hopes for a humane and civilized way of resolving the problem was bleak until Musa al-Sadr came up with a solution. He called for a meeting of all the family leaders and asked them to work out a different way of dealing with the conflict and misunderstanding between them. After the leaders had met for some time and agreed on a set of actions to take whenever two families had a problem, he asked them to return the following day and bring some of their fellowmen with them to swear an oath. The following day, ten thousand men came from the largest families in the city centre to listen to the Imam and they all took the oath (Naim 85). After the oaths, incidents of revenge killings decreased by eighty percent. Imam Musa used the opportunity to ask all Lebanese communities with the problem of revenge to do the same (86). Religious leaders and all those involved in peace and conflict resolution could employ this methodology to resolve protracted conflicts and killings.

The Role of Religious Leaders in Promoting Social and Religious Harmony

Imam Musa al Sadr accomplished so much within a period of twenty years since he arrived Lebanon from Iran. It is over fifty years since his disappearance in Libya but his influence, ideas, way of life and charismatic leadership have universal value and acceptance. Lebanon's history of violence, suffering, marginalization, sectarian division, crisis, poverty of the Shia community is similar to the discrimination faced by Christians and other groups in Nigeria. As the Shia, Christians in predominantly Muslim states are minorities they can find in the suffering of the Shia community hope and courage for the future. Lamenting on the situation of Christians in northern Nigeria, Kukah opined that:

Other forms of discrimination include the denial of places of worship for the building of churches in most parts of Northern Nigeria, the constant harassment and targeting of places of worship for destruction by mobs of Muslim or by overzealous public servants of the state, the exclusion of Christians from public employment in the state civil service and limited opportunities for cultural self-expression. Christians remain outside the loop of power in most states despite their high levels of educational qualifications (web).

The Catholic Bishops conference of Nigeria, regional episcopal conferences, CAN and many other leaders have spoken out against all forms of discrimination meted out against Christians and other groups in their communiques. These efforts need to be replicated in our communities by individual religious leaders in more concrete and practical ways.

The role played by the Imam in providing leadership, social cohesion and religious harmony in Lebanon is a model and example of the role religious leaders can perform in promoting peace and unity. Religious leaders in Nigeria have so much influence in the society in which they live and can inspire their members towards understanding one another and resolving the issues that have caused conflicts between Christians and Muslims. Imam Musa calls religious leaders as *rajal al din* (men of religion) who must be distinguished from the deviant men of religion. Religious leaders are to be seen as men speaking for the masses and for all victims of injustice irrespective of class religion and ethnicity. Imam Musa was a leader who believed that he was the servant of his community and not the absolute authority in it. In his opinion, the responsibility of leadership is similar to that of religious responsibility. The most important task of the leader is to empower his community and advocate on behalf of them no matter what the circumstances or cost. A leader is someone who is willing to sacrifice his life for his community (Naim 12). In the book, *Islam is our choice to change the current reality*, al Sadr used the word “Imam” in describing the concept of a leader. For him, “an Imam is a human being who has reached a certain point of spirituality and completeness. In the Shi’i belief an Imam is the successor of God on earth, the speaking book of God, the mirror of Islam and the personification of Islam (Naim 232). This means that a religious leader must be a man of integrity, decent, honest and sincere in every aspect of life. Those who met Musa al Sadr testified to the cleanliness of his turban and collar, the elegance of his appearance, the cleanness of his shoes. “He was clean in another important way: he had a clean hand, he was clean with money. He was not greedy; his material needs were modest. Even some of the financial contributions given to him for his personal needs were passed on to the institutions and charities that he had set up”(Ajami 102). There was a purity of intentions in the goals he had set out to do. It was not meant to be a career path or for sordid gains. This is the path that all religious leaders are called to emulate and follow.

It is the role of religious leaders to bring all their adherents together into unity especially in the Nigerian society when there are so many denominations and sects seeking for members. The average Nigerian is gullible to all forms of teachings such as extremism, prosperity, indoctrination and radicalization. In these kind of circumstances, Onaiyekan describes the Nigerian society as a religious jungle and lays the blame on the religious leaders and tasks them with a serious sense of duty to correct the anomaly. “Religious leaders have indeed a serious duty to clarify their respective stands so that there can be some identifiable route in this jungle. After all, the confusion has been caused partly by religious leaders themselves, who have for so long drilled bigotry, jealousy and destructive criticism into their adherents. It is only right that they take the lead in bringing people together” (35).

By bringing people together, the society will appreciate differences in culture and religion and so bring the desired development to all people. Prejudice, biases, pre-conceived ideas are great obstacles to dialogue and religious leaders can make a difference.

Religious leaders need to come together and discourage their members from reprisal killings and desire for revenge which are often targeted at innocent persons leading to counter-reprisals with more innocent people losing their lives. Violent response to attacks goes contrary to the teachings of both Islam and Christianity. At a conference on violence and Persecution at TCNN by Church Leaders and Theologians, participants resolved, “to teach and advocate love and forgiveness for our enemies and doing good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27-37) and we will not be diverted from the Church’s mandate to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). There are many testimonies to the way these move together in harmony. We do not restrict this gospel mandate to preaching but seek its holistic expression in our social and working lives, acting as salt and light within the world. We see this as our positive Christian agenda, that by living exemplary lives of excellence, we can counter the persecutors’ agenda; touching every area of life (2). All leaders must take the lead especially those in great positions of authority.

Conclusion

The life, work and teachings of Imam Musa al Sadr are relevant to all religions. His contributions to dialogue and unity between Muslims and non-Muslims changed Lebanon and it has the potential to change all multicultural and multiethnic societies such as Nigeria. We need to have the courage to listen to what the other is saying so that we can relate to him or her with respect. It is sad that there are many who think that they know Islam, not realizing that Islam is a deep ocean. The legacy of people such as Musa al-Sadr would continue to have lasting effect on the progress and development of people and not the power and wealth that people accumulate. Prior to his disappearance in 1978, he had contributed to the support of the poor and the Shi’ah community. He established the Imam Musa al-Sadr foundation which was made of schools, clinics, hospitals, orphanages, nursing college, girls’ schools, institute of Islamic studies etc. The foundation is still functional to this day and is being run by his sister, Rabab Sadr in Lebanon. He is credited with political achievements and relations with Arab governments and visits to many countries preaching peace, tolerance, justice and non-violence. He disappeared on his visit to Libya, but his message and what he stood for must not be allowed to disappear.

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