

## THE THEOLOGICAL COLLEGES OF NAJAF

The holy town of Najaf is the site of the tomb of Imām ʿAlī, fourth Caliph of Islam and the first Imām of the Shīʿah sect. As a holy place in the Muslim world it ranks fourth following Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. It is the first holy city in Shīʿah lands. People come to it for pilgrimage from all over the Shīʿah world and in it they bury their dead whenever they can afford the cost of the journey.

Kufah, three miles from Najaf, is the site of the mosque of Imām ʿAlī. Kufah was the first Islamic capital in Iraq and is well-known as a competitor to Basrah for its school of Arabic grammar. Najaf is thus a great centre of Shīʿah religious learning. It is comparable to the Al-Azhar University in Cairo and Al-Zaitūnah University in Tunis.

Advanced theological scholarship for the Shīʿah sect of Islam acquires special significance because of the necessity of Ijtihād in Shīʿah religious life. Ijtihād is the attainment of such a high degree of scholarship in religion whereby the Mujtahid is able to re-interpret and re-duce religious precepts from the Qurʾān, Ḥadīth and Sunnah, or the utterances and practices of the Prophet, so that his interpretation or deduction may meet the changes of the times. A Shīʿah is required to follow the teachings of a living Mujtahid. When a Mujtahid dies his teachings lose their authority. The Sunnī sects on the other hand usually follow the teachings of four great Imāms or leaders of theology, namely, Abū-Ḥanīfah, Al-Shāfiʿī, Ibn Ḥanbal and Mālik, the four of whom lived in the Middle Ages. No new Mujtahids are required by the Sunnī sects. The Shiʿahs, however, must always have their living Mujtahids, which requires, in theory at least, deep scholarship, original thinking, thorough examination and analysis of religious precepts.

Najaf is the main centre of Shīʿah religious education. Samarraḥ, Kādhimain and Karbalāʾ have their own theological colleges but they do not in general outrank Najaf in importance. Qum in Iran under the leadership of the great Mujtahid Burujurdī had come to occupy an important place in Shīʿah theological education, but it does not yet compete with Najaf.

Najaf has some twenty-four colleges of which those of Burujurdī, Sayyid Kādhim ʿAlī Tazdī, Akhund, Hindī, Qawam, Sadr, Aḥmadyeh, Kāshif al-Ghita, and Mahdiyāh are among the best known. These colleges are attended by some two thousand scholars representing several nationalities. The greatest number come from Persia, but there are Iraqis, Pakistanis, Indians, Kashmiris, Afghans, Lebanese, Tibetans, and students from the Persian Gulf. The following are the statistics of the student composition in Najaf for December 1957: from Iran 896 scholars, from Iraq 326, from Pakistan 324, from Tibet 270, from India, Pakistan and Kashmir 71, from Syria and Lebanon 47, from Hasa, Qatif and Bahrain 20 students, total 1,954. This number fluctuates

tuates according to the seasons and circumstances, for as we shall see later attendance is absolutely free.

It was some thirty years ago that the writer went deep into the study of education and educational methods, being aware of the uniqueness and importance of the Najaf system of education. As a matter of fact in choosing a thesis for a Ph. D. dissertation one of my proposals was to write a thesis on the system of education in the colleges of Najaf, a suggestion which gave way later to another subject, that of the education of the Bedouin tribes of Iraq. My acquaintance with Najaf and its system of education begins with my childhood when my father was a scholar there. My late father spent some nineteen years studying theology in Najaf. Later on at the age of fifteen, I started the same education myself but in Kādhimain, not in Najaf. As time went on my conviction became stronger and stronger that in Najaf we have a mine for educationalists which should be explored so that the whole world might come to know it, appreciate it and adopt some of its features. I have studied the major university systems of education of the West; I have visited German, British and French universities, Oxford and Cambridge included; I have had my own education in American universities. But none of these, not even the German universities which pride themselves on *freiheit* in education, match Najaf in its freedom, in its depth, in its development of personality and in putting its stamp on the individual.

To begin with, the twenty-four colleges of Najaf and the whole educational system are not under government influence, and they are not financed or supported by the government, nor is there a board or external authority which controls or directs these colleges. There are no presidents of colleges, no deans, no masters. Any person of any standard of scholarship who has the willingness to study and who can find an empty room in any of the colleges can go and live there. Religious piety and religious self-discipline are the only rules that guide the discipline of these colleges. Each college consists of an open court, usually square or rectangular, with a pond in the middle, sometimes with trees around the pond. The open square is surrounded by rooms which lodge one or two students each, the ground floor being something like one metre above the ground. In most colleges there is only one floor above this, and only one modern college, that of Buruyurdi, has a second storey. I visited some of the students' rooms. They contain no bedstead but the student has his mattress on a mat or rug. Some rooms have cross-ventilation either by a window or a chimney; others have no ventilation except through the door. Some of them contain portable electric fires. Most of the colleges contain sirdabs or underground cellars which the students use during the hot days of summer. Some Najaf sirdabs are noted for being more than one floor deep, in other words, one can go down into one, two, three sirdabs, one below the

other. The lower one gets the cooler it becomes. In the lowest sirdab one requires heavy clothing if one is not to chill.

All scholars usually wear a massive half-spherical turban, black or white. The black denotes that the wearer is a sayyid or Hashimite by descent. The wearer of a white turban can claim no such descent. There is usually a guardian and a janitor in each college. Scholars who live in the same college do their own cooking and laundry unless they have the means to eat outside or to pay to have their clothes washed for them. They get their bread free from religious donations which come from Shī'ah benefactors who send these donations to the great Mujtahids. Āyatullāh Burujurdī, the great Iranian Mujtahid living in Qum, spends some ID. 6,000 a month in Najaf, Karbalā<sup>3</sup> and Samarraḥ for bread and in paying monthly allowances to some 500 scholars, usually ID. 1½ to ID. 2 per individual. Monthly allowances may go higher for some individuals and may even reach ID. 30 for prominent needy scholars. (One Iraqi dinar is about \$ 2.80).

Scholars who have families and who live outside the colleges form something like half the number of the students in Najaf. They frequent the colleges for their studies and discussions. They are also recipients of financial aid when it is available. Students usually have to depend on financial help from their families or other benevolent sources fully to support themselves. Thus there is no fixed budget, no fixed income, for the colleges. A student studies free of charge and a teacher teaches with no pay. Most scholars in Najaf are students and teachers at the same time. An advanced scholar who studies with a Mujtahid teaches those who are below him; those who are below him teach those who are still below them, and so on. Thus anybody studying in Najaf soon becomes both a student and a teacher. There is no fixed number of years for education. A student may stay in Najaf for as many years as he chooses. Some spend their whole life studying and teaching there. An average educational attainment is made in fifteen years, but this is an arbitrary figure for there is no time limit. Students may desire to stay five, ten, fifteen or twenty years. There are no examinations to be passed. Najaf resembles a great fountain to which anybody can go and drink of its learning as much as he can and as long as he cares. Nobody requires him to drink if he does not choose to and no amount of drinking is required or prescribed.

The courses taken consist of a well-known defined curriculum in language, logic and theology, but other subjects like philosophy, astronomy, mathematics in their mediaeval form may be taken as well, but are left to individual taste. A student is at liberty to use his free time to study any subject, such as a foreign language or literature, if he chooses. The scholar is free to choose his colleagues and associates, to choose his own teacher from among the scholars, to agree with his teacher on the time of meeting and the place of study. The place of study may be in the colleges themselves, in a mosque, or in the teacher's

own home. The Al-Hindi Mosque, or the (Indian) mosque, is one of the biggest centers of teaching, whether it be in small circles or in a large lecture. Those who form a class may be two, three, up to twenty-four in number, unless it be an advanced course which is given in the form of a public lecture in the mosques usually. The lecturer normally sits on a pulpit. The rate of progress of a student differs with the individual; those who can move fast can do so freely and those who are slow can move at their own pace. There is no rushing in education for there is no time limit, there is no examination and no certificate. A slow student may spend his whole life if he wishes in Najaf with nobody dismissing him from the college. High scholarship and intelligence show themselves naturally. Once a scholar is noted for his achievement and intelligence he begins to attract attention and he becomes a center of attention for those who want to associate with him and study under him.

Teaching starts early in the morning after the morning prayer before sunrise and continues until an hour after the evening prayer. Thus a scholar chooses his own hours of study with the teachers he has selected. Several teachers may be teaching the same subject at the same time. Besides group teaching there are discussion and recitation periods where students studying under the same teacher meet to discuss with each other the lesson they have had and usually every day one of them recites that day's lecture, acting as the teacher himself, and is questioned by his colleagues. Besides, each scholar has his own hours of private study and preparation at his own convenience. Thus there is a good deal of grinding memory work and thinking.

Education in Najaf is divided into three stages. The first stage is the *suṭūḥ* or surface education. This includes the study of Arabic grammar, rhetoric and logic. A student starts with an elementary grammar book called *Ujrumiyyah*; the name itself is derived from the Greek word grammar. After finishing this, he studies a more advanced book of grammar called *Al-Qaṭab* which may be replaced by another book called *Jāmi' al-Muqaddimāt*, or "the sum total of introductions." After that he moves on to a more advanced book of grammar which is a commentary on a thousand verses summarizing the whole grammar rendered by Ibn-Mālik. These thousand verses are usually memorised and they contain the essence of Arabic grammar. The most advanced book on Arabic grammar is *Al-Mughnī al-Labīb* which contains all the delicacies and intricacies of Arabic grammar. After finishing with Arabic grammar the student moves on to *Al-Mutawwal* by Al-Taftazānī, which is Arabic rhetoric. After that he moves on to logic in which he studies Aristotelian logic in a book called *Al-Ḥāshiyah* by Mullah 'Abdullāh. The time taken for this *suṭūḥ* stage is normally seven years.

The second stage of learning is that of Al-Fuḍalā' or the wise men, which is comparable to the term sophomore used in American universities. In this stage the student studies methodology and jurisprudence. Methodology consists of the methods of examining evidence and original

sources of religious teachings. Religious jurisprudence consists of the rules and dictates of Muslim religion whether pertaining to ritual practices like cleanliness, prayer, fasting and paying alms, or social individual dealings like commercial transactions, marriage, heritage, etc. The books taught in methodology are *Al-Mu'allim*, *Al-Qawānīn*, *Al-Rasā'il* and *Al-Kifay*. A student takes these successively and usually moves from the simpler one to the more complex. The books in jurisprudence are *Al-Tabṣīrah*, *Al-Sharā'ī'a*, *Al-Lum'a*, *Al-Makāsib* and *Al-Urwat al-Wuthqā*. Here again the books rise in complexity and technicality.

After this intermediate stage the student reaches the third stage of study which is called the external stage, in which students attend lessons given in public lectures by the Mujtahids. These lectures consist of very highly specialised analysis and examination of religious teachings. Among the famous Mujtahids who give such lectures are Sayyid Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm, Sayyid Ḥusain al-Hammānī and Sayyid Al-Qāsim al-Khui. I attended a few of these lectures in December, 1957. One of them was Al-Khui's lecture in the evening in Al-Ḥaḍrah Mosque. There were some 150 students attending, all sitting on the ground with legs crossed. The lecture did not last more than thirty minutes. It was on juridical methodology. I also attended a lecture by Sayyid Ḥusain al-Hammānī in the Al-Hindī Mosque. Some 150 students were present. The lecture was on a person's intention or decision, in relationship to prayer. The lecture here had to analyse the meaning of intention and its relation to the act of prayer. The discussion included a great deal of psychology as well. Another lecture I attended was given by Āyatallāh Sayyid Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm in Al-Ṭūsi Mosque. It dealt with the wedding of slaves and the relation of that wedding to the consent of their masters.

There is no limit of years for this stage of study. One may continue it for life. The aim of great scholars is to reach the high stage of Ijtihād, which may be compared to a doctorate in theology. Thus the Mujtahid has the ability to make his own religious judgements based on his own mastery of methodology, examining all opinions and judgements and the texts of the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth on religious issues. The stage of Ijtihād is reached not by learning alone but in addition by gaining an insight which is God-given. For learning to them is not to be measured by amassing information but by the light which God instils in a scholar's heart. A Shī'ah, unless he be a Mujtahid, has to follow in his daily life the teaching of a Mujtahid, and he is called a Muqallid, which means a follower or imitator. A scholar who reaches Ijtihād, but is not standing for leadership, remains in abeyance and is called a Muhtat or reserve. There are many Muhtats in Najaf whose Ijtihād may one day be recognised in public. Najaf possesses a number of great Mujtahids, some of whom are very learned and impressive leaders of the Shī'ah world. Some of these Mujtahids take on public duties and deal with human welfare; others concentrate on scholarship.

I visited a number of colleges recently and talked to students about

their studies, their lives and their home countries. One student, Shaikh Muḥammad Riḍā Shams-al-Dīn, I asked to relate to me his schedule for one day. He told me that he rises from bed half an hour before sunrise to offer his morning prayer. After sunrise he attends an external lecture in jurisprudence with Sayyid ʿAbd-al-Qāsīm al-Khui. After that he teaches rhetoric. Then he studies Islamic philosophy in a book called *The Explanation of the Eleventh Chapter* by Miqdād al-Suisī. Then he attends another external lecture with Shaikh ʿAbbās in jurisprudence dealing with the subject from the well-known book *Al-Sharāʿiā*. Then a third external lecture studying the subject of Zakāt or alms from the same source. Then he attends still another external lecture with Sayyid ʿAlī Qanī al-Isfahānī. Besides this he has to study personally and attend to prayers and his own life. This is certainly a very full schedule. In other words, a scholar may over-work himself if he so chooses, or he can go easy if he pleases. There is no external driving force.

Another brilliant student whom I visited in Al-Qawam College was Shaikh ʿAlī al-Karāmī. He is an external student also. This young man attends the lectures of Shaikh Ḥusain al-Hillī, and is also studying philosophy. He has a good literary ability and a fine philosophical mind. He teaches rhetoric. His brother is a well-known scholar and author in Islamic philosophy.

The basic features of education in Najaf are the following: —

1. Education is not controlled by any external authority. No government interference and no board decisions.
2. Anyone who goes to study in Najaf goes for learning for its own sake. Learning is not to be aimed at for any extraneous motive. Only piety and serving the purpose of God should be the guiding force. This is why a good scholar in Najaf must combine piety and scholarship.
3. Another feature of Najaf education is that of contentment and asceticism. Students in Najaf do not lead luxurious lives although all those I met demonstrated generosity. Whichever room I visited I was entertained to tea, coffee or some beverage or other. A student from Harat, Afghanistan, who received me in his room, soon left his room when I refrained from taking any of the soft drinks available, and brought in a dish of pomegranate. Simplicity, generosity and friendship are in the atmosphere.
4. Najaf education is completely free. There is no limitation on discussion or enquiry. Within the bounds of Islamic faith, complete freedom of study and research is the rule.
5. Najaf education has solved the problem of individual differences. Here a student can move according to his own pace and choose the subject, the books, the colleagues, the teachers of his own liking. The fact that learning is for its own sake and there are no limited periods for study makes the student go to his studies naturally. This education

does not suffer from the curse of prescribed books and prescribed number of hours.

6. In Najaf colleges the problem of examination does not pester the lives of the students or their teachers. Ability and mastery show themselves to the person himself as well as to his colleagues. An Iraqi student of theology in Najaf has to show some elementary ability to pursue his studies before a committee so that he may be exempted from military service, but this is in no sense an examination of a student's achievements.

7. The development of personality and character is fostered by good example and good associates as well as by religious precepts, for one of the fundamentals of Najaf education is that a student should observe his religious exercises diligently, although I heard some complaints that weak characters who are selfishly inclined are found occasionally among the scholars of Najaf. In other words, the material needs of the age have weakened the character of some scholars and intimidated some of the leaders who would otherwise have been more influential in a bigger sphere.

8. An important feature of Najaf education is thorough scholarship. The same subject, studied and re-studied in successive books, certainly leaves a lasting impression on the student. Moreover, a student teaches what he has studied over and over again. It is my personal experience that there is no better way of mastering a subject than teaching it.

Some of the problems which arise from this system of education are the following:

First, the content of education is mediaeval and archaic in character. The scholars of Najaf certainly have very little access to modern thinking, modern science, modern philosophy, modern psychology, modern hygiene. Some of the colleges still contain the pond in which all wash communally; a very unhygienic practice. I had many discussions with scholars and the great Mujtahids about the need for introducing new subject matter like modern philosophy, psychology, sociology, some hygiene and elements of natural science. The response was generally negative. I remember talking to a professor of Islamic philosophy about the philosophy of Henri Bergson. I found him unacquainted with the name. Thus the scholarly product of Najaf falls very short of meeting the spiritual challenge of modern times. This is a very serious observation on Najaf.

A second observation is that of licensing the graduates and the scholars. As I have just said, there are no examinations, no requirements, no control of attendance; everything is freely done, which is a great asset. But at the same time one cannot avoid meeting people leaving Najaf who are not qualified and yet claim religious leadership. It is left to the public to discover whether a religious man is worthy of his claim or not, and of course piety and personal charm may well become a substitute for scholarship in public functions. Some kind of licensing