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A Conversation with Professor Abdulaziz Sachedina on Shi'a
Prof. Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina ile Şîa Hakkında Bir Söyleşi

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A Conversation with Professor Abdulaziz Sachedina on Shi'a**Abstract**

Abdulaziz Sachedina is one of the prominent scholars in the field of Islamic Studies in the West. He continues his studies and classes at the Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies at George Mason University in Virginia, USA and at the Religious Studies Department of the same university. Sachedina is interested in theological issues related to Shiism and Sunnism, as well as subjects such as Islamic Biomedical Ethics, Islamic Law, Islam and Human Rights. This conversation, which is about Shi'ism, was done in May 2019. His interest in Shiism and approach to current issues have been discussed.

Keywords: History of Islamic Sects, Sachedina, Shiism, Islam.

Prof. Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina ile Şîa Hakkında Bir Söyleşi**Öz**

Abdulaziz Sachedina, Batı'da İslam Çalışmaları alanında öne çıkmış isimlerden birisidir. Amerika Virginia'da bulunan George Mason Üniversitesi'ne bağlı "Ali Vural Ak Küresel İslam Araştırmaları Merkezi"nde ve aynı Üniversitenin "Dini Araştırmalar" bölümünde çalışmalarına devam etmektedir. Sachedina, Şiilik ve Sünnilikle ilgili konuların yanı sıra İslam'da Biyomedikal Etik, İslam Hukuku, İslam ve İnsan Hakları gibi hususlarla ilgilenmektedir. Şiilik özelinde olan bu söyleşi, Mayıs 2019'da gerçekleştirilmiştir. Onun Şiiliğe ilgisi ve güncel bazı konulara yaklaşımları üzerine konuşulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslam Mezhepleri Tarihi, Sachedina, Şiilik, İslam.

Betül Yurtalan: *Thank you, Professor Sachedina, for agreeing to speak to the Turkish Journal of Shiite Studies. You are a Professor of Religious Studies and a senior scholar at the Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies at George Mason University. And you hold the Endowed IIT Chair in Islamic Studies at GMU. You have a wide academic field of study. You have been conducting research and writing in the field of Islamic Law, Ethics, and Sunni and Shi'ite Theology for more than two decades. And in the last ten years, you have concentrated on social and political ethics, including Interfaith and Intrafaith Relations, Islamic Biomedical Ethics and Islam and Human Rights. By giving reference to an extensive and great interview about your life and scholarship,¹ I would like to move on to Shia, the subject which we are going to talk about. Firstly, can we talk briefly about your relation to Shia? You were born to an Indian, Shi'i family in Tanzania. You went to Aligarh Muslim University which is related to the Muslim community in India. Then you were in Iran to study Persian language and literature and to do seminary studies with Shi'i jurists for a while. You also studied in Iraq. So, you have experiences with different Shi'ite groups and centers of higher learning. To what extent did these experiences influence your interest in the history of Shi'a?*



Abdulaziz Sachedina: My interest in Islamic studies in general, and in Shi'ite studies in particular, began early in my life. I was brought up in a religious family. Both my parents followed Shi'ite school of thought and my father was a self-taught scholar. However, it was my personal interest in Islam that prompted me to pursue Shi'ite and Sunnite studies. You can never do Shi'ite studies without investigating the Sunni tradition. Tanzania, with its diverse cultural and religious population was quite ecumenical. As a rule, people adhered to

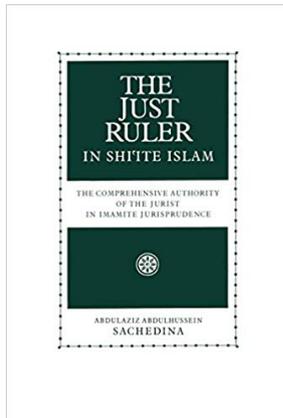
pluralism and harmonious co-existence. Different ethnic and religious groups lived together in this British ruled country. On looking back to my intellectual and personal religious development the spiritual dimensions of Shi'ite religious practices had a major impact upon my

¹ The Maydan, "An Interview with Abdulaziz Sachedina on His Life and Scholarship", Access: 01 October 2019, <https://www.themaydan.com/2017/09/interview-abdulaziz-sachedina-life-scholarship/>

interests in Shi'ism. Retrospectively, Shi'ite tradition combined Sufism and Islamic juridical tradition.

B. Yurtalan: *I want to talk about your Ph.D. dissertation and its expanded book version called "The Doctrine of Mahdiism in Imami Shi'ism: A Study of Doctrinal Evolution in the 9th and 10th Centuries". I know that you said "I was interested in the Islamic messianic idea, the future of the Muslim community. From the very beginning of my higher education I was inclined to search for some answers to the Muslim reformation and I was fascinated with the idea of the Mahdi, the future restorer of pure Islam. And my interest was to study the idea of the Mahdi." So, can we say that your interest in history and your subject was related to your thinking about the future of the Muslim community?*

A. Sachedina: Having grown up under the colonial rule and having been educated in different ideas of reformation under Mahatma Gandhi and other Indian and African leaders in the early part of the 20th century, I developed a keen interest in the future of the Muslim communities in 20th century. This led me to look into a number of Muslim leaders who were involved in the movement for independence and improvement of their peoples under the colonial rule. On many occasions the history of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in Karbala played an important emotional role in spurring the spiritual and ethical interest in understanding the grounds for such revolutionary moments in the national histories of some communities, including the Shi'ite community in India and East Africa. The history of Muslim peoples in South Asia was rich and had a number of instances that related to the future of the idea of ultimate caliph of God, al-Mahdi. I regard my deep interest as the source of future studies in Islam.



B. Yurtalan: *You continued to study the history of Shia with your book "The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam" published in 1988. You discussed the history of the comprehensive authority of the jurist in Shi'ite jurisprudence during the period of occultation of the last Imam, in the 10th and 11th centuries until the modern period in this book. Can we say that this work completed your first book? Could you speak about this book briefly?*

A. Sachedina: Once I started to study the history of Twelver (Imamiyya) Shi'ism and its theology about the future of humanity through al-Mahdi, the sequel to this idea was naturally the period of the Twelfth Imam's prolonged occultation (ghayba). The main question was to trace the development of the leadership of the community when the Imam was in occultation. This search took me to explore two related areas in Shi'ite studies: 1) The

leadership of the Shi'ite scholars in the absence of the last theological Imam; and 2) The intellectual tools that provided the legitimate grounds for the authority of a Shi'ite mujtahid to claim absolute discretionary power to manage the affairs of the Shi'ite community in post-Occultation era. The study about the Shi'ite leadership is tackled in this volume that deals with the idea of *al-sultan al-'adil*, the Just Ruler in Imamite jurisprudence. It is more a juridical than theological, and more historical than doctrinal study. It deals with the development of the idea of *wilayat al-faqih* in Imamite legal thought.

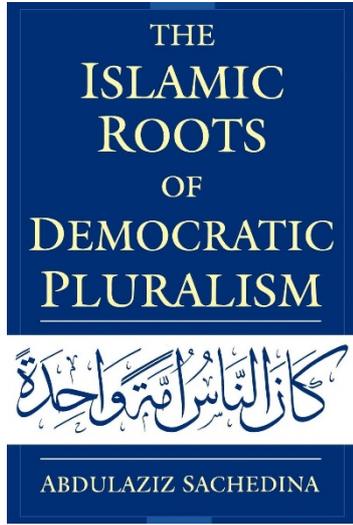
B. Yurtalan: *Can we talk about the Iranian Revolution and the post-revolution period? Have there been changes in Shi'ite thought from the revolution to the present?*

A. Sachedina: 1978-79 Iranian Revolution is a major event in the world history. Its trajectories can be witnessed all over the world in the modern era. It is true that modern men and women have revisited the role religion can or has played in the period that regarded the "end" of organized religions. No one could have predicted the role religion could play in the public domain. Hence, not only Shi'ism, but also Sunnism and other world religions have reasserted their relevance in modern lives. As far as Shi'ism is concerned, this tradition came out in open and claimed its historical place in Islamic studies, which until then was mostly dominated by Sunnite studies. The rethinking that has occurred in Islamic studies in general, and in Shi'ite studies in particular, is palpable in the number of important programs and academic books that have been published about Shi'ism as an integral part of Islamic studies. It is not an exaggeration to say that in all programs of religious studies or comparative studies Shi'ism began to be seen as a critical partner in the total and comprehensive study of Islamic religion, culture and civilization.

B. Yurtalan: *Related to this, in terms of the future of Shia, how do you consider "wilayat al-faqih" and "marja al-taqlid" institutions?*

A. Sachedina: The juridical concept of the "guardianship of the jurist" was always present in interpretive jurisprudence (*fiqh*) even in the Sunni jurisprudence where the role of "guardianship" (*wilaya*) was present in the areas of managing the property of an orphan or a widow. The Iranian revolution under Imam Khomeini increased its political relevance by projecting it as a source of unity of all the Muslims, and not only Shi'ites. From its legal relevance the concept attained constitutional relevance for the Iranians. In a way, *marja'iyya*, attained public prominence under the ayatollahs in Iran and Iraq. *Marja'iyya* had existed for centuries and had functioned as a centralized office of the Shi'ite mujtahid to manage the religious and social affairs of his followers. With the combining of two positions: *marja'iyya* and *wilayat al-faqih* (which was resisted by some prominent ayatollahs of Iraq) in the post-revolution

community of Iran, the office of the Rahbar (leader) in Iran has been treated as the sole legitimizer of the Islamic government in Iran.



B. Yurtalan: *As the writer of “The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism”, what do you think about “toward democratic caliphate” idea of Ahmad al-Katib?*

A. Sachedina: I am a firm believer in the concept of popular sovereignty in the political development of the Muslim community. If the caliph is elected through public debate and consensus then I am supportive of the idea. But being aware of the factionalized Muslim Umma, I doubt if the prevailing political autocracies in majority of the Muslim countries would

ever allow a qualified universal leader to emerge as the caliph. It appears to be the divinely ordained destiny that the Umma needs to await the emergence of the universal leader Al-Mahdi to rule the entire Umma with justice and equity.

B. Yurtalan: *What are the differences between Iranian and Iraqi Sh’iism in your opinion? Theoretically, is it possible to accept Qum and Najaf as two main streams of Shi’a? Therefore, do you think that there is a distinction as Arab Shi’ism and Persian (Iranian) Shi’ism?*

A. Sachedina: My research has shown that culture plays a dominant role in the social identification of the believers. Hence, Arab Shi’ites tend to be influenced more by their “arabness” and the Persians by their “irianness.” Doctrinally there is almost a unified creed among them all; but, in practice I have noticed divergences that are less religious than cultural. It is possible to assert that the Arab Shi’ites are in some practices different than Iranian or Indian Shi’ites. When it comes to the leadership of Najaf or Qum, I would contend that much depends on the personality of the mujtahid. After Ayatollah Khui in Iraq and Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, it will probably be a collective and combined leadership of Najaf and Qum that will be able to speak for the entire Shi’ite community around the world and to manage its affairs. At this time the younger generation seems to be estranged from the idea of taqlid (emulation of the marja’ and paying him the religious dues in the form of khums).

B. Yurtalan: *Do you think that Iran will establish theological superiority on Najaf in the future? For instance, after Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani?*

A. Sachedina: I doubt if any claim to “superiority” can be sustained without the ability to train the future ulema of the community. What people need to see is the ability of religious ideals implanted in everyday lives of the majority of downtrodden Muslims around the world. The ayatollahs are occupied with many trivial issues at the expense of thinking about the future of the Shi’ite community in modern times.

B. Yurtalan: *We know that the Shiite-Sunni relations have been under the spotlight since the early period. As a person who studied/studying both Shiite and Sunni thought, what could you say about this relationship today? Do you see any positive developments?*

A. Sachedina: My own assessment is that although there are a number of sincere leaders who think that the Muslim umma should remain united, there are others who want to damage all that has been achieved over the centuries in reconciling (taqrib al-madhahib) the two major schools in Islam. Additionally, political differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia, has not allowed for better understanding and appreciation of the differences that are exploited to divide rather than unite Muslims all over. The internet has exacerbated the animosity and differences propelled by petro-dollars that could have been used to eradicate poverty in the Muslim world.

B. Yurtalan: *At this point, I would like to ask you about your opinion of Dar al-taqrib in Iran.*

A. Sachedina: As pointed out above, there are many sincere leaders who want to minimize differences and reconcile the two communities. At the same time, there are far numerous vested interests of the political regimes to increase the misunderstanding and antagonistic theologies among the simple-minded believers.

B. Yurtalan: *There has been a constant struggle between Shiites and Salafis. Do you see Salafism as a threat to Shiites and Muslims in general? Or how do you consider Salafism?*

A. Sachedina: Salafism is cancerous disease which will ultimately ruin the ethical and spiritual fabric of the Umma. Let me be clear that “salafīyya” were truly respectful of the Early Muslim leaders (the Sahaba and the Ahlul-Bayt). But, unfortunately, the Wahhabi-Salafi connection has been disastrous. May Allah protect us all from this ailment amin!

B. Yurtalan: *What would you say about academic studies on Shi’a? How do you consider the studies about Shi’a in the academia of West?*

A. Sachedina: Academic studies of Shi’ism (I would say of all Islamic studies) is very much dependent upon who teaches these and

with sort of ideological and political bent. There is a need for methodological approach to the classical sources that are plentiful today. There is a need to recognize the comprehensive and complex nature of the subject matter. Without developing a keen sense of history, theology, law, ethics and philosophy of Shi'ite Islam, it is hard to see any major changes that would occur in the approach to "minority" studies.

B. Yurtalan: *How do you consider the works of Shi'ite scholars about Sunnism and the works of Sunni scholars about Shi'ism? Could you make a comparison?*

A. Sachedina: It all depends how well these scholars are trained in both the traditions. I doubt if polemical attitude will ever disappear in both scholars to give due credit to what it means to be a Sunni or a Shi'i.

B. Yurtalan: *After your Shi'ite studies, you have concentrated on subjects related to law and ethics. Can we talk about your interest in these issues?*

A. Sachedina: I studied classical period of Islam and classical sources that trained me to be fully cognizant of the variety of books on variety of the topics in Islamic studies. I could have continued to do that for the rest of my life. However, for me there has always been a question about application of the classical ideas to derive practical aspects of religion for humanity. This was possible only if I shifted my attention to the modern period of Islam where I saw the opportunity to develop that aspect of my studies. Could there be anything better than law and ethics to attain that goal?

B. Yurtalan: *We have talked about Imamiyya. Before concluding this interview, I would like to ask your opinion on the current situation of Isma'ili thought.*

A. Sachedina: In my assessment, Ismailism needs to develop more serious research on its origins than it has been able to do at this time. The problem is one of methodology that can be applied to assert with confidence the outline of the movement that started in the eighth century. Ismailism is very much entangled in establishing its Islamic credentials and consequently has failed to render its essential contributions in the area of intellectual studies of Shi'ism. Much of the work produced by the "insiders" is apologetic (see: Daftari's imaginative history of Ismailism); or, weakly conceptualized on issues that are relevant to all studies about Islam as a "religion" and not only as a "civilization", with an inherent shortfall in assessing the spirituality and morality that grows out of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Ahlul-Bayt. Ismailism has intentionally kept away from the religious aspects of the movement and insisted upon an antinomian (secular) identity of

Tariqa-based ritualistic religiosity. In my opinion, it has a lot to offer if it can courageously appropriate the intellectual and spiritual aspects of rich Shi'ite tradition. The recently published literature by the "insiders" is engaged in "self-glorification" and "false" appropriation of the scholarly minds like Ibn Sina, Nasiruddin Tusi, and others to the Ismaili claim of "authenticity."