

Antoine Bara: You Shi'a do not appreciate the value of Imam Hussein!

The writer caused a row by confirming that Jesus prophesised the appearance of Imam Hussein. He argues that "I am a Christian but call on humanity to follow the holiness of Imam Hussein as he is the conscience of all religions."

 **From Al-Minbar Media Establishment**

As we headed for the meeting, we did not expect it to be an appointment with someone who considers himself Shi'a even though he is Christian! What we know about him is that he is a thinker, scholar, Christian and Syrian who wrote a book titled 'Imam Hussein in Christian Ideology' which raised controversy because it confirms that the Christ (Peace be upon him) prophesised the appearance of Imam Hussein.

In a meeting which lasted more than three hours, Antoine Bara never mentioned Imam Hussein without saying peace be upon him after his name. Bara maintains that Imam Hussein is not exclusive to Shi'a or Muslims but belongs to the whole world because he is the "conscience of religions" as Bara puts it. It is interesting that Bara considers that being a Shi'a is "the highest degree of love for God". According to Bara, any one in the world, regardless of his religion, can be a Shi'a depending on his own personal interpretation "due to the greatness of following the pure family (Peace be upon them) in order to preserve the beauty of his religion".

Bara, however, chastises the Shi'a, saying, "You, Shi'a and Muslims, do not know the value of Imam Hussein. You are supposed to be absolutely honest in conveying his words on the day of Ashura to the world. This mission requires not only narrating the surface meaning of the event but also to coming to grips with aspects and spirit of his revolution".

As Mr Bara uttered these words during the meeting, we remembered how we squandered the heritage of our great Imam and how negligent we are in furthering his cause. This can be revealed today through telling the truth, defending the oppressed and raising the banners of justice and freedom.

Mr Bara spoke of the circumstances which led him to get to know the character of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him), starting with his meeting with the Grand religious leader Imam Al-Shirazi in the early seventies who enthused him to write his valuable book, and ending with the troubles, difficulties and fights he faced from those who did not like the book. However, he said, "Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) will show kindness towards me on the day of judgement". Here is the text of the interview.

Q1: What is the story behind your book "Hussein in Christian Ideology"?

A: In the beginning, I did not know about the brutal incident of Karbala except some general facts such as Imam Al-Hussein's (Peace be upon him) revolt against Yazid and his murder in Karbala. This is because during our education, this incident was referred to without any detail. When I met with Imam Al-Shirazi in Kuwait, more than forty years ago, he gave me some books about Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him). I read these books and discovered they

contained a unique heroic story. I was also surprised that such a story did not generate much interest from Muslim scholars. A non-Shi'a Muslim speaks about the event as if it were merely a historical one. This is because of the prevalent view of the society in which he lives and in order not to go against his environment and culture. On the other hand, this event has emotional significance for a Shi'a Muslim. As for Orientalists, their writings only present a materialistic outlook which ignores the spiritual and social dimensions of the revolution.

All of this motivated me to note down remarks about this revolution and the character of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him). My point of view is perhaps the most neutral and objective despite all other religious and emotional considerations. I am a Christian writer and researcher who lives in Muslim country and has been exposed to Muslim culture from the same sources, which has caused my cultural and social identity to be a Muslim one even though I am Christian. This has made my awareness and understanding of the cause of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) complete. As a matter of fact, I did not have the intention to write about this topic. However, I used to visit Imam Al-Shirazi in Kuwait with my friend Azhar Al-Khafagi. While talking one time, I said that due to the nature of my journalistic work I have written down notes on Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him). Imam Al-Shirazi said to me, "why don't you collect these notes in a book?" "I will think about it", I said. The idea fermented in my head, so I went to my office, collected the notes that I had written, which now seemed a lot, and started to do more research. As you know once a researcher starts research, he never finishes. As I got deeper, the research became more difficult and I found myself caught in a minefield of sensitivities. You might adopt an opinion which pleases some but not others, let alone the fact that as a Christian, I should keep away from research, like this, which belongs to Muslims.

However, I continued my research as I thought we, as Christians, should have a balanced view different to that of Muslims, with regard to the issue of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him). I reveal no secret by saying that throughout the writing process, I felt a special moral inspiration pushing me to continue researching, editing and writing, however difficult this was due to different considerations.

I have tried to cover all aspects through a lot of explanation and analysis of different sides and dimensions. I have also attempted to answer a lot of questions which relate to the revolution and the character of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him): why did this battle take place and was it for a worldly purpose? Why did Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) seek martyrdom? What is the secret behind his words and his screams? Why did he take women and children with him? This has extended the period of writing the book to more than five years, two of which were fully devoted to writing. Even though

I was not married at the time, it took me that long to write the book. This seemed a long time for me since none of my other works had taken more than two years to complete.

As soon as I finished the book, which I had changed and revised time and again, I sent it to Imam Al-Shirazi. He read the book and liked it and said literally, "Print it immediately". I told him that I will do so as long as he writes an introduction to the book and he agreed. I talked to Mr Baqir Khureibit, editor of 'Sawt Al-Khaleej' magazine which I worked for, who agreed to print the book; hence the book was published.

It is noteworthy here that as soon as the book was published, Imam Al-Shirazi asked me for 20 copies and wanted to pay for them. I said, "How can I accept your money when it is thanks to you that I have written this book?" He said: "I want to help you. And if you do not accept the money, I will not take the copies". In fact I was very embarrassed and due to Imam's insistence, I had to agree.

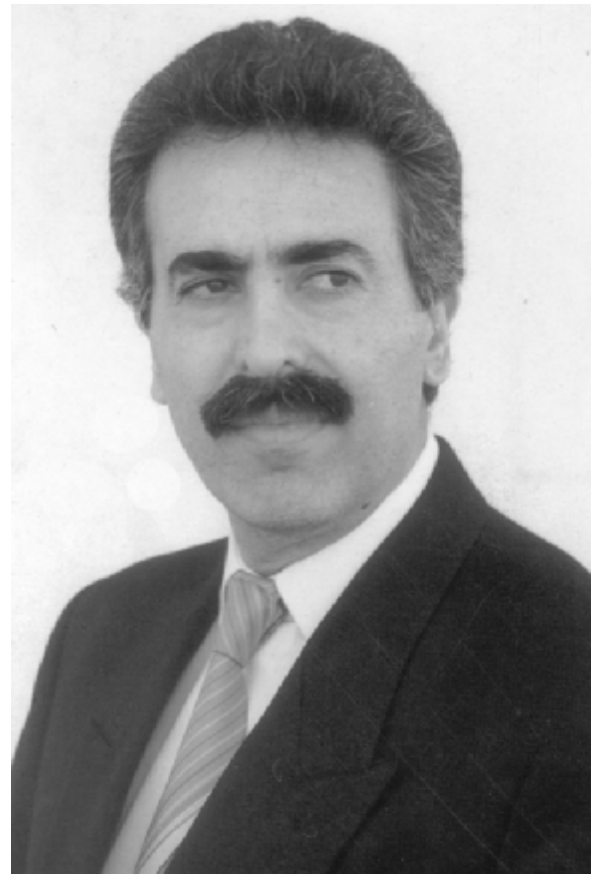
Q2: Did your book not provoke counter reactions?

A: Of course it raised many reactions; more than you can imagine. It is true that the Shi'a in particular and Muslims in general accepted the book and I know many who consider it the best book written on Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him), but some Muslims and Christians objected to it. For example, they said, "he is Christian, how can he be a supporter of the Prophet's family?"

I recall that someone in Beirut published a book containing a response to my book. However, the book's handling of the case was very poor and superficial. The writer endeavoured to prove that the case of Imam Hussein was only a historic incident related to the struggle for power. On the other hand, a doctorate thesis was written on the book and submitted to one of the Lebanese universities. Also someone from the University of Lahore in Pakistan, named Mushtaq Assad, asked for permission to translate the book into Urdu. I immediately agreed. He was surprised since I did not ask for a share of the profits. I said "I did not write this book for profit, but because of my belief in Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him)".

Also an Iraqi doctor, called Ridha Rasheed, came from Austria, to ask to translate the book into Austrian and Russian. I also agreed. Thanks be to God, the book has been translated into seventeen languages. This is only thanks to the grace of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him).

Ten years after the publication of the book, I was surprised to be summoned to Kuwait, where I used to work, to be investigated. I was accused of being against the Muslims' Caliphs! On appearing at the court, I knew that the case was filed by the Kuwaiti government. They objected to a sentence in the book describing Othman bin Afan's government policy as corrupt and this policy being the reason behind giving more authority to the Umayyads. I defended the use of the statement in



Antoine Bara

court by explaining that I took it from Muslim books. I also named some of these books which are widely circulated and available in the country's public central library. Addressing the judge I said: "You left more than 499 pages which praise figures of Islam starting with the Prophet, and then Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Hussein (Peace be upon them) and hold onto this one page which you claim is against Othman! In short, the court judged that I pay a fine of fifty Kuwait Dinars and it confiscated and banned the book, even though the book has been approved more than three times for inclusion in the electronic catalogue of the book fair and, as you know, the book gets read every time before inclusion.

Q3: Was the writing of the book an interpretation of a special feeling you had or pure scholarly research?

A: It was both. In the beginning, writing the book had a scholarly purpose but as I got deeper and expanded on the historicity of the topic, a feeling of the greatness of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) grew in me. This character sacrificed himself for religion and principles and to preserve Muslims from deviating from the path of Islam to ensure the continuity of the message and passing it over from one generation to the other. Had he not sacrificed himself in this highly

emotional way, this strong effect on people, which preserved the religion of Islam, could not have been felt. The proof is what happened when the prisoners of war were returned to Damascus; Sunnis, Shi'a and Christians threw stones at the soldiers because they were emotionally affected. The same also happened in Homs where people beat up the soldiers and deprived them of water because they deprived the pure family of the Prophet (Peace be upon them) of water.

Indeed human principles were generated by the Ashura revolution. This is what pushed me to continue writing the book which only gave me fatigue and troubles without any other personal benefits except for the blessing of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him). By blessing I mean the fact that the book was printed more than twenty times, only three of them by me. Many bodies have printed the book without my permission but I do not mind because I do not consider the book to be my personal property, on the contrary it belongs to all humanity the same way that Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) belongs to all humanity.

Q4: After this in depth study of the history of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) you must have arrived at a definite description of his character, who is he in your view?

A: My own description of Imam

Hussein (Peace be upon him) is that he is “the conscience of religions”. Had it not been for him, all divine religions would not have continued to exist. Islam started with Muhammad, and continued with Imam Hussein, and Zaynab (Peace be upon them) being the scream which completed the march of Jihad and the preserving of Islam.

God wanted to preserve this new religion that is why He sent Imam Hussein to his grandfather as a martyr but not as a prophet. Karbala was a turning point. Had Imam Hussein not carried out his revolution, the concept of monotheism would not have continued to exist and the new religion of Islam would have become tied to the practices of the rulers whose societies would have accepted and surrendered to their oppression under any circumstances because they were the rulers.

I believe that Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) was commanded by God to follow this path because he had a specific divine mission, the same way that prophets had a specific divine mission. Unfortunately, even though Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) is a holy character to you Muslims and Shi’a, you do not recognise his value and you have neglected his heritage and revolution. Today you must know how to support this great Imam by saying the truth, helping the oppressed, reforming society and achieving justice and freedom. You are supposed to be absolutely honest in delivering his scream on the day of Ashura to the world. This task requires you to get to study thoroughly the dimensions of his revolution. It is not enough to narrate and describe the outward aspect of the tragedy to the world.

Q5: The chapter in which you said that Christ (Peace be upon him) prophesied the appearance of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) was like a bomb! It was the most controversial chapter in the book...can you shed more light on this?

A: Of course this chapter looks widely into the meaning of the word ‘Comforter’ which appears in the Bible. Before I explain what it means I would like to confirm that the Bible mentions Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him and his pure family) as well as Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him). This prophesies come in the context of talking about the one true religion which, in my view, is Islam. Christ (Peace be upon him) spoke of the appearance of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) in the gospel of John by saying: “But now I go My way to Him that sent Me, and none of you asketh Me, ‘Whither goest Thou?’ But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is expedient for you that I go away, for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send Him unto you. And when He is come, He will reprove the world concerning sin, and concerning righteousness, and concerning judgment” (John, 16:5-8). Some Christians have explained the word ‘Comforter’ as the Holy Spirit. But having researched its meaning, I do not think this meaning applies to it at all. So, I looked at the other two explanations; that this is either referring to Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him and his pure family) or referring to Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him). After more research, I realised that Christ (Peace be upon him) could not have sent a prophet like himself but it was possible that he sent a martyr to humanity which means that it is definitely Imam Hussein who is



Photograph: Peter Marshall.

being referred to in the above quote from the Bible.

I have discussed this fact in detail in the book and I do not want to repeat myself here but in the third edition of the book, I added an introduction in which I included more proof of Jesus’ prophesy about Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him). It is there in the third edition for those who want to refer to it.

I would like to point out here that at that time, and after publishing the book, I met with a Christian priest in Lebanon who said to me “I have heard for a long time that Christ prophesied the appearance of a martyr, but I didn’t know who he was. When I read your book, I was convinced by its sound analysis. Imam Hussein is undoubtedly the martyr that Christ spoke of.”

I believe we all have to get rid of extremism and acknowledge the facts which include Christ’s (Peace be upon him) prophesy of Prophet Muhammad and his family (Peace be upon them). We also have to believe that the Islamic story about Christ’s ascent to heaven is more accurate than the Christian story of crucifixion and resurrection. Anyway, Christ and all other prophets including the seal of prophets, Muhammad (Peace be upon him and his pure family), and also Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Hussein (Peace be upon them) all follow the same path, calling for the same religion of monotheism, for worshipping only one God.

Q6: In this context, you said in your book that if Imam Hussein was one of us we would have put up a flag and a minaret for him in every part of the earth and we would have called the people to Christianity in the name of Imam Hussein. How is that possible?

A: These are not my own words. These are the words of a priest who lived at the time of Imam Hussein’s martyrdom. These are natural words that reveal how you Shi’a and Muslims do not recognise the value of your Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him)!

We had the hoof of Christ’s donkey and we used to make pilgrimage to it while you have the grave of Imam Hussein, his relics, blessings,

heritage, but you have not made use of them in a way that frees the world from its tragedies by turning to Imam Hussein. If Imam Hussein was one of us, we would have built him a beacon on every part of the world for he is not a stage in life but the march of human freedom. He is a permanent principle. However, many Muslims have not yet discovered the secret of Imam Hussein’s (Peace be upon him) revolution and its effect on people’s souls.

Q7: This statement raises many questions. How come you are Christian and at the same time confirm that Islam is the true religion and that Christ prophesied the appearance of Prophet Muhammad and his grandson Imam Hussein (Peace be upon them). Explain to us how you understand the terms Christianity, Islam, Shi’ism?

A: Christianity is one of the stages of the one total religion which has come after Judaism and preceded Islam. Islam is the religion that complements all religions. Since Judaism was theoretical and Christianity was purely spiritual, Islam came to mend these shortcomings. In the end, we are all Muslims because we all believe in the one God, the Torah, the Bible and the Quran.

Shi’ism is the highest degree of the love of God. It is a natural state for all

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who love the family of the Prophet (Peace be upon him and his pure family), who are the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali (Peace be upon them). Shi’ism is the pride of humanity. Any one in the world can be a Shi’a by virtue of the greatness of following the pure family of the Prophet (Peace be upon them) in order to preserve the beauty of his faith.

Q8: What attracted you most in the character of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) and which of his words and sayings are closest to you?

A: I was attracted to his extreme modesty even though he was a great holy figure. Among his words and screams on the day of Ashura which most moved me were “Is there any supporter to stand by us? Is there any ally to rescue us?” I always remembered these words because they describe how ungrateful people can be to those sent by God and how people get involved in pursuing their personal interests and ignore the principles and values advocated by religions.

With pangs of conscience, revolutions, including Al-Tawabeen, started. Unfortunately this was after the death of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him). How much loss has all humanity suffered because they betrayed him and did not stand by him (Peace be upon him).

Q9: What is your view of the ritual gatherings held by Shi’a every year to remember Imam Hussein?

A: I consider them a model for remembering the Al-Taf tragedy where pangs of conscience return and, in turn, faith is re-born in souls via supporting the continuity of the cause of Imam Hussein.

Q10: how do you honestly perceive the Shi’a rituals practised in these gatherings such as slapping, blood shedding, mourning, and the like?

A: I think they contribute much in reactivating the memory and conscience since you enact the event without hurting the others. This leaves you with the holy relic of faith throughout your life. When you slap your body, you punish it morally for

not being there at the time of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him). It also means that you are ready to sacrifice yourself and everything you have to join the march of Imam Hussein.

As for the blood-shedding rituals, I believe it is a symbolic message stating that you are prepared to sacrifice your blood for Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) which is truly a great and effective message.

Q11: What is the message that you want to convey to the followers of Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him)?

A: As I have said earlier, you have to be absolutely honest in delivering the great message and story of Imam Hussein to the world. This task requires you to have a deep and realistic understanding of the spirit of his movement. This will make humanity adopt the message and employ it in rejecting oppression. The annual anniversary of Karbala should not pass just like that. It is true that your rituals in Imam Hussein centres have acquainted the world with Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) and his story. However, Muslim scholars are negligent because they have not understood and conveyed the message properly.

They have to deliver the story of the revolution to all parts of the globe as there are people who cannot understand the revolution correctly with their limited mentality. I think the West would follow Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) if they knew about the noble purposes of his revolution.

Q12: Do you believe that Imam Hussein will be on your side in the day of judgement?

A: Yes, my master Imam Hussein (Peace be upon him) will be kind to me on the Day when all cannot help because he knows how much I have suffered to bring this book out and all the difficulties and troubles I have been through, for his sake without seeking any benefit or personal interests. I hope my words will echo in the hearts of people. I call on humanity to be guided by the holiness of Imam Hussein and to take him as a beacon to follow in one’s private and public life.