

Interview

Interview¹ mit Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā an-Nīnowī

Eingeleitet von Bacem Dziri

Einleitung

Sayyid Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā an-Nīnowī (geb. 1966) ist ein syrischer Gelehrter, der eine klassische Ausbildung genossen hat und derzeit in den USA lebt und lehrt. In Atlanta (Georgia) leitet er das von ihm im Jahr 2012 gegründete Madina Institute, welches Zweigstellen in unterschiedlichen Kontinenten des englischsprachigen Sprachraums unterhält.

In diesem Interview erläutert an-Nīnowī zunächst die grundsätzlichen Prämissen und Verfahrensweisen einer Islamischen Theologie aus seiner Sicht, woran sich auch das Grundprofil dieses Gelehrten erkennen lässt. Ferner spricht er sich dafür aus, die islamwissenschaftlichen Studien kritisch zu rezipieren, da er in ihnen eine Relevanz für eine mögliche Neuformulierung der Islamischen Theologie sieht. Im Curriculum des Madina Instituts sind entsprechend islamwissenschaftliche Werke Teil der Lehre. Der Großteil des Interviews dreht sich allerdings um sein Verständnis der frühislamischen Auseinandersetzungen (*fitna*). Hierzu herrschte vor einigen Jahren in diversen englischsprachigen Foren eine Kontroverse über die Zulässigkeit und Korrektheit seines Zugangs zu diesem Thema. An-Nīnowī – wohlgerne selbst ein Alide aus der Linie Mūsā al-Kāzims (gest. 183/799) und seines Enkels Ibrāhīm al-Mujābs (gest. ca. 200/815); letzterer ist im gleichen Schrein begraben wie sein Vorfahre al-Ḥusayn in Karbalā' – positioniert sich in diesem Interview abermals zur frühen *fitna*, allerdings erstmals und ausführlich im deutschsprachigen Raum, wo er bisher kaum rezipiert wurde. Beim Transkribieren und Lektorieren dieses Interviews bemühte sich die Redaktion der HIKMA darum, die gesprochenen Äußerungen des Interviewers und Interviewten im Rahmen einer adäquaten Syntax wortgetreu widerzugeben.

1 Dieses Interview mit Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā an-Nīnowī führte Bacem Dziri, M.A., wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter am Institut für Islamische Theologie der Universität Osnabrück sowie am Institut für Studien der Religion und Kultur des Islam an der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, am 13.9.2017 in Form einer Online-Konversation.

Hikma: (*basmla*) What do you think are our priorities for contemporary Islamic theology and how could one determine these priorities?

Muhammad b. Yahyā an-Ninowī: (*basmla*) From a purely academic point of view, I think it is important to look at Islamic theology, first of all, from the text, meaning, from its origin based on the question of what is the source of Islamic theology? And the source of Islamic theology, that is agreed upon by everybody, is the Qur'ān. So, that must be put as a standard first, not only as a standard but also as a validation for anything else that may be attributed to Islam. In order to demonstrate the meaning behind this, you see various Muslim groups agree about what is prophetic, what did the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – do, as in terms of what the prophetic Sunnah is. Now, most Muslims probably agree about ninety-five percent and I do not have correct statistics, but I am just making a general statement, because they agree on having mostly everything except some political *aḥādīṭ* and some very, very, few *aḥādīṭ*. When calculating this in percentage it would definitely be less than two or three percent. I am just throwing that number again. As a result, there is consensus among all Muslims that the major issues are prophetic and what I am trying to say is I need to establish a validation point for theology.

From a safe point of faith, we need to look at the Qur'ān first, as the source document and then as the validating document for anything else that says: “Islam says”, because the only one that can truly speak on behalf of Islam is the God of Islam, obviously Allah, and also the Prophet of Islam, if the attribution is authentic to the Prophet. Now, with that I think we can start with having a raw base. I also stipulate that anything attributed to the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – himself must be in concordance and in conformity with the Qur'ān. The reason for that is, because the Prophet does not have the power to legislate. The Prophet *explains* legislation. So, it cannot be different from that perspective.

Now, if we look at the Qur'ān then, alright, we can discuss it: Now looking at the Qur'ān, and that is what Islam is to me, because the reason I am saying that is, it is unfair to go to, let us say a writing, an author who was living in the times of, let us say two/three hundred years after Islam, four hundred years after the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – passed away and say: “Well, this is what Islam says”. That is not a proper approach, because the question is who speaks on behalf of Islam? Again, who speaks on behalf of Islam is the Qur'ān. That is one, and that is what is *authentically* related to its Prophet as long as it does not contradict to the Qur'ān. Once I have that, I think I have the material from an Islamic theology. Now we can look at this Islamic theology from the scripture and from what is attributed to the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – authentically, from a few points of views. Number one: the Muslim point

of view, in general, and I do not really care about the different theological groups within Muslims, meaning, Sunni, Schii, Khawārij, Mu‘tazila, etc., because the majority of the disagreements between them are about political issues and the theological disagreements are not that many. There are few and many of them are semantics.

So, we can look at it from how Muslim theologians look at it or we can look at it by just going directly to the scripture and making whatever we want out of it. So, I think it is important how we look at it. For example, when we look at what Joseph Schacht did, for example, with his “Muhammedan Jurisprudence”, we need to *understand* how he came about his conclusions and also where are the gaps, where are the deficiencies and where are the inconsistencies in *his* assumptions from a traditional Muslim theological point of view and try to – in an academic neutral environment – try to see where the truth is and where it is not. And again, you see that in Juynboll, for example, when he went and tried to substantiate what Schacht had said. You see that in Motzki, you see in many of them where they, obviously, try to go and make some sense.

But, obviously, I feel that within Islamic theology, specifically, there is a confounding effect where you bring what is in the Qur’ān and you bring something else that someone attributed two/three hundred years after the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – and you make them equal in validity as a text. Obviously, there is a problem in that, because then that becomes very selective and what is attributed to the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – two-three hundred years after he passed away is so much that Muslim theologians *had* to go and figure out how do we yield, take out and remove weak and forged *aḥādīṭ*, and lies, etc. So, that is where we stand.

Hikma: So, thank you for this answer. How should we deal with this and what should we do with this, what you have called, “political *aḥādīṭ*”? For example, there is a controversy about the *ḥadīṭ al-thaqalayn* and the question if „Qur’ān and Sunnah“ is the true version, the right way to live islamically, according to the Prophet. I think your point of view is rather critical in this regard. How should we deal with what you have called “political *aḥādīṭ*”?

Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā an-Ninowī: Alright, what I mean by political is not just political per se. What political is, where the *Ummah* disagreed, where Muslims disagreed was about political succession. Political succession was the biggest issue where people disagreed on and that is basically what the fight was about. It circled around questions, such as: Who is the legitimate leader? Is the leader textual, meaning, did the creator, did Allah himself appoint a leader? Did the Prophet appoint a leader?

What I believe from my *istiqrā'* – and *istiqrā'* is based on the meaning that I allege and I claim that through comprehensive reading of the texts, basically first the Qur'ān then the authentic prophetic Sunnah – now I am not going to what scholars have said, they have said whatever they said, may Allah bless them all. However, based on the prophetic Sunnah and the Qur'ān, I perceive that the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – first did not appoint a leader, meaning, a political successor after him. We have a few notions or few narrations attesting to good virtues and the good qualities of this Ṣaḥābi or that Ṣaḥābi, etc.

At the time, these were taken as an indication to say that the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – meant that Abū Bakr – *raḍīya-llāhu 'anh* – is the *khalīfa*, while others said: “No, maybe it should have been ‘Alī.” That was the early difference. These *aḥādīth*, we do not really have them (...). Another point is that I do not believe that the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – came to build a political state per se. The reason for that is very simple. He did not leave us a Prophet by which we – number one – know who is the political leader after him? Number two: Who gets to be a political leader, meaning, who gets to be the *khalīfa*? What are the conditions that the *khalīfa* must have from the Qur'ān and the Sunnah? I am not talking about scholars; scholars have written about that. However, the Qur'ān and the authentic prophetic Sunnah, what are the conditions, that must be available in someone, so he can be eligible to be a *candidate* for the *khalīfa*. Is a *khalīfa*, the political leader *appointed*, *elected* or *selected*? Because we also have, for example, Sayyidunā Abū Bakr – *raḍīya-llāhu 'anh* –, who was selected first by three or by two and then by a group and that was made publicly the next day. Then we have Sayyidunā 'Umar, who was *appointed* first but then elected afterwards. Then we have Sayyidunā 'Uthmān, who was selected by a group of six people and then we have Sayyidunā 'Alī, who was elected. So, that shows you that the Ṣaḥāba – *raḍīya-llāhu 'anhum* – did *ijtihād* in appointing a leader. The reason that they did *ijtihād* is because they did not have a clear text. If they would have had a clear text then they would not have done that. This tells you that the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – left without giving us a clear plan of who is allowed to become a *khalīfa* or a political successor or political leader and what the conditions would be. Additional questions arise, such as when would he be revoked or removed, are there term limits to him, etc.? All of these things concern the process of governance and are not mentioned. Accordingly, this demonstrates that the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – came to establish a framework, which was designed for people to learn how to be just, how to be good with each other and then within this framework they can do whatever is good for *them*. They can elect, they can select if that is what they want to do, as long as it meets the public benefit and everyone agrees to it. The Prophet – *ṣallā-*

llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam – himself never forced *anyone* on *anything*. One of the first examples of this is when he came to Medina he did not ask the people there or demand from them that: “I need to make a state here.” He did not enforce that. The people actually *wanted* that, so it was always based on a two-way and not a one-way decision-making process.

With that, I say “Alright, obviously, there are many of these *aḥādīṭ*”. The Shia, for example, say, all of their sects, whether they are referring to the Twelvers, Zaydīs or Ismā‘īlīs or another kind, they say the *ḥadīṭ* “*man kuntu mawlāh fa-‘Aliyyun mawlāh*”, that this *ḥadīṭ* is *mutawātir*, which means undisputedly transmitted. This includes an *indication* that ‘Alī should be the successor after the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – himself. Now, this is disputed by some of the Shia groups themselves, such as the Zaydī-Shia. The Zaydī-Shia, they say: Alright, you are right, it is an indication but it is *ambiguous*. The text is a *naṣṣ khafiy ghair jālī*, it is not *explicit*, and since the text is not *explicit*, this means it is subject to interpretation. Therefore, they gave an excuse to the Saḥāba, that they did not take the text as an indication that ‘Alī was the successor and appointed Abū Bakr instead. They also said that was a mistake, but that is rather an excuse because they did not understand what they should have understood, which is somewhere to work.

As a supporter of the Ahl as-Sunnah perspective, we say: „It was selection then election. All of them were good and every one of these three, four, five Saḥāba, who were very close to the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* –, they all were qualified“. Apparently, the circumstances back then led to Sayyiduna Abū Bakr – *raḍīya-llāhu ‘anh* – becoming the *khalīfa* and ‘Alī eventually gave him *bay‘a*, which means even if he did not agree to it at the beginning, in the end it did lead to a consensus and limited legitimization from those who believe that ‘Alī represents legitimacy.

Now, we have *aḥādīṭ* that as, what you mentioned the *ḥadīṭ al-thaqalayn* versus the: „I left you the book and the Sunnah“. The one, the *ḥadīṭ* that: „I left you the book and my Sunnah“ is narrated through five different chains. One of them has absolutely no *sanad*, which is stated in the “*Muwaṭṭa’*” from Imām Mālik – *raḥimahu-llahu ta‘āla* – and its *balāgh*. He brought it as *balāgh*, *wa-balaghanī annahu*, without any *sanad*. We do not know who told Imām Mālik this, we do not know anything about the chain. Regarding *asānīd al-Muwaṭṭa’ al-marfū‘ minhā*, the one that is *marfū‘* they are all *saḥīḥ*, but if it is not *marfū‘* we have no idea who told Imām Mālik this, so we cannot make a judgment on the *ḥadīṭ* without knowing where it is, because it could be *mursal*, it could be anything.

Anyway, Imām Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr tried in his “*Tamhīd*” to *connect* them, to connect these *aḥādīṭ*, these four *balāghāt* from “*al-Muwaṭṭa’*”. He tried to connect this specific *ḥadīṭ* and raised the awareness of four different

chains. All of these four different chains are entirely weak. So, therefore, it makes the *ḥadīṭ* weak, that is it. The meaning behind it is that to this day there is no authentic *sanad* to the *ḥadīṭ*: „I left you the book and my Sunnah“. However, in “*Saḥīḥ Imām Muslim*”, *ḥadīṭ* Zayd b. Arqam and also in “*Gāmi‘ Imām at-Tirmidhī*” that has an authentic *sanad*, the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – is telling us that: „I left you two things. If you hold onto them you will not be misguided after me“, *ḥadīṭ* Zayd b. Arqam: “*udhakhirukum Allāha bi ahli-baytī*” three times. In this statement, he mentions the Qur’ān and the household.

Now, this becomes an issue for a couple of reasons. Number one: Does it mean that the Sunnah does not matter, but the household matters? And number two: Who are the households? Well, first of all, obviously, mandating the prophetic Sunnah is in the Qur’ān. It requires no additional mandate. Allah – *subḥānahū wa-ta‘āla* – himself tells you in the Qur’ān: “*wa-mā ātākum ar-rasūlu fa-ḥuḍūh, wa mā nahākum ‘anhu fantahū*”. He tells you in the Qur’ān: “*aṭī‘u llāha wa-aṭī‘u r-rasūl*”. There is another spot in the Qur’ān, where he tells you: “*mā kāna li-mu‘minin aw li-mu‘minatīn idā qaḍā llāhu wa-rasūluhu amran an yakūna lahumu l-ḥiyaratu min amrihim*”. These make it evident that there is no way “*laqad kāna lakum fī rasūli llāhi uswatan ḥasana*”, we can go on and on and mention several more similar spots in the whole book. The Qur’ān emphasizes the whole point of the absolute leadership of the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* –, as a role model and that means his Sunnah is absolutely prioritized as the only legitimate validating saying that explain the Qur’ān, nothing else, and not following him would be deviating from the Qur’ān itself. So, there is no need to reemphasize it. In essence, especially, when I have an authentic one and I favor a weak one over an authentic one, this raises a problem. Therefore, the authentic *ḥadīṭ* remains as being *al-kitāb wa-l-‘itra*, which really means *al kitāb*, the Sunnah, then the *‘itra*. The reason is because the *kitāb* mandates the Sunnah.

Consequently, we come to the other bigger question that refers to the *‘itra*. Who is the *‘itra* that the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* – is telling us about in the authentic *ḥadīṭ* that says if we hold onto them we will never be misguided after him? Does this apply to someone who claims to belong to his blood lineage from fourteen hundred years ago? Well, we have to look at who the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* – identified as being the *‘itra* or *ahl al-bayt* and with that he is actually referring to himself. In this case, we only have one *ḥadīṭ*, precisely *ḥadīṭ* as-Sayyida ‘Ā’īsa in “*Saḥīḥ Muslim*” and *ḥadīṭ* “Umm Salama”, which represent the same *ḥadīṭ*. In “*Musnad Aḥmad*”, Umm Salama describes the emergence of the following *aya*: “*innama yurīdu llāhu li-yuḍhiba ‘ankum ar-riḡsa ahla al-bayti wa yuṭahirakum taḥīra*” in the *Surah al-Aḥzāb*, that the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – brought a cloak – and the *ḥadīṭ*

of Sayyid ‘Ā’iṣā is in “*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*” – but this one is a longer version of it, so it explains it. In this one, she said that he cloaked himself, ‘Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥassan and Hussain and said: “*Allāhumma hā’ulā’i ahlu-baytī fa-dhab ‘anhumu r-riḡsa wa-ṭahhirhum taḥtira*” (yā Allah, those are my house, my *ahl al-bayt*). This example demonstrates a perfect prophetic definition of who is considered and who belongs to *ahl al-bayt*. Accordingly, that prophetic definition points out to five individuals who are *ahl al-bayt*. He does not tell you that their offspring are not *ahl al-bayt*, but he told you who these five *are*. With that, I have something that is textual, that is *ṣaḥīḥ*.

Then there is another *ḥadīṭ* that I would like to discuss. It is the *ḥadīṭ* of Zayd b Arqam in “*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*” when he was asked: “*man ahlu baytīhi?*” That is the wording of “*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*”: “*azwāḡuhu min ahli-baytīhi?*” They asked him: “are his wives from his household?” Zayd b. Arqam answered: “No, his wives are not from his household, but his household consists of those who are deprived from *ṣadaqa* after him”. This example provides another clear explanation that there is a primary group existing few circles, which we refer to as *ahl al-bayt* or the *‘itra*: The one that the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* – himself designated by his own words and there is no other *ḥadīṭ* identifying who *ahl al-bayt* are by the – Prophet *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* –, except that one, nothing else. And then there is the *ṣiyāq* or the *context* of the *āya* of “*Surat al-Aḥzāb*”. The context of the *āya* in the “*Surat al-Aḥzāb*” was talking about *yā nisā’ an-nabī* and should not be ignored. This means the honourable wives are to be *included*. Their inclusion does not necessarily have to be to the first circle, the very first designation, however, the prophetic designation does not include them, but maybe in a more general context of the *āya* this should be the case since the wives of the men belong to his household as well. Sure, Zayd b. Arqam mentioned that if someone is divorced, she is no longer a part of his household, but his household is always his household, fair. That is a primary designation, second. The third designation is also recognized and described by Sayyidunā Zayd b. Arqam in “*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*”, where he said: “His family are those who are deprived from *ṣadaqa* after him” and when he was asked: “Who are they?”, he replied with: “The offspring of ‘Alī, the offspring of ‘Aqīl, the offspring of Ja‘far and the offspring of al-‘Abbās.” So, now we have these three circles and surely we can tell that the offspring of ‘Alī, all of them, or the offspring of Ja‘far or ‘Abbās or ‘Aqīl, not all of them were educated by the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*. Not all of them were nourished by the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – directly, even though they are maybe his grandchildren up until today. We know, that the prize of the Prophet himself – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – designated as my: “yā Allāh, these are my *ahl al-bayt*, so, yā Allāh, purify them” and all

of this, we know they were all his students. They were all copies of him in one way or another. He mentioned that in fact. He mentioned ‘Alī in an authentic *hadith* by saying: “‘*Aliyun minnī wa-anā min ‘Alī*”, which means “‘Alī is from me and I am from ‘Alī”. He mentioned “‘*Fāṭima minnī*” (Fāṭima is a piece of me). He also mentioned “‘*Ḥassanun minnī*”, (al-Ḥassan is from me). In the same manner, he mentioned Ḥussein, “‘*Hussaynun minnī wa-anā min Ḥussayn*” (Ḥussein is from me). So, he mentioned all of them in this way but does not mention this about anybody else. Hence, they must be meant to be part of a special designation, especially, regarding those five individuals is expected to remain consistent. This consistency is also reflected in his statement: “I left you two things, if you hold onto them you will not be misguided. The book, which mandates the Sunnah and the example of those four people after me should be taken as role models because they are mirroring it, for they are consistent with the book and the Sunnah”. Here I would like to emphasize that he is not doing that to tell you that these four – ‘Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn – are a legislating body that can legislate. No, on the contrary, because he himself – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – does not legislate. The only one who legislates law is Allāh – *subḥānahu wa-ta‘āla*. He, the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – explains the law and those four individuals were a product of the *tarbiya*, the education of the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*, so in this sense they mirror his understanding of it. And maybe he said that because they get to live long after him. Maybe you can say: “Why didn’t he say that about other people?” Well, first of all, maybe because he educated them himself. Second, because they belonged to the prophetic household, they grew up in the same household, where Jibrīl and the other angels used to come and spend time there. And thirdly, because there was such a major focus on them since their father Sayyidunā ‘Alī is the one who accompanied the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – the longest. And also Hussein got to live to the age of sixty-one. That is long, that is fifty years after the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – passed away. Hence, many wisdoms exist. Maybe we do not know all of them but the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – designated those people as examples to point towards the Sunnah and from the Sunnah to the book. In the same manner that is reflected in his words: “And if we hold onto them we will never be misguided”.

Hikma: Thank you. So, you yourself are a descendent of Sayyidunā al-Ḥusayn from the line of Mūsā al-Kāẓim, venerated by Sunnis and Shias and by the Imāmiyya more precisely, as the seventh *Imām*. However, since you apparently perceive yourself as a Sunni, what are your thoughts about when and how this „parting of the ways“ happened between Sunnis and Shias?

Muhammad b. Yahyā an-Ninowī: Well, this is a long story, but let me make it short [...] In the general sense, I believe it means a little bit of everybody, but in a specific sense, I believe they are defined. Those represent the mirror of the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – in a complete manner. Everyone after them we respect and we love them for their relation, but their closeness to *their* great great-grandfather, to Sayyidunā ‘Alī, Ḥassan and Ḥussayn and Fāṭima, their closeness is based on how much they really follow that line and adhere to it. Therefore, I would not say that they themselves are the mirror but I do say those five are the mirror of the Sunnah. The reason I want to say that is because I do not want people to think that anyone who has a blood-relationship to Sayyidunā ‘Alī, for example, or others to say: “I am a mirror of my grandfather“. That is not necessarily true. The mirror of the grandfather, who we know, textually speaking are the five, particularly according to the prophetic text.

Up until the year 36, the year the Battle of Ṣiffīn between ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya took place, Muslims would call themselves Muslims, whether they belonged to a designated group or not. They were not called Sunnah, Shia or Khawārij during the time of the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*. Obviously, this also refers to the time of Sayyidunā Abī Bakr, Sayyidunā ‘Umar, Sayyidunā ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī. Now as a Sunni Muslim, I do not try to evaluate, I understand people in academia evaluate everybody, but I personally take a traditional *Sunni* point of view in not making judgments about people, whoever they are or wherever they are. However, I do perceive it from the point when the first split within the *ummah*, the body of Muslims, occurred. This simultaneously marks the time a different designation word was given, not just Muslim, something else. With this I am pointing out to when the first *sectarianism* started. The first sectarianism started in the year 36 during the Battle of Ṣiffīn, when the Shāmis or the Syrians with Mu‘āwiya raised the Qur’ān on the sword. One third of Sayyidunā ‘Alī’s army were *qurrā’*, who were just memorizers of the Qur’ān and they figured: “Alright, let us stop, let us not fight” since they saw the swords and said: “We will rule by the Qur’ān.” Once Sayyidunā ‘Alī, obviously, agreed to mediation, the third group consisted of the reciters of the Qur’ān – they were not scholars, they were reciters. There is a difference between people who memorize and people who internalize. Those memorizers used to chant it very nicely and memorize it, etc. Anyway, they told him: “If you accept mediating with Mu‘āwiya that means both of you are *kāfir*, not just him. You are also a *kāfir*. You are an unbeliever and he is not a believer as well because you people now are downgrading the book of Allah to the opinions of men.” And Sayyidunā ‘Alī, obviously, answered them and left them after he told them: “I give you three things. I will never stop you from fighting, I will never stop you from getting social welfare from the state and I will never stop you from

going to the *masjid*, you can always go to the *masjid*.” But what they did is they entirely split from the army of Sayyidunā ‘Alī and now they were designated, they exited the army of ‘Alī (*kharaja*) and we Sunnis and Shi- is call them Khawārij because from *kharaja*, those people who exited from ‘Alī’s army and that marks the first split. After this split people started to call themselves all kinds of names, such as the people of *haqq*, the people of *‘adl*, etc. Now, that designation no longer exists. You do not have one *ummah* entirely that says: „everybody is Muslim“, but rather exclusions, such as by saying: “this is *kāfir*, that is *kāfir*”. This reflects the first split that emerged after the year 36.

Surely, as you know, the mediation did not go well, after Sayyidunā ‘Alī’s mediation, still the war was not resolved and both parties, meaning, the people of Sayyidunā ‘Alī were preparing for war, the people of Mu‘āwiya were preparing for war until Sayyidunā ‘Alī was martyred around year 40 of *hiğra*, thirty years after the Prophet – *sallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*. When he was martyred the people, who were behind ‘Alī and those who were supporters of him and knew he was the righteous *khalīfa*, there was a lot of bitter feelings about things, especially, because ‘Alī – *radiya-llahu* – was martyred but Mu‘āwiya was still there. There was a lot of commotion during this time. Then al-Ḥassan took over after his father for approximately six months and he realized that a lot of the people in the army have been bought, strayed away, a lot of people have been deceiving him. Consequently, he made a deal with Mu‘āwiya that was based on the idea of: “Look, as long as you live Mu‘āwiya, you get to be the executive leader. Once you die the executive leadership or the *khalīfa* returns back to me and we stop all wars.” Since al-Ḥassan decided that he wanted to save bloodshed because he figured that it is not worth it, especially, because more and more people who were joining him have been bought. In particular, after one third had left him and Sayyidunā ‘Alī had to fight them and they became what is now known as the Khawārij, the third group of people who left ‘Alī’s army. Now, you are left with two thirds. One third was already bought anyway, so now you are left with one third, the hardcore supporters of Sayyidunā ‘Alī. I would say after al-Ḥassan made a deal a lot of people did not necessarily like the deal, most of all, the hardcore fighters. They did not see the wisdom of Imām Ḥassan to save people from bloodshed. In addition, people who were involved in the battles are always more emotional but al-Ḥassan accepted it and they had to remain silent and maybe not all of them liked it much. Some of them did not like it and they voiced it. So, they figured: „Okay, we will be patient until Mu‘āwiya dies and al-Ḥassan becomes their *khalīfa* again. Except that, mysteriously, al-Ḥassan was killed shortly before Yazīd, the son of Mu‘āwiya, was appointed successor. That really got them winded up and upset. After that many other events followed, such as al-Ḥussayn and the

issue in Karbalā', etc. Apparently, this led to people going to *extremes* because what happened there, at that time and place, was really *extreme*. I also think that this was the time the seed was planted, where a united group of people who used to be amongst the supporters of 'Alī grew apart. However, I do want to mention here, what is really important is that the two thirds or the one third that split from 'Alī's army, the vast majority of them remained as the people who eventually became known as Ahl as-Sunnah. Nevertheless, there is a small minority of them that really took it to heart and refused to recognize anything and then eventually they figured that the only leader amongst us the offspring of 'Alī and that kind of political idea became crystallized as a theological idea. So, they brought a *ḥadīth*, only one orphaned *ḥadīth*, nobody has it but the Twelvers, that Allah appointed twelve political successors, one after the other and if anyone does not believe in any of them then he is not Muslim. Accordingly, this whole thing started to go further and further. After the martyr of Sayyidunā 'Alī overthrew the martyr of Sayyidunā al-Ḥussayn. I think that is the reason that caused the splitting of the Shia, which was first political started to become crystallized, especially, after al-Ḥussayn's martyr in Karbalā' in the year 61, it became crystallized to a credo difference. This occurred, especially, after the killing of Imām al-Ḥussayn and the persecution and even before the persecution of those who loved 'Alī or during the time of al-Ḥassan. Back then it was common sense that you do not persecute anyone who loves 'Alī, but there was persecution and there was slander of 'Alī. All of these factors played a major role into bringing some people together who figured that: "'Alī is your leader and the leaders must be only from his offspring and everyone else is illegitimate, including the first *khulafā'*, did not make a difference to them." That is what they thought and that is how it started.

Hikma: Later on, there was also this so-called *tawwābūn*-movement and in your sermons you have also talked a lot about the tragedy of Karbalā'. At least some Sunnis might not understand its importance or they do not see the necessity of talking about these issues. Why do you think it is important to talk about it and how should this kind of discussion take place?

Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā an-Ninowī: Look, I claim to follow the line of Sufism, so I am a Sufi-Sunni. I think the Sufis have always been within Ahl as-Sunna wa-l-Jamā'a and by saying that I am referring to the Sufis of al-Ghazālī and the al-Junaydī kind of Sufism. The Sufis, who have always expressed their love towards the Ahl al-bayt have always thought that they have not been mentioned but they were actually mentioned a lot. If you look at the poetry of the Sufis, they always talk about the Ahl al-bayt and the Ahl as-sunna, in general, not just the Sufis. The Ahl as-Sunna wa-l-Jamā'a do not

have hate towards Ahl al-bayt. Some of them may not out of fear of giving credence to the Shia groups, who is their competitor even if they may not mention them. Yet, there is no Sunni on the face of the earth who has *hate* towards Ahl al-bayt, at least not in the times we live in today. However, hate did exist in the old days. An example for this is *naṣb* and how they slandered, cursed, fought and killed ‘Alī and his children, including anyone who was with him. Alhamduillah this no longer exists and those people were not actual Sunnis.

Nowadays some Sunnis do not mention [Karbalā] simply due to it being a sensitive matter and also because it is not easy to accept or rather to be reminded of the bloodshed of 60.000 Muslims, among them Ṣaḥābīs and Tābi‘īs, etc. just thirty years after the Prophet passed away. It is not an *easy* event to digest but indeed at the end of the day it is a part of human history. Nobody claims the Ṣaḥāba or Ahl al-bayt as being impalpable – not from a Sunni point of view anyway. All of them are great people, who may make some mistakes and we hope because of their approximate closeness to the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – that Allah will forgive them for what they did and that they would repent before but they did not. Even though, some people do not mention it. I, however, think it is important that we have today’s, open information. In the old days open information was not available. As a consequence, people started to follow whatever they wanted to follow. Yet, today we live in a world, where information is widely accessible and if we do not additionally educate ourselves about the significance of the Ahl as-sunna perspective, it will become a disadvantage for us. I do not have an animosity towards the Shia or even the Khawārij, who cursed ‘Alī and declared him *kāfir*. On the contrary, I believe they are all Muslims despite that I disagree with them and that we have irreconcilable differences with them. The same goes for the Shia but I consider them full-fledged Muslims with all the rights and privileges and I believe that they are excused based on the fallacy they follow. From my point of view, it is a fallacy, it is a false predicament, a false basis that they go by but I believe that false basis may be the excuse for them in that sense and Allah knows best. It is not my job to judge.

Some of them try to avoid that, as I have stated before, because they do not want to give credence instead they think that if they mention that they give credence to the Shia. The truth is if we live in a world where information is open and accessible, the scholars need to understand that people get their information from Google, from Yahoo from anywhere else and they do not really wait for anybody to tell them anything. It is not like the old days anymore. This shows that it is essential to equip the students with knowledge. Maybe this is not a priority, I do not see it as a priority for the seeker, the beginner who should concern themselves with knowing more about Allah – *subḥānahu wa-ta‘ālā*, his Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-*

sallam – and how to love everybody and to not have any hate towards anybody. For the students of knowledge, I think it is very important to understand these details and to be able to navigate safely between all these kind of historical landmines, if I might say, that exist there, so they can understand some of it, not so they can *live* history. A lot of people learn history and they still live in history. The point of history is that, unfortunately, we cannot change what happened in history, so what we need to do is to learn from it and try to use what we learned to help us navigate to our present situation in order for us to plan for a better future.

Hikma: Thank you. There are some *aḥādīth*, which belong to the *faḍā'il* and which could maybe have more or less a political tendency. How could these *aḥādīth* be part of what Ahl as-sunna treats as canonical?

Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā an-Ninowī: Look, the point that distinguishes groups from each other so we have to come to understand that the differences are basically between the three sects. Today we have three sects from the year 36, meaning, Şifḥīn until today. The Muslim world consists of three groups: Sunni, Shia and Khawārij; they do not like to be called Khawārij, obviously, only Sunnis and Shiis call them that or Ibādīs today. The remnants of them are Ibādīs. In the old days, there used to be multiple groups but today there are Ibādīs and they are good and decent people, good Muslims. Surely, as I have mentioned earlier, we have some theological disagreements that are irreconcilable. Having said that, the *aḥādīth* of *faḍā'il*, in general, with Ahl as-sunna, the *a'imma* of *ḥadīṭ* in Ahl as-sunna narrated these *aḥādīth* in their books. They distinguish them from the *aḥādīth* of *aḥkām* from the *aḥādīth* of *'aqā'id*.

Hikma: Could you tell me a little bit more about this distinction? How do they distinguish it?

Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā an-Ninowī: Sure! Basically, if you examine the methodology of the *ḥuffāz*, of the scholars of *ḥadīṭ*, *'ilal* (defects) and critics of *ḥadīṭ*, such as al-Bukhārī, al-Muslim, at-Tirmidhī and others, Ibn Ḥibbān or Ibn Khuzaymah or others. When you look more closely at their „*Şihāh*“, when you look at how their methodology is, in general, they have a different level of scrutiny to *aḥādīṭ* that pertains to masters of *'aqīda* (faith). Not the same, lesser scrutiny to the *aḥādīth* that pertains to *aḥkām* (jurisprudence), how you worship and they have much more leniency in authenticating *aḥādīṭ*, that talk about virtues. When someone thinks that the *aḥādīṭ* of virtues rise to the level of *aḥādīṭ* of *'aqā'id* in authenticity, that person is just ignorant from an industrial *ḥadīṭ* point of view. The reason for this is because the *ḥadīṭ* point of view industry does

not authenticate the *ahādīth* of *faḍā'il*, meaning, the industry in the old days, precisely, the *ḥuffāz al-mutaqaddimīn* from the Salaf, the *old ḥuffāz*, not just anybody, a *musnid* or a *muḥaddith*, such as Bukhari or Muslim, these *a'imma* do not authenticate the *aḥadīṭ* of *faḍā'il* on the same scrutiny level, an authentication requirement and prerequisites the same way as in the cases of the *ḥadīṭ* of *faḍā'il*.

Hikma: But it is not indicated in the works themselves. You have to be a scholar to understand it.

Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā an-Ninowī: Well, you have to, when you read and compare, that is easy to deduce. You can see it. It is not something that a scholar does not know. Almost any scholar of *ḥadīṭ* recognizes that. It is not an individual assumption, it is a general rule. I am not bringing something special from my scholarship. This is actually stated, it is known, it is found everywhere for those who study *ḥadīṭ*, but surely for those who just open up a book of *ḥadīṭ* and they think that it is all salad, as in the sense that he can pick from whatever and it is all the same because it is all *ṣaḥīḥ*. Well, that is not how it is because within the book of „*Ṣaḥīḥ*“, for example, al-Bukhārī – *raḥimahu-llāhu*, he brought forth some *aḥadīṭ* that are not fulfilling his own conditions, not that he did not know that or he is trying to cheat you. No, if you do not understand the anatomy of the work of al-Bukhārī or Muslim or al-Tirmidhī with all the respect, you need to resort to people who understand the anatomy and sometimes he put in the *bāb* in the chapter. This means he puts the *ḥadīṭ* that is fulfilling his conditions and are very powerful in a certain context and sometimes he latches on *aḥadīṭ* that has *munqaṭi' isnād*, discontinued *isnād* because he feels, while it is not authentic in of itself but it adds to the meaning and this *ḥadīṭ* that he put which is or discontinue, it is not *munqaṭi'*. He knows that and the way he designed his book, it is not meant to be part of the authentic skeleton that he tried to bring out to people, but surely it takes people to know that. Yet, I think everybody agrees that the authentication scrutiny and scrutinized jobs of the scholars in the old days, when it comes to matters of authentic *ahādīṭ*, it is not the same for the *aḥadīṭ* of *aḥkām* like the *ahādīṭ* of *'aqā'id* and then both of them are definitely not the same to the *ahādīṭ* of *faḍā'il*. *Faḍā'il*, I mean, this is good, this is *alḥamdulillāh*, we are all with everything is good. The problem comes when he takes the *faḍā'il* as *'aqīda*.

Hikma: Yes, you yourself also studied *ḥadīṭ* from the Ghumārī-brothers, amongst others, but also from the Romardi?

Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā an-Ninowī: Sure, amongst my *shuyūkh*, obviously, were the Ghumārī-scholars in Morocco and many of the Syrian scholars of *ḥadīth* as well and some of the *ḥijāzī* to just mention Muḥammad ‘Alawī al-Mālikī and other *shuyūkh* in Mecca and Medina.

Hikma: Could you please tell us a little bit about the Ghumārī-brothers because we do not know a lot about their characteristics?

Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā an-Ninowī: The *Ghumārī*-brothers are seven brothers that were from Tanger, northern Morocco. They are Moroccans. Their father, Muḥammad b. aṣ-Ṣiddīq was known to be a very pious man. He had a Shādīlī-Sufī order called „Ṣiddīqī-order“ which is a Shādīlī-branch. All of his children, basically, became scholars. What made them distinguished is found in a couple of things. One of them is that they were scholars of *ḥadīth* and Sufism at the same time and that is not something that is very common. Usually, people think that these are contradictions, but actually we claim they are not. Look at Ibn Ḥibbān, who was a *muḥaddith*, a Sufī or look at Imām aṣ-Ṣuyūfī, he was a Shādīlī – he wrote a book about the Shādīlī-*tāriqā* – and was a *muḥaddith*. Look at aṣ-Ṣakhawī, look at an-Nawawī, so you find plenty of people in the old days, who were *ḥuffāz* or *muḥaddithīn* and Sufis, so that is the first thing to look at. The second thing is, and often people do not know this: All of the seven brothers do not belong to the same school. They actually represent seven schools. Just to make things even more confusing. Number one: they were non-conformists, meaning, they did not conform to the tradition but they were conform to the book and to the authentic prophetic *sunnah*. As a result, whatever they thought was authentic they figured, especially, some of them, such as Sīdī Aḥmad who died in 1960 – I have never had the honour to see him – but Sayyidī Aḥmad, for example, used to believe it is *ḥaram* to do *taqlīd* in anything. It is not permissible for anyone to emulate anyone. It is important for you to ask, but you should not emulate without knowing, and therefore, he went to prohibition of that. Which is a tough position to take, to be honest with you, Allah knows [...]. For example, let us take a closer look at the Ash‘arī-school, so even though they were involved in the majority of issues. Ash‘arīs is determined by being a non-anthropomorphist, but not Mushabbihā. They were not a group of people who give Allah attributes that his creation has, for example, like some of the Ḥanbalīs do and they do not believe that Allah lives in the sky or that Allah resembles a superman, but nobody knows how Allah looks like, etc. They were people of *tawḥīd*, in the sense of: “nothing is like Allah – *subḥānahu wa ta‘ālā* – and he is not contained by directions, nor by skies, nor by creations” [...], especially, Sayyidī Aḥmad would not be called Ash‘arī. In fact, he criticized the Ash‘arīs for being too *rational* in their

approach. However, when you look at his perspective more closely, he is in almost every position Ash‘arī, a couple of positions that are not that significant, not detrimental. When you look at him, he said he started as a Mālikī, like all of them did, and then they became Shāfi‘ī. According to their view, the Shāfi‘ī was more *dalīl*-based in the *furū‘* regarding the issues of *fiqh*. Then Sīdī Aḥmad, for example, said: “I do not perform *taqlīd* on anybody, so whatever the Qur‘ān and the Sunnah says, I follow”. But in turn they were not people who were *against* the school, the *a‘imma*, themselves. What they were against is some of the people in their time, whose views were that if you do not follow exactly what recent scholars said in the Mālikī or in the Ash‘arī, then you are not a good man and those were the kind of things that they did.

In sum, the Ghumarīs is a group but everyone in this group belongs to a school of their own to be honest with you, but all of them, in general, took positions that were not mentioned by some of the *a‘imma* of the Ahl as-sunnah, somewhere, sometime. Therefore, I cannot tell you that, one single position they took is nowhere found within the tradition of Ahl as-sunnah. *Everything* they did and maybe it is not conforming to one *madh-hab* or one school, but from the big frame of Ahl as-sunnah. From the beginning, you would find their opinions, even the irregular ones that made people have some animosity towards them, while some people loved them. All of their opinions can be found in the early ways of Ahl as-sunnah, even if it is not the regular ones.

Hikma: Thank you. Okay, maybe two last questions. One is about this non-violence approach of yours. You also wrote about non-violence as a major or fundamental principle in Islam. Could you elaborate on this idea for us?

Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā an-Ninowī: Yes. I believe that Islam, like other faith-systems, are characterized by non-violence. Other faith-systems, such as Abrahamic faith-systems like Islam, which I believe is non-violent by definition, meaning, that the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – came with two ideas that are very important. One of them was *lā ikrāh*, the Qur‘ān mentioned that there is no compulsion, because if you force people to believe, you will be encouraging people to have hypocrisy, that they say something and believe something else. The second idea that the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – initiated came with *lā ‘unf*, non-violence. Consequently, the message of the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – through the Qur‘ān was: “I have a book maybe about 400 pages on non-violence, as a fundamental Islamic principle”. I examined everything in the Qur‘ān, everything in the Sunnah, that is *authentic* and I realized that there is not *anywhere* mentioned, where the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – or the Qur‘ān itself calls the people to be vio-

lent towards those who do not believe or towards those who are different from them. The only focus was that people ought to live in justice by following the laws of justice that are equal and good with all people are to be there. That is the only thing in my view and I also looked at the Prophet's – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – message and I found him saying over and over again that Islam or that violence is the language of the inarticulate and that non-violence is the weapon that knows no defeat and that is what he practiced himself the whole time.

Hikma: Is it not just another word for freedom in the end?

Muḥammad b. Yahyā an-Ninowī: Well, you see, Islam came to afford all people dignity and justice as human-beings because the Qur'ān itself honoured every human-being on a radical level. This means as a human being you are honoured. Allah said: "*laqad karramnā banī ādam*" (we have honoured the children of Adam), so this leads to everyone being honoured. The Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – also exemplified that through his *Sīra*. So, the freedom that al-Qur'ān al-Karīm or that Islam brought us is a freedom to live because Allah *enabled* you to live and to make all the choices you want, whether the choices are good or bad. Allah is the judge. That is the right of the creator, except when it comes to the right of the creation; Islam encourages us to have laws that are fair and just. In addition, among the most important objectives that Allah – *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā* – sent messengers or that Allah – *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā* – created us in the first place, amongst the most important ones is to establish justice. Allah mentioned that in the Qur'ān: "*li-yaqūma an-nāsu bi-l-qisṭ*" (We sent them messengers and revealed the messages, so that people establish justice). To me that is the most important thing. Subsequently, Allah – *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā* – made being just and good obligatory and made *imān* a matter of choice. Either you want to believe or you do not believe, that is the freedom that Allah gave you in this world, but you do not have the freedom not to be judged because of it.

With this message in mind, the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – came to give people life not to take life away from them, even when they did not believe in him. In fact, there is a *ḥadīth* that you probably know about, and the *ḥadīth* in Bukhārī and Muslim, where an-Nabyy – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – says: "*nuṣirtu bi-l-ru'b*" (I was given victory by fear) and a lot of people think this *ḥadīth* is among those *ḥadīth* that shows you how terrorizing the religion of Islam is, where in reality it is exactly the opposite and the Prophet – *ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* – is a prophet sent by Allah. So those people who wanted to fight him and kill him, Allah – *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā* – aided him not with flood like Nūḥ – *alayhi as-salām* – that wiped out everyone or with other things, but he aided him with fear in

the hearts of those who are ready to kill him. The reason for this is because if he fights them Allah will grant him victory over them anyway. And since during that time the prophet had not finished his message yet, Allah placed fear in their hearts out of saving their own lives and their blood from being shed out of his mercy, because he is mercy to the world, so that is how we look at it.

Hikma: Very interesting. Last question, when I met you in Frankfurt some months ago you have said that love is the very essence of religion. Why do you think that it is all about love?

Muhammad b. Yahyā an-Ninowī: You know, I have a book coming out soon which is also called „*The Book of Love*“ and I think that when you look at the whole *dīn*, the whole faith, the whole faith of Islam can be summarized in two words: love god, love people. There is nothing to it because look at Allah – *subhānahu wa ta‘ālā* –, let me just give that *āyah* and that is it, we can use it as a starting point. Well, Allah – *subhānahu wa ta‘ālā* – says in *Ṣūrah Āl-‘Imrān (basmala)*: “*qul in kuntum tuḥibūna llāh fatta-bi ‘unī yuḥbibkumu llāh*” (Say, if you love Allah follow me ... the Prophet *ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*). Allah tells him: “Tell them, ya Muhammad, if they love Allah they should follow you, Allah loves them”. Now, wait a minute, it probably does not sound right to some people. What do you mean by saying, if you love Allah, follow Rasūlu llāh? Maybe to some minds it should rather be: “If you *believe* in Allah, follow Rasūlu llāh”, meaning, if you believe in the statement of faith “*ashhadu an lā ilāha illa llāh*” first, then it should not be an issue for you to realize that “*Muhammadun rasulu-llah*” but Allah does not mention if you believe, nor if you understand, nor if you have faith in *lā ilāha illa-llāh*. He did not mention any of that instead he mentioned: “If you love Allah, follow me”, which indicates that the whole *lā ilāha illa-llāh* is the love of Allah – *subhānahu wa ta‘ālā* – and that is why in another very important *āyah* in the Qur'an, such as the following: “*ya ayyuhal lladhīna āmanu, man yartadda min-kum ‘an dīnihi fa-sawfa ya’ti llāhu biqawmin yuḥibbuhum wa-yuḥibbūnah*” (Oh you who believe, whoever amongst you rejects their *dīn* or make leave their *dīn*, the part from *their* faith, Allah will replace you by people who love him and he loves them. Look at the verse more closely. Now, when people apostate or when people leave their *dīn* is it not usually because of a doubt that came in their mind, it is a rational doubt, it is a philosophical doubt, it is a scientific doubt that they do not think that this *dīn* is right? What does this have to do with love? How come he is telling them: „All you who believe, if you apostate from your *dīn*, Allah will replace you by people who love Allah and they love him“? This evidently shows you that the problem of people who apostate is never philosophical,

nor scientific, nor is it rational, it is simply that there is no love in their heart, and hence.

Hikma: Thank you very much for sharing all of your thoughts and ideas. Hopefully, one day we will welcome you here in Germany again. I would appreciate it very much. Thank you very much for the interview.