Fragility and Courage:

A KHOJA REFLECTION ON THE LEGACY OF DR. ABDULAZIZ SACHEDINA

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REFLECTION 03-JANUARY 2026
TORONTO, CANADA

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Do not be afraid of being alone on the path of truth, for many walk on the path of falsehood

— *Imam Ali,* ***Ghurar al-Ḥikama***

Abstract

The death of a scholar invites reflection not only on a life concluded but on the world that produced it, resisted it, and was transformed by it. Abdulaziz Sachedina's intellectual project emerged from the experience of communities negotiating identity, vulnerability, and belonging in modern history. The East African Khoja diaspora, marked by migration, resilience, and institution building constructed impressive communal infrastructures, yet developed habits of identity formation that privileged emotional solidarity over interpretive depth. His work illuminated the fragility that arises when religious conviction is inherited without comprehension and when tradition is preserved without the capacity to articulate its meaning. This essay explores the ethical and intellectual challenges of inheritance in environments shaped by survival, cohesion and anxiety, and asks what it means to sustain a tradition with seriousness in an age that rewards sentiment, speed, and certainty.

Early Encounters And Intellectual Formation

To understand Sachedina's project, we must return to the conditions in which it first took shape. His trajectory did not emerge from institutional planning or inherited privilege but from a generation of migrants encountering their tradition at a moment when belief could no longer rely on memory alone. Late twentieth-century modernity demanded articulation rather than repetition, and his intellectual life unfolded within this tension.

My first encounter with him occurred in Qom in the mid nineteen seventies, not in a lecture hall but in a musafirkhana where students, pilgrims and migrants shared temporary accommodation while navigating uncertainties more permanent than their surroundings. I was a teenager then, on my way to begin high school, standing at the threshold of learning. He was nearly two decades older, already marked by a discipline of inquiry and ethical seriousness unfamiliar to me. Even in that brief encounter, the generational distance revealed itself not simply in age but in the gravity with which he understood religious life. I travelled from Tanzania to the United Kingdom with ambitions I could not articulate. He had already embraced a mode of study that treated religious knowledge as cognitive responsibility rather than identity. His manner suggested no desire for relevance or recognition; it reflected a conviction that belief required inquiry, argument and discipline.

Qom itself reminded us that sacred geography does not guarantee clarity. The city's religious significance was unmistakable, yet its infrastructure revealed economic strain, institutional fatigue and the pressures placed upon individuals who carried tradition as obligation rather than aesthetic commitment. Faith did not present itself as emotional refuge. It manifested as study, translation and endurance. Religious identity required

cognitive discipline rather than performance; the distance between sincerity and comprehension was not theoretical but the difference between stability and collapse.

Our conversation was brief but decisive. It challenged my assumption that belief could function indefinitely as inherited sentiment. His presence suggested that tradition is not preserved by repetition; it is threatened by it. The Qur'an's insistence on reflection is not poetic embellishment but a warning that communities can lose intellectual agency long before doctrinal allegiance fades. His seriousness conveyed generosity, the belief that dignity lies not in certainty but in the willingness to think honestly when certainty becomes difficult. Years later, our paths crossed again in Toronto at the Bayview Centre. Whenever he spoke there, whether on an ordinary Thursday evening or at a special program, the hall would be filled to the brim, a quiet testament to the gravity and trust his voice commanded in a way that now feels increasingly rare.

A second formative encounter occurred in Portsmouth in nineteen seventy-eight while I prepared for higher studies. There I met Dr Jasim Husain, who was completing his doctoral dissertation at the University of Edinburgh on the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, later published as *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam*. The interaction was unplanned yet emblematic of that generation. Intellectual formation took shape not through structured curricula or institutional mentorship but in improvised contexts as young migrants pursued academic study while confronting unresolved theological questions. There were no research pipelines, no systematic supervision and no digital platforms for testing ideas publicly. Intellectual work occurred in private reading and long conversations rather than performative discourse, producing a subjectivity shaped by autonomy, solitude and persistence.

These encounters unfolded as the pressures of modernity became increasingly visible. Scientific rationality, historical criticism and expanding ethical frameworks had begun to erode environments in which inherited ideas could rely on communal consensus for legitimacy, a condition Charles Taylor analyses in his account of late modernity, where belief becomes *"contestable, optional, and open to challenge,"* requiring new forms of intelligibility for its survival.[1] The challenge was not disbelief but displacement. Devotional vocabulary could not function in public without translation. Belief required intelligibility, and intelligibility required methodological labour.

The vulnerability of that generation was intellectual rather than material. Many were economically capable and socially adaptable, yet epistemically uncertain. They inherited convictions whose emotional resonance remained powerful but whose conceptual foundations were unprepared for scrutiny. Their task was not novelty but integrity: to inhabit the tradition in a world that no longer accepted unexamined continuity as evidence of sincerity. Interpretation was not a threat to tradition; it was essential to its survival.

With hindsight, this fragility signalled transition rather than decline. It revealed that the era in which conviction could rely upon implicit consensus was ending, and that a new cultural environment was emerging, one that required articulation, argument and intellectual maturity. Figures such as Abdulaziz Sachedina did not arise to destabilize tradition; they emerged to prepare it for a future in which sincerity alone would no longer be sufficient, and where the authority of belief would depend upon understanding rather than inheritance.

My path to these questions emerged from experience. I was formed within the same Khoja milieu that shaped so many of the communal reflexes this essay examines, an environment marked by migration, endurance and a deep investment in cohesion. The virtues that enabled survival also produced particular intellectual habits: a preference for consensus over inquiry, stability over friction and continuity over examination. These sensibilities framed my earliest encounters with scholarship and help explain why the work of someone like Sachedina could feel, to many within our community, less like illumination and more like disturbance. The

horizon from which he spoke was unfamiliar; the horizon within which we listened was shaped by an entirely different set of historical imperatives.

Faith Under Modern Pressure

The generation that carried Shi'i tradition into the late twentieth century was formed in environments where religion operated less as a system of ideas than as a structure of belonging. Migration, economic insecurity and institutional fragility produced communities in which cohesion mattered more than interpretation and continuity more than analysis. Faith served as cultural anchorage and social infrastructure, binding individuals into networks capable of absorbing displacement. In such settings, theological inquiry was not central because belonging itself fulfilled the essential function of religion.

For diaspora communities such as the Khojas, shaped by displacement, minority status and economic adaptation, theology rarely emerged as a public discipline. Survival required coordination and loyalty; it did not foster spaces for disagreement or intellectual risk. Religious life developed a preference for emotional solidarity over epistemic agency. Believers learned to affirm doctrine without exploring its architecture, to perform conviction without articulating it and to defend identity without understanding the grammar that sustained it. Yet a tradition that insists on reflection cannot reduce belief to unexamined loyalty, for the Qur'an repeatedly asks, *"Do they not reason (afalā ta'qilūn)?" (Qur'an 2:44).*[2]

Within such communities, those who engage in intellectual work are often seen as disruptive. They expose the fragility of inherited formulations by insisting that belief cannot rely on reassurance alone. They challenge the assumption that tradition is self-evident. Their work is interpreted not as responsibility but as rupture. Communities that have not cultivated habits of reasoning cannot distinguish critique from abandonment; any attempt to articulate belief appears destabilizing.

The paradox is clear. Communities insist on preserving belief yet marginalize the intellectual practices required for its survival. They valorize certainty while lacking the mechanisms through which certainty is generated. They celebrate devotion while neglecting comprehension. They inherit a tradition that demands reflection yet cultivate environments in which reflection is treated as disloyalty. The result is a form of belief that is emotionally potent but intellectually fragile.

Understanding this paradox is essential for evaluating figures such as Abdulaziz Sachedina. His work did not seek to unsettle faith; it recognised that the social conditions which allowed unexamined belief to endure had already disappeared. He attempted to provide believers with the interpretive tools necessary to inhabit their tradition within public and pluralistic spaces. Resistance to his work reflected not doctrinal disagreement but institutional anxiety.

These pressures persist. Modernity demands articulation. Digital culture rewards performance over thought. Belief remains vulnerable where certainty is prized but understanding is scarce. The challenge is not to defend religion against a hostile world but to cultivate maturity that enables believers to articulate faith responsibly within it.

Courage And Controversy

The dynamics described above formed the background against which the intellectual labour of Abdulaziz Sachedina was received, interpreted and often resisted. In Khoja settings especially, unity had long been synonymous with survival, and survival had required predictable forms of religious expression. Inquiry, however, is never predictable. To introduce argument into communities conditioned by caution is to unsettle the

equilibrium upon which their coherence rests. It was within this ecology, shaped by migration, fragility and the performance of certainty, that Sachedina's commitment to interpretation confronted the communal instinct for stability.

As his influence widened, resistance did not always take the form of argument. In some settings, it appeared instead as exclusion, the quiet withdrawal of platforms, the narrowing of invitations, and the circulation of cautionary narratives designed to signal that certain questions carried social cost. This was not accidental. Communities that conflate authority with stability often respond to intellectual independence by managing access rather than engaging ideas. Ostracism becomes a substitute for refutation, and silence replaces debate. What was at stake was not simply disagreement, but control over who was permitted to speak with legitimacy.

His scholarship unfolded in environments that were cautious rather than curious. Religious authority was sustained less through doctrinal exposition than through the conservation of inherited formulations. Sachedina challenged this structure not out of antagonism but because he regarded theological inquiry as an ethical responsibility. Fidelity to tradition, in his view, demanded more than repeating conclusions; it required the courage to examine them, reformulate them and defend them with intellectual honesty. Interpretive responsibility, as Sachedina understood it, operated within the inherited architecture of Twelver doctrine, not in opposition to it.

Such courage was often misread as insubordination. Communities shaped by precarity tended to view interpretive effort as destabilizing because it exposed the fragility of structures built upon consensus rather than comprehension. In political theory, Hannah Arendt described this phenomenon as the fear of *"thinking without banisters,"* the anxiety that accompanies thought when inherited assurances no longer hold.[3] Sachedina's insistence on argument was therefore interpreted less as devotion to truth than as a threat to communal equilibrium. Yet his project rested on a simple premise: belief cannot rely indefinitely on emotional reassurance, and the sacred demands maturity rather than obedience.

Within Khoja communities, the anxiety surrounding his work was structural. The controversies it provoked revealed more about communal insecurities than about the arguments themselves. The fear was often theological: that rearticulating the doctrine of the Al-Ghayba might destabilise the metaphysical architecture upon which Twelver identity and legitimacy rest. In diasporic setting, where the Occultation functioned not only as a doctrinal cornerstone but as a psychological refuge, the shift from inherited affirmation to interpretive articulation appeared not as maturation but as existential threat. For some, subjecting the Al-Ghayba to rational scrutiny risked eroding the very mechanism through which divine authority, communal endurance and eschatological hope were sustained.

This resistance reflected a deeper apprehension: that if the central mystery of the tradition became discursive rather than deferential, the social and spiritual order dependent on it might lose its stabilising force. The concern was not merely fear of modernity or identity dissolution. It was fear of puncturing the protective metaphysics through which historical vulnerability had been managed.

The tension was acute because the Al-Ghayba had long served as a metaphysical anchor, a horizon of hope in communities accustomed to uncertainty. Yet without interpretive disciplines to accompany this inheritance, the doctrine risked becoming less a source of meaning than an instrument of epistemic containment, offering certainty without inquiry and reassurance without intellectual risk. When Sachedina insisted on interpretive responsibility, he exposed a structure that had sheltered belief from precisely the kind of examination tradition requires to remain alive.

His work unsettled established conventions not by denying their value but by demanding that they be understood rather than merely inherited. Many were uneasy with the expectation that belief justify itself.

Formulations that could be affirmed without scrutiny felt safer, because scrutiny introduced the possibility of disagreement, fragmentation and diminished authority. Interpretation threatened institutional equilibrium, and equilibrium had long been treated as essential to communal preservation. Jürgen Habermas describes such a posture as the preference for *"communicative accommodation" over "discursive rationality,"* a mode of discourse that prioritises harmony over truth.[4]

This reaction was not irrational. Communities forged in vulnerability often develop defensive reflexes toward intellectual risk. Inquiry appears synonymous with instability; dissent becomes indistinguishable from disloyalty. In such environments, thinkers are valued only when they reinforce emotional consensus. Scholarship is welcomed when it confirms and resisted when it interrogates. Under these pressures, courage becomes a liability rather than a virtue.

Sachedina rejected this model of religious life. He insisted that faith must confront ambiguity rather than retreat from it and that believers bear responsibility for engaging complexity even when it unsettles comfort. He regarded theological inquiry not as a threat to piety but as a form of devotion, grounded in the conviction that God deserves the dignity of intelligence. His aim was not to weaken conviction but to strengthen it through comprehension rather than sentiment.

The courage necessary for such work was not dramatic but disciplined: a willingness to endure misunderstanding, misrepresentation and exclusion. Intellectual courage rarely produces applause; more often it invites suspicion. It requires perseverance in communities that treat uncertainty as defect rather than catalyst for growth. His resilience was not a declaration of superiority but a refusal to abandon the belief that religion requires thought and that conviction must be capable of explanation.

In this sense, his trials resembled those of earlier and later Shia thinkers, from Shaykh al-Mufīd and Mullā Ṣadrā to ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī, Murtaḍā Muṭahharī and Ali Shariati, whose pursuit of understanding provoked both admiration and censure. What is lost when such a figure dies is not only an intellect but a presence that insists upon seriousness, a voice that refuses to let belief collapse into sentiment and a life that demonstrates that faith without courage becomes superstition and courage without humility becomes arrogance.

The Pluralism, Ethics And The Other

If theology is the grammar by which a community narrates God, ethics is the grammar by which it acknowledges the human being. For Abdulaziz Sachedina, these domains were inseparable. He believed, as Mullā Ṣadrā taught, *that "the dignity of the human being arises from the graded intensities of existence,"* and that reverence for the sacred does not require suspicion toward the stranger.[5]

Pluralism, in his thought, was not a concession to secular tolerance or liberal sentiment, nor was it a claim about the equivalence of religious truth. It did not deny the finality of Islam or the Qur'an's role as the corrective and preservative culmination of earlier revelations. Rather, it articulated an ethical posture grounded in the Qur'anic anthropology of human dignity: a vision in which certainty of belief coexists with moral responsibility toward those who do not share that belief. To encounter difference was therefore not to relativize truth, but to encounter *"another bearer of divine breath, another participant in the drama of moral becoming."* This intuition finds resonance in Emmanuel Levinas's insistence that the face of the other makes an ethical demand prior to identity or agreement.[6]

The Qur'an does not describe humanity as uniform but as a tapestry of difference, framing diversity not as a threat to truth but as an instrument of consciousness: *"O humankind, We created you from a male and a female and made you peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most honoured of you in the sight of God are those most conscious of Him." (Qur'an 49:13)*[7]

This verse neither romanticizes nor collapses difference. It affirms moral differentiation without erasing theological distinction, grounding dignity in creation while reserving judgment, guidance, and ultimate truth for God alone. It exposes the inadequacy of identities defined primarily *by "negation"*, a dynamic Charles Taylor identifies as central to modern struggles over recognition.[8]

Sachedina sought to articulate an ethics of recognition rather than fear. For him, ethics was not a catalogue of prohibitions but a discipline of perception: a cultivated attentiveness that refuses to reduce the other to category or opponent. In this horizon, the enemy of moral clarity was not disbelief but dehumanization, the refusal to grant another the complexity we claim for ourselves.

What unsettled some readers was not his defence of pluralism but his insistence that the integrity of belief demands engagement rather than withdrawal. He argued that the God of revelation is not anxious, and that communities shaped by fear have misunderstood their own theology. The ethical vision of Islam, in his reading, was not tribal but teleological. It oriented the believer toward the cultivation of character, not the fortification of boundaries.

Imam ʿAlī captured this moral horizon with characteristic precision: *"People are of two types: either your brother in faith, or your equal in humanity."*[9] This statement is not a sentimental aphorism. It is a metaphysical claim. It imagines a universe in which dignity precedes agreement and compassion precedes conformity, even as salvific truth remains bound to guidance, responsibility, and divine judgment. Human dignity is bestowed through creation, while accountability unfolds through revelation.

Seen in this light, Sachedina's ethics did not secularize Islam; they sought to purify it of pettiness. He believed, like Muṭahharī, that *"a tradition capable of producing Nahj al-Balāghah should not fear philosophical inquiry, and a community shaped by Karbalā should not fear moral responsibility,"*[10] His work did not ask Muslims to abandon identity but to deepen it, recognizing that love of God becomes disingenuous when it produces contempt for His creation.

What remains striking about his scholarship is not its novelty but its fidelity. It did not rebel against tradition; it pressed tradition toward its most demanding implications. The Qur'an imagines a world in which dignity is unconditional, and the Imams articulate an ethics in which the other is not a threat to faith but a test of virtue. Such a vision requires courage because it dismantles the psychological architecture of tribal loyalty and replaces it with an ethical horizon in which the believer must encounter the stranger without weaponizing certainty.

To inhabit such an ethics is difficult. It requires patience with complexity, a willingness to relinquish defensiveness and the humility to acknowledge the dignity of those who do not mirror our commitments. It demands recognition that God's generosity is not diminished by human difference, and that our refusal to honour that difference reveals less about the world than about ourselves.

In his passing, we are left with questions his work implicitly raised. Can a community that fears the other encounter God without distortion? And can a religion that fears the mind honour revelation without trivializing it?

The courage that shaped Sachedina's scholarship was not only the courage to think but the courage to encounter difference without fear. He believed that theological maturity is inseparable from ethical generosity, and that belief reveals itself not only in its claims about God but in its recognition of the human being. His work therefore moved from the courage to interpret toward the courage to acknowledge, insisting that conviction becomes authentic only when it can honour the complexity of the world.

Beyond Ritual Inheritance: Inheriting A World Of Ideas

Diasporic communities that secured survival through cohesion must now cultivate institutions capable of sustaining complexity, or they risk inheriting a rich tradition without the intellectual infrastructure required to engage it. For Khoja institutions, this challenge is especially acute. Our remarkable achievements in organisation, philanthropy and communal efficiency emerged from an ethic shaped by migration and necessity. Yet these virtues did not cultivate the interpretive capacities needed for intellectual adulthood. We built structures of admirable stability, but we did not build parallel structures capable of generating, evaluating and sustaining complex thought. The result is a tradition abundant in devotion yet under-resourced in the very disciplines through which belief matures. This is not a moral failure. It is a historical inheritance. But because it is historical, it now demands transformation.

The death of a scholar is not only an occasion for grief. It is a moment of revelation. It exposes the extent to which a community depends on the labour of individuals and how precarious a tradition becomes when its intellectual life rests on personalities rather than institutions. Legacy is not secured through admiration, nor preserved by sentiment. It is sustained when those who remain undertake the slow work of comprehension, the patience to confront complexity, and the humility to begin from uncertainty rather than imitation. Without such labour, even the most luminous ideas eventually ossify into nostalgia.

Alasdair MacIntyre reminds us that a tradition survives not through the preservation of conclusions but through *"continuities of conflict, a disciplined practice of argument, critique and refinement."*[11] A community that seeks stability without thought may achieve peace, but it will rarely achieve maturity. A tradition that inherits riches without cultivating the capacities to interpret them inevitably becomes dependent on individuals instead of institutions. When intellectual life becomes personalized, it becomes fragile. The loss of a scholar becomes the loss of an entire horizon of thought. Rituals may persist, but the capacity to think collapses unless it is cultivated collectively rather than delegated to a few.

Murtaḍā Muṭahharī foresaw this danger long before it became globally visible. He warned that *"a tradition that suppresses inquiry collapses inward because it mistakes preservation for repetition and reverence for silence."*[12] His concern was not novelty but vitality. A community capable of deep thought might instead habituate itself to emotional reassurance while losing the disciplines that make belief resilient. For him, intellectual labour was not rebellion. It was fidelity.

The legacy of scholars such as Abdulaziz Sachedina is not a set of doctrines to reproduce but a form of seriousness to embody. He did not ask for adherence. He asked for responsibility. The health of a religious community is measured not by its ability to silence dissent but by its ability to sustain thought without anxiety. Ideas do not endure because they are admired. They endure when communities cultivate the habits and institutions that allow belief to become intelligent, patient and morally serious.

The question that follows is not how to honour a scholar, but how to shape communities capable of sustaining the kind of intellectual labour that scholarship represents. The task ahead is not merely to remember what has been inherited, but to build what has not yet been constructed.

The Work That Remains

The passing of a scholar does not close a chapter. It reveals the extent to which a community has relied on a single mind to carry responsibilities never meant to be borne alone. Death, in such moments, becomes less a rupture than a disclosure. It exposes the quiet dependencies we have cultivated, the intellectual labours we deferred, and the disciplines we admired from a distance but did not undertake ourselves. Remembrance is

not nostalgia. It is accountability. It asks whether the tradition we have inherited can endure without the scaffolding we assumed would always remain.

For Khoja communities, this question is particularly pressing. Our history is one of movement across oceans, empires and social worlds, and of the virtues that such movement demanded: resilience, discipline, cohesion and organisational brilliance. These were not minor achievements. They were conditions of survival. Yet the habits that protect a community in moments of vulnerability do not necessarily cultivate the intellectual capacities required for maturity. Continuity can preserve the surface of a tradition while leaving its interior underexamined. Cohesion can sustain identity while inhibiting inquiry. A community skilled at survival may still struggle to inhabit the life of the mind.

The death of a thinker such as Abdulaziz Sachedina forces this recognition upon us. It reminds us that intellectual life cannot remain the vocation of a few, nor can it be outsourced to seminaries abroad or entrusted to occasional charismatic figures. A tradition becomes adult only when its interpretive responsibilities are shared. Its institutions must cultivate the disciplines of reading, questioning, arguing and refining. Believers must be formed not merely to repeat but to understand. Without such formation, each loss becomes a crisis. This is not because a voice has fallen silent. It is because too few voices are prepared to continue the conversation.

To honour Sachedina is not to canonise his conclusions. It is to emulate his seriousness. It is to recognise that thought is a form of devotion and that interpretation is an act of fidelity. The courage to inquire is not a threat to belief. It is a condition of its endurance. If our community can cultivate these virtues, if we can build institutions that encourage reflection rather than suspicion, and reward comprehension rather than compliance, then the intellectual horizons that shaped his work will not fade with his absence. They will widen.

If these virtues are cultivated, our tradition will not merely survive modernity. It will inhabit the intellectual adulthood that scholars such as Abdulaziz Sachedina sought to model with such lonely courage. If we fail to cultivate them, his absence will reveal what his presence concealed. It will show that our admiration exceeded our willingness to continue his work, and that the future he strained toward will remain a horizon rather than an inheritance.

Notes

[1] Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007)
[2] Qur'an 2:44
[3] Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind (New York: Harcourt, 1978)
[4] Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984)
[5] Mullā Ṣadrā, al-Ḥikma al-Mutaʿāliyya fī al-Asfār al-Arbaʿa
[6] Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969)
[7] Qur'an 49:13
[8] Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994)
[9] Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 53, various editions
[10] Murtaza Mutahhari, Man and Faith (Tehran: Sadra Publications, 1985)
[11]Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981)
[12]Murtaza Mutahhari, Man and Universe (Tehran: WOFIS, 1983)