

Chapter 12: Imamate

Imam Hasan (a.s.) followed the footsteps of his grandfather, the Prophet (S). Like the Prophet (S), who had entered into Peace treaties including the one with the infidels of Mecca, Imam Hasan (a.s.) preferred to enter into a peace treaty with Mu'awiya in order to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. The main terms stipulated in the treaty were [i] that Mu'awiya should not nominate his successor; [ii] he should not interfere in religious matters; [iii] he would stop forthwith the calumny and falsehood propagated against Imam Ali (a.s.) and the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.) from on the pulpits. Mu'awiya, the hypocrite that he was, signed the treaty to gain instant reprieve, but he flouted every word of the treaty even before the ink on his signature could dry.

Thus, for a second and last time, the ostensible temporal leadership was separated from the religious leadership, not to be united again in one person, until the reappearance of the Awaited Twelfth Imam (S). Before we proceed to discuss Imamate, it will be proper to know the connotation of the word '*Imam*'. In every language, words have different meanings with reference to different contexts. Every language also attributes a special meaning to a word. Though in Arabic the term '*Imam*' means 'leader', in the Islamic sense and perspective, the term has acquired a special and significant connotation exclusively referable only to the religious head. For instance, the word 'Messenger' may apply to anyone, but when a Muslim uses the word, it refers only to the Prophet (S) and none else.

Even in this perspective, there has arisen a marked difference between the Shiite and the Sunni interpretation. In the early centuries, both the Shia and the Sunni, universally, acknowledged that the term 'Imam' refers exclusively to the twelve Imams designated by the Prophet (S). The *six Sihah*¹ which are the authentic books of traditions relied on by the Sunnis, as also all other books of traditions, whether Shia or Sunni, contain numerous references to the Prophet (S) designating and identifying by name the twelve Imams (a.s.). Other offices of the state were designated separately; for instance an ambassador was called a 'Safeer'; the Governor was called the 'Wali'.

However, centuries later, Abu Hanifa, ash-Shafi'iy, Malik, and Ahmed ibn Hanbal were given the prefix of '*Imam*' by their followers as a tribute to their knowledge and work. Of these four, Abu Hanifa was exclusively given the special title of '*al-Imam al-A'dham*²' since his treatise and interpretation of Islamic

tenets came to be followed by the largest majority of Muslims, known as the Hanafites. It should be noted here that these four (Abu Hanifa [b. 80– d. 150 AH.], Malik [b. 95– d. 169 AH], ash-Shafi'iy [b. 150– d. 204 AH] and ibn Hanbal [b. 164– d. 241 AH]) were all born several decades after the time of the Prophet (S) and they were not designated or named as Imams by the Prophet (S), nor did they themselves ever claim to be Imams. It was only a popular prefix added to their names as a tribute, by their followers after their death out of love, affection, and regard.

In much later times, the Sunni sect further diluted the significance of the word '*Imam*', and when any person possessing some knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, he was referred to as an *Imam*. The Twelver Shia, on the other hand, consider only the twelve *Imams* (a.s.) designated and named by the Prophet (S), as their temporal and spiritual leaders, and Divine Guides. For the Shia, *Imamate* is as much a Divine conferment as Prophethood. The verses of the Qur'an reveal that God conferred *Imamate* on Abraham. Therefore, an Imam cannot be chosen or elected by men.

There are several basic differences between the Twelver Shia and the Sunnis as to who is an Imam. The Twelver Shia consider that the Imams are chosen and designated by God. The Sunnis believe that it is sufficient if the majority of Muslims designate a person as the Imam. Among the Sunnis, the reputed knowledge of Islamic Jurisprudence is the only criteria for such designation. The Twelver Shia, on the other hand, hold that the Imams are chosen and designated by God; that the Imams are endowed with knowledge of the past, present and the future; of the known and unknown and all the scriptures revealed to the various Prophets, since the Imams are the very embodiment of the Divine Wisdom.

For the Twelver Shia, the supreme commander [*Ulil Amr*], in temporal as well as religious matters, is the *Imam* of the time. The Sunnis interpret '*Ulil Amr*' as the head of the state, separating religion from worldly affairs. Though, for the Twelver Shia, the terms *Imam* and *Ulil Amr* refer only to the twelve designated *Imams* (a.s.), recently the term was also being erroneously and unfortunately used, in its Sunni sense of the word, by a small section of the Twelver Shia to denote the head of a state. Similarly, the term '*ahlul thikr*' exclusively denotes the immaculate and infallible Ones (a.s.). However, in recent times, the term '*ahlul thikr*' is also being misused by some Twelver Shia to denote a pious and learned person.

Another term that is grossly maligned, misinterpreted and misunderstood is '*Jihad*'. There is a sharp difference in the Shiite and Sunni interpretation. Basically, the term is used to denote struggle or effort. Thus, the first requirement of a Muslim is *Jihad an-Nafs* (the strife against one's base desires or excesses). On a larger perspective, it is a struggle, fight and strife against oppression and tyranny. In the later sense, it means war. For the Twelver Shia, no person or body of persons has the right to declare or commence a war. The Divinely designated and Divinely inspired *Imam* (a.s.) of the time alone has the authority to order or commence *Jihad*. Even in such cases, the *Imam* (a.s.) never declares a war of aggression, or in modern terms, 'war of preemption', but to act only in defense against oppression and tyranny by standing up to the tyrant, after all the avenues of avoiding the conflict have failed. This is

exactly what Imam Husayn (a.s.) did in Karbala, as the *Imam* of the time, to protect the faith and to expose the injustice and oppression of Yazid, the tyrant ruler.

Imamate, the real and ostensible religious authority, always remained with Ali (a.s.) and his eleven designated progeny who were then were, as even today are, called *Imams* of the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.), while the *Caliphate* came to represent temporal authority. The three *Caliphs* never ever, at any time, claimed *Imamate* or called themselves or were ever known as '*Imams*'. They always remained merely the *Caliphs*. The real temporal as well as religious authority (*Caliphate* and *Imamate*) always remained vested in the Imams of the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.). The importance of the difference between *Imamate* and *Caliphate* has to be understood in the light of the Qur'an and the Sunna. The Qur'an reveals that after Abraham's sacrifice had been accepted, God declared that Abraham, already a Prophet (S) and Khaleel, was made the '*Imam*'. When Abraham wanted to know if his progeny also would be designated as Imams, the reply was '*not those who are transgressors and oppressors*'.³

Authentic traditions abound, in both Sunni and Shia books, about the Prophet's designating, by name, of the twelve *Imams* of the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.). Thus, *Imamate* and therefore leadership, both religious and temporal, always remained, in reality, with Imam Ali (a.s.) and his eleven designated progeny called the *Imams of the Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.). The choice of ostensible temporal heads, in all sorts of manners, never made any difference to the Divinely appointed *Imam* (a.s.).

The various dictates and judgements rendered by the *Imams* (a.s.) in temporal matters, which the rulers of the time found incapable of solution, is an ample proof that the *Caliphate* (the temporal authority) also remained, in reality, with the Imams (a.s.). What the ruler of the time took away from the Imam (a.s.) was the treasury and the hordes of hypocrites and timeservers. The Imams (a.s.) detested glamorous ostentation and had no use for riches or sycophants. They relished frugal and simple food, even as they gave generously to the poor, orphans and the disabled. They preferred coarse clothes for themselves but distributed good clothes to the poor. None of the *Imams* (a.s.) hoarded wealth nor did they leave behind any property or money. They always worked and earned their living and, therefore, had no need to depend upon the ruler or to please him. They also detested hypocrites and timeservers. Therefore, the loss of the treasury and the loss of hypocritical supporters were of no importance to them. It is for this reason that the *Imams* (a.s.) never made any attempt to fight and gain the seat or the vain gloss of worldly power. It is, therefore, trite to say that Imam Husayn's dispute with Yazid was a struggle for power.

Some people argue that, after the Prophet (S), both temporal and religious leadership passed on to the *Caliphs*. It is further argued that the *Caliphs*, particularly the second *Caliph*, brought in several innovations in religious matters such as adding to the morning call for prayer [*Azan*], the words '*the prayer is better than sleep*' [*as-salatu khayrum minan nawm*]; appropriated *Khums* and used it for military exploits instead of paying it to the progeny of the Holy Prophet (S); banned the practice of *Mut'a* (temporary marriage) ...etc. These acts are touted as proof of the *Caliph's* control and authority over

religious matters. The Prophet (S) himself was made to say that he could not, in any manner, alter, amend, or introduce changes in the Divinely revealed Laws.⁴ Therefore, the *Caliph* had no power to bring in any amendment, alteration, or innovation in the Divine Laws. It is common knowledge that transgression of any law does not amount to its amendment by the individual. The Qur'an declared that Islam was revealed to the Prophet (S) as a complete and immutable code of conduct governing the Muslims in all walks of their life, whether temporal or religious. The *Caliph's* innovative actions cannot be termed to be in exercise of the religious power assumed by or conferred upon him, but should be treated only as unauthorized and illegitimate interference. No power can be assumed to vest in anyone that would subvert the very principles for the preservation of which the *Caliph* takes the office.

Further, if it was true that the three *Caliphs* exercised religious authority as well as administration of temporal affairs, there would be no need for the numerous occasions when the three preceding *Caliphs* had to seek Imam Ali's dicta whenever complicated matters of Islamic jurisprudence had to be solved, and for the second Caliph to declare, ever so frequently, that had Imam Ali (a.s.) not been there, Umar would certainly have perished.

If really Yazid had both the temporal and religious authority, there was no need for him to seek a Fatwa to legitimize his assault on Imam Husayn (a.s.). Even today, where the so-called Islamic countries are faced with a hypothetical or real religious issue, their governments seek the Fatwa of the Mufti to legitimize their stand. If the government had the temporal as well as religious authority, why should the ruler of an Islamic country seek a Fatwa from any person other than the temporal head of the state?

Both the Twelver Shia and the Sunni believe that while the government has the power to regulate or carry on administration, religious issues lie within the compass and exclusive jurisdiction of the religious head. For the Twelver Shia, the matter is taken one-step further- while temporal administration of a state may lie in the hands of those in power, religious matters are always in the hands of the *Imam* (a.s.) of the time. The *Imams* (a.s.) might not have pressed for temporal authority in the interest of the survival of Islam, but neither did the *Imams* (a.s.) surrender nor did the rulers claim to take away the *Imam's* religious authority at any time. Those who sought to ascend the seat of power considered themselves only as administrators of temporal matters, even as they were keenly aware that in religious matters they were not competent to assume authority. It is thus that the *Caliphs*, when confronted with matters of faith or jurisprudence, have readily admitted their ignorance while asserting that Imam Ali (a.s.) had superior knowledge and authority, in all matters, as the Holy Prophet (a.s.) declared repository of wisdom.

The Ulema as Jurists have the obligation to search for and find a solution from precedents by virtue of their learning and knowledge of the Qur'an and the Sunna. They have no authority or power to innovate or do the guessing game and come out with a probable solution according to their personal view of the problem. On several occasions, the sixth Imam (a.s.) has demonstrably deprecated the use of conjecture in matters of religion. In this regard, it is worthwhile to translate the writing of the late Allama Sayyid Zeeshan Haider Jawadi from his book '*Nuqooshe Ismat*':

“In the fundamental principles of Islam, every Imam is the guardian and protector of the Shariah [religion]. The need for Imamate alongside the Risalah [prophethood] is due to the fact that Divine Revelations cease the moment the prophetic mission is completed, and it then becomes necessary that there should be some *one who protects and preserves the religion revealed through the prophet, so that the Divine Laws are retained in their original form and applied in their original substance. For all outward appearance, it seems possible that the Shariah may be preserved even by the scholars of the Muslim community. But, Imamate is indispensable for the preservation of the Divine Commandments, because scholars are ignorant of the Divine Laws as they have no access to the al-Louh al-Mahfoodh [the Preserved Sacred Tablet] and they acquire knowledge by studying the Holy Book [Qur’an] and Traditions [Sunna] and they interpret the Divine Laws, according to their individual human capabilities. This is the reason why there is a conflict between the Fatwa [Edict] of one scholar and another, and their method of reasoning are conflicting, different and not uniform. On the other hand, the Imam is endowed with complete knowledge of the Divine Commandments through his access to the al-Louh al-Mahfoodh, even from the time of his birth. Therefore, there is absolutely no question of contradiction or conflict in the interpretation and implementation of the Divine Laws by one Imam in different situations or between one Imam and another at different times. All the Imams were the guardians and protectors of the Divine Commandments and they performed their obligations. Preservation and interpretation of the Divine Commandments, is of two kinds; one where the Imam interprets a commandment whenever the occasion arose and there was a likelihood or threat of the Commandment being misinterpreted or put to abuse, and the second kind is where the validity of a Commandment is challenged, or the Commandment is sought to be derogated, altered, or abolished. In the later event, it becomes obligatory on the Imam, even at the cost of his life, to stand up to such attempts to abrogate, alter, abolish, or challenge the validity of the Divine Commandments.*”⁵

It is appropriate to mention here that most of the writings on *Imamate* relate to the apparently human qualities of the fourteen Infallible ones (a.s.). In fact, they are perfect in everything and represent the unique model of morals and manners. The Prophets and the Imams form the link between God and man, and therefore, necessarily, one facet of their personality reflects Divinity while the other reflects human quality.

The concept of the Ideal or Perfect Man (*Insan Kamil*) among the Sufis and some sects of Muslims, and the concept of Avatara Purusha among the Hindus, are the nearest but not the perfect examples for the Shiite concept.

In Shiite Islam, people have no right to choose the successor of the Holy Prophet (S) as it is the prerogative reserved to God by Himself. The simple reason is that man's knowledge is limited to availability, approach, and reach. Due to the innate human tendency to err, man's knowledge is subject to frequent revision. Human knowledge is constantly evolving, aided by observations and assisted by the implements progressively invented by man.

Shiite tenets contradict the assumption raised by the other Islamic sects that the Prophet (S) was, after all, an ordinary human being just like any of us, and that he had two sides to his personality; occasions when he acted as the Messenger of God and received Qur'anic Revelations from God, and at all other times, when he was just a man, susceptible to commit mistakes or be affected by natural human frailties. Refuting this concept, the Shia hold that Prophets are invested with the office of Prophethood from their inception in the Spiritual sphere. In that sphere, God made covenants with them.⁶ They continue to be Prophets from the moment of their birth in this world and remain so throughout every moment of their life. The example of Jesus speaking from the cradle⁷ is a case in this point. Therefore, there is no possibility of the Prophet's committing any error at any time. Nor can any successor of the Prophet (S) be fallible.

The Sunni sects, on the other hand, hold that after the Prophet (S), any person can become his successor by election, nomination, or appointment by a select committee. The Shia argue that assuming that all the buffalos of the world joined together and selected or elected the one who had the longest horns among them and declared him to be a 'man', he would nonetheless not cease to be a buffalo, nor will he become a 'man'. It is God Who created him a buffalo and he will remain so. No progress, no evolution, no experience will elevate him to the position of man. So also only, those that are Divinely appointed shall be the Prophets or the Successors. Man has no say in the matter.

The Shia consider the Holy Prophet (S), as the Perfect Man, and being God's chosen representative, as the Perfect Mirror that reflects the summation and totality of the Being of God, without the need for integration, incarnation or transmigration. For, it is impossible to speak of integration, incarnation or transmigration without presupposing two existents, whereas here there is only One Existence [without a second] ; all things being extant within that One Being, but not existent by themselves. The Existence that is One without a second manifests Himself through His Creation and conceals Himself in His Names. Between the states of manifestation and concealment there is an intermediary stage (Barzakh) that distinguishes the manifest from the hidden. This Barzakh is the Perfect Man who is the Mirror that reflects summarily or in detail, the Manifest and the Hidden or an intermingling of both.⁸ The Imams (a.s.) being the inheritors of the Prophet (S) are the successors to the Perfect Man.

The Perfect Man is God's representative on the earth at all times. All Apostles, Messengers, Prophets, and Vicegerents are Perfect Men of their times. The earth cannot be without the Perfect Man to guide humankind from the first to the last day.

In short, the mirror (more aptly a photograph) shows the image, but by itself, it is something other than what it reflects. Yet, we identify the person it reflects. The concept of Immaculacy and Infallibility of the Imams (a.s.) is based on the fact that despite being the Mirror that reflects Divine qualities, which often led men to assume and erroneously declare that the Perfect Man (*Ma'soom*:infallible) is 'God', the infallible ones (a.s.) themselves always rejected such false attributes and elevation to godhead and declared that they possess human qualities since they were once born (and therefore had a beginning)

and one day they would be destined to leave this world,⁹ whereas the Almighty Creator alone is Beginningless and Eternal.

The Shia assert that both the spiritual and temporal leadership was with the Prophet (S). After him, it was vested upon the designated successors; the *Imams* of the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.). On the other hand, other sects of Muslims consider the caliph, not necessarily appointed by God, as the Temporal Authority, distinct from the Spiritual Authority (the Imam). Therefore, according to the Sunnis, the successors of the Prophets can be chosen by men, from among men. The Shias consider that the Successor of a Prophet should be beyond human frailties so that there is not the slightest possibility of his committing any error or be influenced by worldly considerations while transmitting the Word of God and the Divine mission. This is the basic Shiite tenet of the Infallibility of the Imams (a.s.), the successors of the Holy Prophet (S).

The Shias and a vast majority of Sunnis hold that the Holy Prophet (S), his daughter the Immaculate Fatima (a.s.), Imam Ali (a.s.) and eleven Imams (a.s.) from their progeny, designated by God, are the Immaculate and Infallible persons (a.s.).¹⁰ God declared them chaste and He protected them from even the slightest shadow of error.¹¹ Hence, the traditions related from the Infallible ones (a.s.) alone are considered authentic by the Shias.

Thus, in Shiite thought, like the Prophet (S), the Imams (a.s.) hold a unique position as the Intermediary between God and Man. It is therefore that Imam Ali (a.s.) proclaimed, “*I am the Dawn of the First day of Creation.*”¹² The symbolism here is very eloquent. The dawn is the intervening period that separates the night from the day, but by itself it is neither ‘day’ nor ‘night’. One end is merged with the night and the other end is merged in the day. So is the position of the Imam (a.s.), who, being the intermediary between God and Man, is the reflection of both, while by himself he is different from both. On the one hand, in the capacity of the servant, the Imam (a.s.) is subservient to the Omniscient and Omnipotent God, and on the other hand, the Imam (a.s.), as the all-knowing Guide to humankind, is far superior to and different from man.

¹. ‘Sihah’ is the plural for of ‘Sahih’ that is a book of Hadith.

². The greatest imam.

³. Qur’an, 10: 15, 33:62, 35:43.

⁴. Qur’an, 10: 15, 33:62, 35:43.

⁵. Nuqoosh-e-Ismat, by Allama Zeeshan Haider Jawadi.

⁶. Qur’an, 3:81.

⁷. Qur’an, 17:30.

⁸. Mir’aatul Aarifeen fee Multamise Zainul Aabideen, p. 24 and 25, English Translation of Text, Translation, Introduction and Notes by Sayyid Hasan Askari, Publishers:Zahra Trust U.K [1983], Burlington Press [Cambridge] Ltd., Foxton, Cambridge CB 2 6SW.

⁹. Qur’an, 3: 185, 21:35.

¹⁰. A Shiite Creed, Publisher WOFIS, P. 83, Waheed Akhtar, Early Imamiyya Shiite Thinkers, P xxxii.

¹¹. Qur’an, 33:33.

¹². Nahjul Asrar.

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