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Introduction: A Comparison between Imam al-Husayn's ('a) Path and That of Other Imams ('a)

[Dissimulation \[Taqiyyah\]](#)

The comparison between Imam al-Husayn's¹ approach and that of other Imams is a topic worthy of research and discussion. Many view Imam al-Husayn's methodology as being contradictory to that of other Imams, such as Imam al-Hassan² ('a)³, Imam al-Sajjad⁴ ('a), Imam al-Baqir⁵ ('a), Imam al-Sadiq⁶ ('a) and even that of Amir al-Mu'minin⁷, 'Ali ('a), suggesting that the rest of the Imams followed a dissimilar doctrine to Imam al-Husayn ('a). This belief ultimately triggered problems and created confusion in the hearts of the believers; given that they needed to know who to follow in their deeds and practices, it is necessary for the follower to know which doctrine he must refer to.

To clarify this topic of discussion, I must add that "dissimulation" [*taqiyyah*]⁸ is the attribute by which the Shi'ahs have been recognized and that it is something which has been advocated by the teachings of the Divine Imams. It is perceived as an exclusive characteristic of the Shi'ah. So much so that the terms "Shi'ah" and "dissimulation" as well as "Hatam al-Ta'i"⁹ and "generosity", are conceded as implicants of each other.

All of the Imams acted in accordance with dissimulation during their lifetime, except Imam al-Husayn who did not dissimulate and instead chose to rise up against the corrupt government. If dissimulation was justified, why then did Imam al-Husayn choose not to act upon it, even though all the necessary grounds were laid for him to do so? And if dissimulation was not justified, why did the rest of the Imams dissimulate and order their followers to do so?

Moreover, this in itself is a fundamental debate regardless of whether the methodologies of the Imams were similar or if they differed. Assuming that they all followed one methodology, all chose to dissimulate or none did so, this in itself must be debated, taking into consideration the principles of jurisprudence¹⁰ and Islamic theology (including whether or not dissimulation corresponds to Qur'anic teachings and

logic).

Although widely attributed to the Shi'ah branch of Islam, dissimulation is also present among non-Shi'ahs—it is on the same level as the belief that alterations to the Qur'an are part of the Shi'ism. Albeit, supposing a group of Shi'ahs are able to alter the Qur'an; the same numbers of Sunnis¹¹ are able to carry out such a task. The number does not change according to one's belief. Of course, if a Sunni scholar cannot distort the Qur'an, then neither could a Shi'ah scholar. However, this issue was only raised as an example and we do not intend to focus on it here.

To further clarify the issue of dissimulation, it must be noted that there have been other examples where contradictions in the doctrine and behaviour of the Imams were observed, not only in the issue of dissimulation. For example, the Prophet (s)¹² might have acted differently from Imam 'Ali ('a), or both acted the same, whereas Imam al-Sadiq and Imam al-Baqir ('a) acted dissimilar to them. These discrepancies have been noticed on many occasions and I shall mention some of them in further examples. Therefore, given that we believe in the infallibility of the Imams, that their deeds are as much a testament as their word, whose conduct should we pursue?

Since we believe that the Prophet (s) has directed us towards them, we have accepted the leadership of Ahl al-Bayt¹³ ('a) and regard their sayings and deeds as testament. Therefore, we are more affluent in evidence and sayings than the Sunnis. We have more traditions [*hadiths*] and valuable prayers (which themselves act as gates to Islamic culture and education, and must be discussed separately) than the Ahl al-Sunnah. Since they do not have as many traditions as we do, this places Shi'ism in a richer state. Those who have counted the number of *hadiths* in the Sunni *Sihah al-Sittah*¹⁴ and *Al-Kafi*¹⁵ have said that there are not as many *hadiths* in those six authentic books as there are in *Al-Kafi*. I have not counted the number myself, but those who have read the books have said that it contains more than 16,000 *hadiths*, making this book a jewel for the Shi'ahs. For this reason, the Shi'ism has never seen the need for *qiyas*¹⁶ (analogical reasoning) and *istihsan*¹⁷ (juristic preference), which has always been a source of pride.

I would, however, like to add that there is no doubt that having a large number of *hadiths* and references can be regarded as a strong point for the Shi'ahs. However, as a result of numerous errors, they can also be considered as a setback for the Shi'ahs. Having fourteen leaders, each of whom announces different routes and traditions may result in perplexity, confusion and chaos. This will only pave the way for those who wish to use religion in their own interests, to achieve their immoral aims by spreading corruption.

They will be equipped with holy forces, using the *hadiths* and deeds of the Imams as proof justification for their actions. In this way, they misguide everyone else to act in the way they desire. All this will only result in dispersal, chaos, lack of morals, and social principles. Pity the nation which lacks morals and social principles, allowing everybody acting upon their own ways of thinking. The saying “once a patient has too many doctors, there is no hope for recovery” is on the same basis with what is mentioned

above.

Beyond doubt, if all these apparently different methodologies are not researched, examined and explored, we will still see these negative effects even if we have several leaders with different approaches, or leaders that have the same approach but express it differently in different places and we will not be able to resolve these differences to reach a specific aim. This will lead us to chaos as mentioned before.

As an example, if we look at the lives of Prophet Muhammad(s) and Imam 'Ali ('a), we see that they lived in poverty, wearing patched clothing and feeding themselves on oat bread. Also in the *Qur'an* it says,

“Indeed, you have in the Messenger of Allah an outstanding exemplar for him whose hope is in Allah and the Last Day, and remembers Allah much.”^{[18](#)}

This implies that all people are obliged to follow the Prophet's path and customs. They must all live on low class levels and wear patched clothes. On the other hand, when observing the lives of Imam al-Mujtaba^{[19](#)}, Imam al-Sadiq or Imam al-Rida^{[20](#)} ('a), we see that they did not live in the same fashion as the Prophet. They lived well, ate good food, wore good clothes and appreciated the superb aspects of life.

Once, Imam al-Sadiq ('a) paid a visit to a wealthy person. He found the wealthy person in a small house. The Imam asked him, “Why do you not buy yourself a bigger house?” He replied: “This is my father's house, in which he used to live.” The Imam then asked, “If your father was lacking common sense, does that mean you should be foolish like he was? Do you want to pay the price for your father's senselessness for the rest of your life?”

It is such apparent contradictory issues in Shi'ism that make it look like it has this weak spot. But the same example can be used to show that not only is it not a weak point but a point of strength. For an introduction, let us assume two cases:

1) when an infallible leader [*imam*] lives among us for 20–30 years, the changes, transformation, twists and turns that take place and the way the Imam acts towards them are not enough for us to master all the necessary aspects of religion and become familiar with the outlooks and features which we will be required to base our lives on in this changing world. This is because religion, like all other theoretical and practical studies, has its own statements and adjustments and orientations.

2) But if the same leader lived with us for 250 years, facing a variety of matters, and showed us ways of solving and dealing with such issues, we would become better accustomed to religious teachings and free from extremity and aridity. According to the logic expression “free of taking something as a cause that is not the cause”^{[21](#)}, we would be better able to escape the “mixing of reality and subsidiary”^{[22](#)}. Mixing reality and subsidiary means two things that are always together, one of which is involved in a third matter, the other of which is in no way involved with the third matter but its presence is based on its

company of the first. It would be wrong for us to assume that the second matter is the cause of the third matter. Assuming we have A and B on a plate. A produces C. We might then think B produced C or that B had an effect on producing C. It is of no doubt that religious leaders followed a doctrine and ideology suitable to their time, meaning religion has given freedom to people according to the exigency of the time. Therefore, with a multiplicity of religious leaders or long life of one leader, man can better distinguish the essence of religious teachings from the exigency of his time. He can grasp the spirit of the religion and exclude the issues that are only appropriate to the exigency of time. It is possible that the Prophet (s) executed some actions based on the necessity of his time, like the destitute life he used to live. On the other hand, Imam al-Sadiq (‘a) did not live such a life. Now I shall narrate a story, which may help to clarify this issue.

In a famous saying, mentioned both in *Al-Kafi* and *Tuhaf al-‘Uqul*, Sufyan al-Thawri²³ visited Imam al-Sadiq (‘a) and objected to the Imam wearing fine clothing, since the Prophet (s) did not wear such garments. The Imam said, “Are you inferring that since the Prophet used to live in that way, everyone else should do the same until the end? Do you not know that this is not a part of the Islamic commandment? You must act and think upon wisdom. You must use your intellect and take time and place in to consideration.²⁴ The Prophet used to live a middle-class lifestyle appropriate to his time. Islam commands equality and compassion. We must observe that this was the lifestyle of the majority at that time. Of course, as the Prophet was the leader, people used to give up their wealth and life for him and it was possible for him to have all sorts of lifestyles.

However, he never took advantage of that, even though it was all available to him. Islamic commandments denote sympathy, compassion and equality. They stand for justice and fairness. It is the soft and delicate methods which stop the frustration in the soul of the poor and prevents a friend or a neighbour, or whoever may be watching your acts, from becoming upset. If the luxurious lifestyle that is available now were possible during the time of the Prophet, then he would not have conducted his life in that way.

People are given personal choices on the aspect of dressing up, and may choose whether to wear old or new clothes, in whichever material and style they prefer. Religion does not pay attention to such matters. What is important in religion are issues such as sympathy, compassion, equality, justice and fairness.” The Imam then added, “And as you see me now, I am aware of the responsibilities towards my possessions, thus there is no logical or spiritual difference between my method and the Prophet’s (s).” It has been mentioned in the *hadiths* that there was once a famine during the time of Imam al-Sadiq (‘a). He ordered his finance supervisor to sell their stocked wheat in the market and said they would purchase their daily bread needs from there. The bread from the market was made from a mix of oat and wheat. Islam does not specify whether to have wheat bread or oat bread or mix oat and wheat together, but it does say: your way among people should be accompanied with fairness, justice and kindness.

Examining this difference between the Prophet’s approach and Imam al-Sadiq’s, we can better

understand the spirit of Islam. If Imam al-Sadiq had not explained this issue, we would have considered this aspect of the life of the Prophet (his middle class lifestyle), which was based on the necessities of his time, to be a part of Islamic commandments correlated with *Surat al-Ahzab* (33:21) which commands us to follow the Prophet. This would have led us to presenting complicated arguments and restricting people until the Day of Judgement. Therefore, Imam al-Sadiq's statement and his explanation of the apparent difference between his method and the Prophet's is a valuable lesson for us which relieves us from extremity and aridity and familiarizes us with the meaning and spirit of religion. Fortunately, Imam al-Sadiq has made a statement personally on this issue, but even if he had not made such a statement, our own wisdom, endeavor and independent judgement should help us not to consider such issues contradictory, opposing and conflicting. Such extremity is especially present among Traditionalists [Akhbaris]²⁵ who even disallow smoking.

Consequently, one way to solve the contradictions facing the different doctrines is what is known in common expression as the conventional solution [*al-hall al-'urfi*]²⁶ or the conventional reconciliation [*al-jam' al-'urfi*]²⁷, which considers the difference in necessities of the time. This can even be used in cases of contradiction, to which our scholars have not paid attention.

Another example; once they mentioned this *hadith* to 'Ali, "Color the white hairs in the beard and do not let yourselves resemble the Jews." 'Ali used to narrate this but never acted upon it, meaning he never dyed his beard. 'Ali responded thus, "This order was specific to the Prophet's time. It was a war tactic employed so that the enemy would not be able to recognize the old from the young in the army. This was a con at times of war, which the Prophet used repeatedly but today it depends on individuals' prerogative."

Now if Imam 'Ali's method was not there and he had not explained this issue, we would have assumed that the Prophet had commanded all people to dye their beards and we would have been occupied by the state of people's beards, instructing them to continue to dye their beards until the Day of Judgement. Thus, this is itself a way of solving the contradictions. Of course, this task needs all the necessary research and studying.

I remember one of the well-informed and broad-minded scholars who talked about 'delegated freedom' [*tafwid*], traditions that echoed frequently, about how Allah gives free-will (e.g. the authority of the justice administration) had said: for example...²⁸

We should also know that there are issues related to the essence of religious teachings, i.e. the divine collective commands. They cannot be altered or transformed in anyway and are a consequence of high and public interests. Until there is man, these commandments are there and until the point that man is a man, he must take these commandments in use.

¹. Husayn ibn 'Ali ibn Abi Talib(626-680), the third Shi'ah Imam.

². Imam al-Hasan ibn 'Ali ibn Abi Talib(625-669), the second Shi'ah Imam.

³. The abbreviation, "a" stands for the Arabic invocative phrase, 'alayhi's-salam, 'alayhim'us-salam, or 'alayha's-salam

[may peace be upon him/them/her], which is mentioned after the names of the prophets, angels, Imams from the Prophet's progeny, and saints ('a). [Trans.]

- [4.](#) Imam 'Ali ibn al-Husayn (658–713), the fourth Shi'ah Imam.
- [5.](#) Imam Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-Baqir, the fifth Imam.
- [6.](#) Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (702–765), the sixth Shi'ah Imam.
- [7.](#) Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (599–661), the first Shi'ah Imam.
- [8.](#) The practice of hiding one's beliefs when under pressure.
- [9.](#) Hadrat al-Ta'i: a heroic figure famous for his generosity in pre-Islamic Arabia.
- [10.](#) Principles of jurisprudence: a science which discusses the methodologies of deducting Islamic rulings.
- [11.](#) Sunni Muslims form the largest branch of Islam. They are referred to as Ahl al-Sunnah, those who follow the tradition. The word Sunni comes from the word Sunnah, which means the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad(s).
- [12.](#) The abbreviation, "s", stands for the Arabic invocative phrase, sallallahu 'alayhi wa alihi wa sallam [may God's blessings and peace be upon him and his progeny], which is mentioned after the name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (s). [Trans.]
- [13.](#) Ahl al-Bayt is a phrase meaning People of the House, or family. In the Islamic tradition it refers to the Household of the Prophet Muhammad.
- [14.](#) The six authentic hadith books for the Ahl al-Sunnah.
- [15.](#) Al-Kafi by Muhammad ibn Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Kulayni al-Razi. This book is a collection of the traditions taught by the Prophet and the Imams and handed down to the Muslim community by the disciples of the Imams. The name al-Kafi means "that which is sufficient"; that is, the book was intended to be a comprehensive collection of traditions created by Shi'ah Imams.
- [16.](#) In Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, qiyas is the process of analogical reasoning from a known injunction [naṣṭs] to a new injunction.
- [17.](#) Istihsan is an Arabic term for juristic "preference". Muslim Sunni scholars may use it to express their preference for particular judgements in Islamic law over other possibilities. It is one of the principles of legal thought underlying personal interpretation or ijtihad.
- [18.](#) Surat al-Ahzab 33:21.
- [19.](#) Imam al-Hasan ibn 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (625–669), the second Shi'ah Imam.
- [20.](#) Imam 'Ali ibn Musa al-Rida (766–818), the eighth Shi'ah Imam.
- [21.](#) This is a philosophical principle.
- [22.](#) This one is also a philosophical principle.
- [23.](#) Sufyan ibn Sa'id ibn Masruq Abu 'Abd Allah al-Thawri al-Kufi (d. 783 CE): He was a hadith scholar (the Imam of the "Ahl al-Hadith") of the eighth century.
- [24.](#) See Ibn Shu'bah al-Harrani, Tuhaf al-'Uqul (Qum/Iran, 1994), p. 24.
- [25.](#) The Traditionalists are those who consider the traditions [ahadith] as the only source to receive religious information. They do not recognize using the common ijtihad (the Qur'an and intellect) feasible.
- [26.](#) Methodologies or principles of Islamic jurisprudence [usul al-fiqh].
- [27.](#) Also based on usul al-fiqh.
- [28.](#) Unfinished text by the author.

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