

Lesson 1: The Place of Leadership in Islam

The Place of Leadership¹ in Islam

The Imam is, with respect to the masses composing the *ummah*, the leader and exemplar from whose intellectual power and insight those travelling toward God benefit, whose conduct and mode of life they imitate, and to whose commands they submit.

Imamate has a broad and comprehensive sense that includes both intellectual authority and political leadership. After the death of the Prophet, the Imam was entrusted with the guardianship of his accomplishments and the continuation of his leadership, in order to teach men the truths of the Qur'an and religion and ordinances concerning society; in short, he was to guide them in all dimensions of their existence.

Such leadership, exercised in its true and proper form, is nothing other than the realization of the goals of Islam and the implementation of its precepts, precepts established by the Messenger of God; it bestows objective existence on the ideal of forming a community and codifying a law for its governance. Imamate and leadership are sometimes understood in a restricted sense to refer to the person who is entrusted with exclusively social or political leadership.

However, the spiritual dimension of man is connected intimately with the mission of religion, and the true and veritable Imam is that exalted person who combines in himself intellectual authority and political leadership; who stands at the head of Islamic society, being enabled thereby both of convey to men the divine laws that exist in every sphere and to implement them; and who preserves the collective identity and the human dignity of the Muslims from decline and corruption.

In addition, the Imam is one whose personality, already in this world, has a divine aspect; his dealings with God and man, his implementation of all the devotional, ethical and social precepts of God's religion, furnish a complete pattern and model for imitation. It is the Imam who guides the movement of men toward perfection. It is therefore incumbent on all believers to follow him in all matters, for he is a living exemplar for the development of the self and of society, and his mode of life is the best specimen of virtue for the Islamic community.

Most Sunni scholars are of the opinion that Caliphate (*khilafah*) and Imamate (*imamah*) are synonymous, both signifying the heavy social and political responsibility bestowed on the caliph, who attains his position of guardianship for the affairs of the Muslims by election. The caliph both solves the religious problems of the people and assures public security and guards the frontiers of the country through the exercise of military power. The caliph (or Imam) is therefore at one and the same time a leader of conventional type and a ruler concerned with the welfare of society, whose ultimate aim is the establishment of justice and guarding the frontiers of the country, it is for the sake of these aims that he is elected.

According to this concept, the qualifications for leadership are governmental competence and capacity for rule. On the one hand, the leader must punish errant and corrupt individuals by implementing the penalties God has decreed; hold in check those who would transgress against the rights of others; and repress rebellious and anarchic ruffians. On the other hand, by acquiring the necessary military equipment and organizing a powerful army, he must both protect the frontiers of the Islamic state against all aggression, and also confront, with jihad and armed struggle, various forms of shirk and corruption and factors of ignorance and unbelief if they prevent the progress or the implementation of true religion and the dissemination of *tawhid* by way of propagation and guidance powers proves impossible.

In this view of things, it does not present a major problem if the leader or ruler has no background of erudition with respect to God's ordinances, or even if he has strayed beyond the boundaries of piety and polluted himself with sin. Anyone can lay claim to the title of successor (*khalifah*) to the Prophet who undertakes the tasks he used to fulfil. It is not offensive if some oppressive tyrant establishes his dominance over Islamic society by trampling the rights of the people, shedding their blood and exercising military force, calling himself the leader of the Muslims; or if some two-faced politician assumes the office of successor to the Prophet, and then proceeds to rule over people, despite his lack of spiritual and moral qualities, canceling all notion of justice and equity. Indeed, not only is it impermissible to oppose him; it is necessary to obey him.

It is on the basis of this view of the matter that one of the great Sunni scholars expressed himself as follows concerning the caliph:

"The caliph cannot be removed from office on account of contravening God's laws and commands, transgressing against the property of individuals or killing them, or suspending the laws God has decreed. In such a case, it is the duty of the Islamic community to set his misdeeds aright and to draw him onto the path of true guidance."²

However, if such an atmosphere predominates in the institution of the caliphate, with the caliph leaving no sense of responsibility, based on his own religiosity, toward Muslim society, how can those who wish to reform the situation constantly watch over the deeds of a corrupt leadership, evince the appropriate reaction on every occasion, and purge Islam of deviation? Can rulers be persuaded by mere advice to change their ways?

If God had wished to entrust the destinies of the community to unworthy rulers, to impious and selfish oppressors, it would not have been necessary for him to bestow messenger hood on the Prophet or to reveal the ordinances needed for the stability of society. Did those caring, self-sacrificing and noble souls who throughout the centuries rebelled against evil and oppressive rulers act contrary to God's will?

Dr. Abd al-'Aziz al-Duri, a Sunni scholar, writes as follows:

"At the time the sovereignty of the caliphate was being established, the political theory of the Sunnis with respect to this institution was not based simply on Qur'an and *hadith*. Rather it rested on the principle that Qur'an and *hadith* must be understood and explicated in accordance with whatever events subsequently occurred. Thus every generation left its mark on the theory of the caliphate, because that theory assumed a new shape with each new occurrence and was colored by it. An obvious example is the case of Qadi Abu 'l-Hasan al-Mawardi, who served as chief judge under the caliph. When writing his book *al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah* he kept the concerns of the caliph in mind, at a time when the caliphate was at its most degenerate. He employed all his mental powers to reconcile the views of earlier jurists with the situation existing in his own time and the developments that were occurring then. His sole talent was in eschewing any kind of free and original thought. He wrote:

"It is permissible for an unfit individual to be the leader even if a fit individual is also to be found. Once someone has been chosen, he cannot be removed simply because there is someone better and more fitted available.'

"He admits and vindicates this principle in order to justify rule by numerous unfit caliphs. It is possible, too, that he wished to refute Shi'i views on the subject. The theological and credence view he puts forth serves no other purpose for the Sunnis but to justify the political developments of the day. The only aim was to justify whatever might be grouped under the heading of *ijma'* (consensus)."³

Such are the intellectual foundations of those who regard themselves as followers of the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and the guardians of religion and the *shari'ah*. They denounce as rejecters and traitors to the *Sunnah* of God's Messenger a whole host of Islamic thinkers and social reformers, followers of the Imams of justice, the proofs of God and the guides of mankind.

If rulers who are strangers to the spirit of Islam and trample underfoot the laws of God, have the right to rule over the believers; and if the *ummah* of Islam is obliged to obey such rulers, being forbidden to take them to task in order to reform the caliphate or to disobey their orders what then becomes of the religion of God?

Can the Islamic conscience accept this as a proper form of loyalty to the *shari'ah* of the Prophet? Is not the inevitable result of this mode of thought the granting of unlimited rights to the powerful and oppressive tyrants that have ruled throughout history?

By contrast, the Imamate in the view of the Shi'ah is a form of divine governance, an office depending on

appointment just like prophethood, something God bestows on exalted persons. The difference is that the Prophet is the founder of the religion and the school of thought that proceeds from it, whereas the Imam has the function of guarding and protecting God's religion, in the sense that people have the duty of following in all dimensions of their life the spiritual values and mode of conduct of the Imams.

After the Messenger of God, the Islamic *ummah* stood in need of a worthy personage who would be endowed with the knowledge derived from revelation, exempt from sin and impurity, and capable of perpetuating the path of the founder of the *shari'ah*. Only such a personage would be able not only to watch over the political developments of the time and to protect society from its deviant elements, but also to provide people with the extensive religious knowledge which spring from the fountainhead of revelation and derive from the general principles of the *shari'ah*. The laws derived from revelation would thus be preserved, and the torch of truth and justice held high.

Imamate and caliphate are inseparable, in just the same way that the governmental functions of the Messenger of God cannot be separated from his prophetic office. Spiritual Islam and political Islam are two parts of a single whole. However, in the course of Islamic history, political power did become separated from the spiritual Imamate, and the political dimension of religion was separated from its spiritual dimension.

If Islamic society is not headed by a worthy, just, God fearing person, one unsullied by moral impurity, whose deeds and words serve as a model for people; if, on the contrary, the ruler of society himself violates the law and turns his back on the principles of justice there will be no environment capable of receiving justice, and it will not be possible neither for virtue and piety to grow and ascend, nor for the aim of Islamic government to be accomplished, which is none other than orienting men to the Supreme Principle and creating a sound environment for the dissemination of spiritual values and the implementation of a law based on divine revelation. The moral conduct of the ruler and the role of government have so profound and powerful an effect on society that 'Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, regarded it as more influential than the educative role of the father within the household. He thus said: "With respect to their morals, people resemble their rulers more than they resemble their fathers."⁴

Since there is a particular connection and affinity between the aims of a given government and the attributes and characteristics of its leader, attaining the ideals of Islamic government is dependent on the existence of a leader in whom are crystallized the special qualities of a perfected human being.

In addition, the need of a society moving forward toward its own perfection for leadership and governance is a natural and innate need, and in just the same way that Islam has made provision for the individual and collective needs of man, material and moral, by codifying and ordering a coherent system of law, it must also pay heed to the natural need for leadership in a fashion that accords with man's essential disposition.

God has provided every existent being with all the tools and instruments it needs to transcend the limitations of weakness and lack and advance toward its own perfection. Is it then possible that man who is also nurtured in the embrace of nature would somehow be excepted from the operation of this inviolable rule and be deprived of the means of spiritual ascent?

Could it be said that a Creator Who has lavished generosity on man for the sake of his bodily development might deprive him of the most basic means needed for his spiritual elevation, that He might grudge him this bounty?

At the time of the death of the Messenger of God, the Islamic nation had not reached the cultural or intellectual level that would have permitted it to continue its development toward perfection without guardianship and oversight. The program that Islam had established for the development and elevation of man would have remained soulless and incomplete unless the principle of Imamate had been joined to it; Islam would have been unable to play its precious role in the liberation of man and the blossoming of his talents.

Fundamental Islamic texts proclaim that if the principle of Imamate is subtracted from Islam, the spirit of the laws of Islam and the progressive, monotheistic society based on them would be lost; nothing would remain but a lifeless form.

The Prophet of Islam, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, said: "Whosoever dies without recognizing the Imam of his time dies the death of the *Jahiliyyah*."⁵

The reason for this is that during the *Jahiliyyah* pre-Islamic era of ignorance the people were polytheists; they knew nothing of either monotheism or of prophethood. This categorical declaration by the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, shows the importance that he assigned to the Imamate, to the degree that if someone fails to place his spiritual life beneath the protective cover of a perfected ruler he is equivalent to one whose whole life was spent in the *Jahiliyyah* and then went unredeemed to his death.

¹. By 'leadership' here is implied the conception of Imamate. An Imam is an infallible person designated by the prophet as his successor by God's command.

². Baqillani, al-Tamhid, p. 186.

³. al-Duri, al-Nuzum al-Islamiyyah, Vol. I, pp. 72-84.

⁴. al-Majlisi, Biharal-Anwar, Vol, XVII, p. 129.

⁵. Ahmad b. Hanbal, al-Musnad, p. 96.

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