

[Home](#) > [Fifty Lessons On Principles Of Belief For Youth](#) > [Part 4: Imamate \(Leadership\)](#) > [Lesson 31: When did Imamology Begin?](#) > Think and Answer

Lesson 31: When did Imamology Begin?

We know that after the death of the Prophet of Islam, Muslims were divided into two groups:

One group believed that the Holy Prophet did not designate a successor to himself. This group believes that he left it up to his nation to meet and decide among themselves who their leader should be. This group is called Sunnite.

The other group believes that the Holy Prophet was infallible, immaculate and free of sin and error and had knowledge so that he could spiritually and materially lead the people and preserve the essence of Islam so that it would find continuation.

They believe that selection of such a person could only come from God through the Holy Prophet of Islam and that the Holy Prophet did this and he selected Imam 'Ali as his successor. This group is called Shiites.

Our goal in these brief discussions is to follow-up these issues by using intellectual and historic reasoning verses, of the Holy Qur'an and Traditions of the Holy Prophet.

But before we begin the main discussion, several points should be mentioned.

1. Will this Discussion cause Differences?

The moment that the discussion centers on imamate, some people immediately say something to the effect that, "Today is not a day for such discussions!"

Today is the day to discuss Muslim unity and any discussion about the successor to the Holy Prophet only causes differences and separation!

Today we have common enemies and we have to do something about them, namely, Zionism and eastern and western colonialism. Conflicting issues must be put aside.

But this way of thinking is completely wrong.

In the first place, that which causes differences and separation is discussions and debates which are based on prejudice, illogic and hatred.

But discussions which are logical and reasonable free of discrimination and quarreling, held in a friendly environment, not only are not a cause for differences of opinion and separation, but rather they decrease the distances and common points of belief are strengthened.

In my journey to the Hijaz, with the intention of the pilgrimage to God's House, I held many discussions with the scholars and learned Sunni men. Both of us felt that these discussions not only were not ineffective, but that they caused greater unity and understanding; they decreased the distance between the two sects and everyone washed away their prejudices.

The important thing is that which will become clear in these lessons; we have many points in common with one another and we can rely upon them in face of our Common enemy.

Sunnis are divided into four sects: Hanafis, Hanbalis, Shafi's, and Malikis. Existence of these four groups have not caused separation among them and when they, at least, accept Shi'ism as a fifth school of thought, many of the differences fall away. Recently, the great Muftis and head of the al-Ahzar University (in Cairo), Shaykh Shaltut, took an effective step and formally announced the acceptance of the Shi'ite school of thought among the Sunnis.

This was a step towards the understanding of Islam and establishing friendly relations between himself and the late Burujerdi, the great leader of the Shi'ites.

Secondly, we believe that Islam is crystallized in Shi'ism. While we have respect for all of the Islamic sects, we believe that Shi'ism can better introduce the real Islam in all of its dimensions and solve the problems related to the leadership of the Islamic community.

Why should we not teach our children this school with reason and logic and if we do not do this, clearly we have committed an act of treason.

We are certain that the Holy Prophet selected his successor. What is wrong with following up this belief with reason and logic?

But in these lessons, we must be careful that the religious emotions of others are not slighted.

Thirdly, in order to destroy the principles and unity of Muslims, the enemies of Islam tell such lies and so instigate Sunnis against Shi'ites, tell so many lies and so insult Shi'ites about the Sunnis so that in some countries, in general, they have grown distant from each other.

When we discuss the issue of imamate in the method described above, and mention the points which the Shi'ites emphasize, and we use proof from the books of the Sunnis, it becomes clear that the propaganda was lies and that the common enemy has tried to poison the environment.

As an example, in one of my trips to the Hijaz, I held a meeting with one of the important religious leaders of the Sunnis. He said, "I have heard that the Shi'ites have a Qur'an which is different from our Qur'an."

I was very surprised. I said: "Proving that this was not true is very simple. I invite you or your representative to come to Iran after the hajj umrah, without any previous notification. You will see that on every street, in every bazaar or mosque or home, there are Qur'ans. We will go into any mosque that you choose, and study the Qur'ans there. So that it becomes clear that our Qur'an and yours are exactly the same. Most of the Qur'ans which we use are printed in the hijaz or in Egypt and other Islamic countries."

This very friendly conversation clearly did away with the amazing misconceptions which had been planted in the mind of one of the famous religious leaders.

The point is that a discussion on imamate, in this manner, confirms the unity of Islamic society, helps in clarifying the truths and decreasing the differences of opinion.

2. What is Imamate?

Imam means leader, leader of the Muslims. In the principles of belief of the Shi'ites, an immaculate or pure Imam refers to a person who is the successor to the Holy Prophet in all areas, with the difference that the Holy Prophet is the founder of the school and the Imam is the guardian and preserver of it. Revelation was revealed to the Holy Prophet but not to the Imams. They learned from the Holy Prophet and they had an extraordinary knowledge.

From the point of view of Shi'ism, an immaculate Imam does not just mean leader of Islamic rule, but rather, includes spiritual and material, internal and external leadership as well. In other words, they are responsible for leadership on all levels; they are responsible for the preservation and guardianship of Islamic beliefs and ideology, without any errors or deviation and they are the selected people of God.

But the Sunnis do not see imamate in this way. They only understand imamate as leader of the rule of Islamic society. In other words, leadership in every age and time is the caliph of the Prophet and the Imam of the Muslims!

Of course, in the future lessons we will prove that in every age and era, there must be a divine representative; a prophet or a pure Imam must be upon the earth to preserve the precepts of truth and guide those who long for the truth.

If one day this person is hidden from the people, a person, as his representative, is responsible for the preservation of the precepts and the formation of a government.

Think and Answer

1. What is the reason behind people saying that today is not a day to hold such discussions about imamate?
2. In response to this, how many answers can you give for the necessity of this discussion?
3. How does the enemy cause disputes among the Muslims and what is the way to seal these breaks?
4. Can you recall an example of a dispute which is caused by the enemy?
5. What is the meaning of imamate in Shi'ism and what is the difference with the definition given by the Sunnis?

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