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The Approach Adopted by Ahl al-Bayt

The school of thought preached by Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) regards the latter concept as the basis of Divine Justice whereby God rewards good doers for their good deeds and punishes the evil doers for their evil. Compulsion is akin to oppression and is a negation of justice, while empowerment is a postponement of effecting justice, disabling it from getting the upper-hand and the power it rightfully deserves. Both contradict the concept of the absolute perfection of the Divine.

A man visited Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and asked him, "O son of the Messenger of God (S)! It has been reported to us that the truthful (As-Sadiq) Ja'far ibn Muhammad (a.s.) said, `There is neither compulsion nor empowerment but a way to choose one of two.' What does he exactly mean?" He answered, "Whoever claims that God does our deeds and then penalizes us for doing them has in fact accepted the concept of compulsion, and whoever claims that God Almighty empowers His Proofs to distribute His sustenance has in fact adopts the belief of empowerment.

One who believes in compulsion is a *kafir* (disbeliever), and one who believes in empowerment is a *mushrik* (polytheist)." So I asked him, 'O son of the Messenger of God! Then what is this way to choose one of two means?' He answered, `It is finding a way to do what they are enjoined to do and forsake what they are enjoined to forsake.' I asked him, `Does God Almighty have a Way and a Will in this regard?' He said, `As regarding deeds done in obedience to His commandments, His Will in their regard is His approval of and assistance in their performance. As regarding His Will about sins, it is His order that they should be shunned, that He condemns them, and that He forsakes those who commit them.'"

Empowerment

Yasir the servant said, "I asked ar-Ridha' (a.s.), `What do you say about empowerment?' He said, `God Almighty entrusted His Creed to His Prophets to convey to people, saying, `Whatever the Messenger permitted for you, take it with approval, and whatever he ordered you not to do, do not do it.' As regarding creation and sustenance; no, He did not empower anyone in their regard.' Then he said, `God Almighty says: `God is the Creator of all things,'[1] and He also says, `It is God Who has created you:

further, He has provided for your sustenance; then He will cause you to die; and again He will give you life. Are there any of your (false) partners who can do any single one of these things? Glory to Him! And High is He above the partners they attribute (to Him)!'"[2]

Imam Warns

In another narrative, the Imam discloses for us the conduct which a believer has to undertake with those who believe in empowerment in order to create a psychological barrier between them and others which would paralyze their action and deprive them of the element whereby they influence others by the misleading and false creed they preach.

Abu Hashim al-Ja'fari says: "I asked Abul-Hasan (a.s.) about the *ghulat* and about those who believed in empowerment, and he said, `The *ghulat* are *kafirs* (disbelievers), while those who believe in empowerment are *mushriks* (polytheists). Those who sit with them, mix with them, eat or drink with them, visit them, marry their daughters to them or marry their daughters, accept their trusts or entrust them to keep theirs, believe in them, support them even by a fraction of a word, have abandoned the nearness to God, to the Messenger of God, and to us Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.).'"

In another narrative, when someone mentioned compulsion and empowerment, the Imam (a.s.) said to the attendants, "Shall I provide you with an original view in which you shall not dispute with each other, and through which you will win the argument over those who argued with you in its regard?' We requested him to do so, whereupon he said, `God Almighty was not obeyed by compulsion, nor was He disobeyed by being over-powered. He did not neglect His servants living in His domain; He is the King above their kings, the Powerful One above those who have power among them.

When His servants opt to obey Him, He would not stop them nor forbid them, and if they opt to disobey Him, He may interfere and foil their attempt, or He may not and they will do just that; therefore, He is not the One who caused them to disobey Him.' Then he said, `Anyone who masters this will have the winning argument over his opponent.'"

Imams Did Not Endorse Making Similitudes With God

Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), in a dialogue with al-Husayn ibn Khalid, denied what some people attributed to his forefathers when they claimed that they made similitudes to God and believed in compulsion, describing those people as *ghulat* who underestimated the Greatness of God Almighty, and that their fabrication about his forefathers and their attributing to them what they did not say was similar to the fabrication of others about the Messenger of God (S) by their narration of allegations endorsing making such similitudes and also endorsing compulsion.

Regarding the subject of *tawhid* and its relevant topics, Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) has a long discussion which requires an independent and sufficient research, and suffices us this brief presentation of what

was reported about him in this regard. Those who wish to pursue their research of this subject are referred to *'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha'* (*a.s.*) by Shaikh al-Saduq in which he compiled what was narrated about the Imam in this regard.

Transmigration of Souls

Al-Tanasukh kufr, that is, "To believe in the transmigration of the souls is to disbelieve in God," says the Imam in an answer to the question "What is your view regarding the transmigration of the souls?" put to him by someone. He answered saying, "Anyone who believes in *tanasukh is kafir* (disbeliever) in God the Great, a disbeliever in Heavens and in Hell." The reason for this is that the belief in the transmigration of the souls means that the human soul, after its departure from the body at the time of death, goes to the body of an animal to live in it. In other words, it is like a bird that as soon as it is set free from its cage will seek another cage. This implies a negation of the Judgment which is one of the basic principles of the Islamic creed, hence it is a negation of Paradise and Hell.

Those who believe in the transmigration of the souls interpret Paradise and Hell by saying that if the soul that was set free from the body settles inside a good animal, then it is Paradise, and if it settles inside a bad animal, then it is Hell, which is nothing but a hallucination which the Holy Qur'an clearly refutes, for both Paradise and Hell are realities rather than symbols as these persons would like to think.

Imamate

Imamate is one of the basic beliefs (*usool*) which was the starting point for all the deep differences since the early period of Islam and immediately after the demise of the Prophet (S). The Muslim *ummah*, therefore, split into contradictory and contrasting sects due to the deepening of the gaps either due to the actions of the ruling authorities, or to personal ambitions aspired by some of those who coveted to be Imams.

There are two major schools of thought in Islam which are regarded as the stems from which those sects branch. They are the Sunni school of thought, which preaches that Imamate after the Prophet (S) was the right of Abu Bakr then to the three caliphs who succeeded him, and the Imami Shi'a school of thought which preaches that Imamate after the Prophet (S) was the right of Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.) and to his eleven descendants after him. Each of these schools has its own arguments regarding proving its authenticity and the lack thereof of the other.

The Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) derive their arguments from clear and obvious statement in their regard said by the Prophet (S) and also due to their merits and qualifications which raised them above both common and elite individuals. Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) explained to us the actual program to identify an Imam which agrees with the human nature in considering the distinctive merits and the sufficient qualifications present in a person to qualify for such a very important status.

Imam's Qualifications

In defining the qualifications of the Imam, Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) tells us that he has to be the most knowledgeable among people, the most wise, the most pious, the most courageous, the most generous, and the best in worshipping God. These qualifications have to be present in the imam since he is the one charged with safeguarding the Islamic Message after the Prophet (S) and the one who clarifies its precise details and hidden meanings to people.

Selection of the Imam is Done by God

The Imam (a.s.) assured the person who inquired about these qualifications that the nation cannot be left to choose its *imam* without statements in this regard made by the Prophet (S) who in turn conveys God's commandments related to this issue, for nobody other than God knows the secrets of the individuals and what they hide inside their hearts.

The Imam (a.s.) said: "Do they really realize the significance of Imamate so that they permit themselves to make a choice in its regard? Imamate is greater in prestige, more significant, higher in status, more difficult to attain, harder to achieve, than can people conceive in their minds or define according to their views, or select an Imam as they please, for Imamate became the sole prerogative of Prophet Ibrahim (a.s.), the Friend of God, second in significance only to Prophethood, whereby He honored him, saying, `He (God) said, `I will make thee an Imam to the nations.' He pleaded: `And also (Imams) from my offspring?!' He answered: `But My Promise is not within the reach of evil-doers.'[3]

This verse, therefore, has nullified the imamate of any oppressor till the Day of Resurrection and became the prerogative solely of those elite persons. God, thus, honored Ibrahim (Abraham) by allotting Imamate to those of his progeny who are the elite and who are the Purified, saying, `And We bestowed upon him Isaac and, as an additional boon, (a grandson), Jacob, and We made righteous men of everyone (of them). And We made them Imams guiding (men) by Our Command.'[4]

Imamate, then remained among the descendants of Ibrahim (a.s.), son inherited it from father, one century after another, till the Prophet (S) inherited it. It was then when the Almighty God said to him, `Without doubt, among men, the nearest of kin to Abraham are those who follow him as are also this Prophet and those who believe, and God is the Protector of those who have faith.'[5] Thus, Imamate became the right of the Prophet (S) who, according to the commands of the Almighty God, and in the manner He deemed, vested it upon Ali (a.s.) and it settled among the elite of his descendants whom God gifted with the gift of knowledge and true belief."

The Imam (a.s.) continues to say: "Imamate is the status of the Prophets, the legacy of the wasis (successors of Prophets); Imamate is the caliphate of God Almighty and of His Messenger (S)." "The caliphate of God Almighty" has to be the prerogative of the best of people after the Prophet (S) simply because he, the successor of the Prophet (S), is God's caliph on earth after the demise of the

Prophet (S). His selection, therefore, has to be done by God for how can anyone judge anyone else to be eligible for it if he does not know that person's true inner self? We simply do not understand at all the wisdom of leaving the selection of the Imam to the nation without a final judgment in this regard coming from the Almighty...

An Imam's Attributes

Having defined the attributes an Imam has to have which represent his day-to-day conduct needed by people, Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) says: "An Imam is a scholar who is not ignorant, someone who looks after others untiringly, the substance of sanctity and purity, asceticism and renunciation of the world, of knowledge and adoration. His knowledge grows, his clemency is perfect; he is aware of the responsibilities of Imamate, knowledgeable regarding politics, commanding obedience, executing the Commandments of God, advising the servants of God, protecting the creed of God. Prophets and Imams are assisted by God Who bestows upon them from the treasures of His knowledge and sovereignty in a way He does not endow anyone else, making their knowledge superior to that of anyone contemporary to them, for He, the Exalted and the Sublime, has said, regarding Talut (Samuel), `God has chosen him above you and has gifted him abundantly with knowledge and bodily prowess; God grants His authority to whomsoever He pleases. God cares for all, and He knows all things.'[6]

Regarding the Imams from the Household, progeny and elite descendants of His Prophet (S), the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.), the Dear and Sublime One has said, `Or do they envy mankind for what God has given them of His bounty? But We had already given the people of Abraham the Book and Wisdom and conferred upon them a great kingdom,'[7] and when God selects one of His servants to deal with the servants of God, He broadens his heart for such responsibility, depositing in it springs of wisdom, inspiring knowledge to him."

Indications of Imamate

As regarding how an Imam can be identified, and what the indications are, this is explained by Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in his answer to the question someone put to him which was: "By what indication can Imamate be regarded authentic for one who claims it to himself?" He said: "By text and evidence." The man asked: "What is the characteristic of an Imam?" He answered: "Knowledge, and God's answer to his plea." The man asked, "By what can you yourselves prove your Imamate?"

He answered: "By a Promise made to us by the Messenger of God (S)." The man asked: "What is the evidence that you can tell what is on the mind of people?" He answered: "Have you not come to know that the Messenger (S) said, `Beware of the discretion of a *mumin* for he looks through the light of God'?" The man answered in the affirmative, so the Imam (a.s.) continued saying, "Every believer has a share of discretion, looking through the light of God according to the amount of his belief and the extent of his foresight and knowledge. God has combined in us what He has distributed to all the believers combined

and said in His Book, `Behold! In this are signs for those who by tokens do understand.'[8]

The first of these *mutawassimeen* is the Messenger of God (S), then the Commander of the Faithful (a.s.) after him, then al-Hasan then al-Husayn, then the Imams from among the descendants of al-Husayn till the Day of Judgment."

By all of these statements does Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) define for us the qualifications of an Imam and the group that chooses him in statements which agree with the human nature and the balances of reason which are the final judge on such issues.

1. Al Zumar:62
2. Al Rum:40
3. Al Baqara:124
4. Al Anbiyaa:72-73
5. Aaali 'Imran:68
6. Al Baqara:247
7. Al Nisaa:54
8. Al Hijr:75

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