Imamate in Islamic Thought

Lesson 1
A Core Principal of Shia Islam

• The belief in a divinely appointed leader after the Prophet, is one of the five doctrinal principles of the Shia tradition.

• The other four are monotheism, divine justice, prophethood, and resurrection.

• These topics generated great debates and controversies among Muslims; particularly issues such as defining faith, free-will and predestination, and succession to the Prophet.

• These five doctrines were chosen by Shia scholars to highlight the core beliefs of Shi’ism and to differentiate themselves from other theological schools.
The Belief in Imamate

• In principal, nearly all Muslims believe in imamate.
• There is a famous tradition from the Prophet which has been widely transmitted which underscores the centrality of this belief:
  
  ﺔﯾﻠھﺎﺟ ﺔﺗﯾﻣ تﺎﻣ ﮫﻧﺎﻣز مﺎﻣإ فرﻌﯾ مﻟو تﺎﻣ نﻣ
  
  من مات ولم يعرف إمام زمانه مات ميتة جاهلية

  “He who dies without knowing the Imam of his time, dies a death of the Age of Ignorance.”- The Prophet (s)

Source: Al-Kafi, v. 2, p. 265
The Belief in Imamate

• Al-Majlisi (d. 1110 AH) in Bihar al-Anwar (v. 8, p. 368) recognizes this hadith as mutawair for both Sunnis and Shias:

وَقِدْ رُوِّتْ الْعَامَّةُ وَالخَاصَّةُ مِتَوَاتِرًا مِنْ مَاتٍ وَلَمْ يَعْرِفَ إِمَامُ زَمَانِهِ مَاتَ مِيْتَةً جَاهِلِيَّةً

“Sunni and Shi‘i [hadith sources] have widely transmitted [the prophetic hadith] which states: He who dies without knowing the Imam of his time, dies a death of the Age of Ignorance.”

• Mutawatir, or widely transmitted refers to a type of hadith that has been frequently mentioned in every generation of the narrators of hadith that it leaves no chance to question its authenticity.
The Belief in Imamate

• In the Musnad of Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241 AH), it is reported that the Prophet said:

"He who dies without an Imam, he has died as one from the Age of Ignorance." - The Prophet (s)

Source: Musnad Ahmad b. Hanbal, v. 28, p. 88
The Belief in Imamate

“He who dies without having paid allegiance to the imam of his time has died as one from the Age of Ignorance” - The Prophet (s)

Source: Sahih Muslim, v. 3, p. 1478
The Belief in Imamate

• Why does the Prophet equate the one who does not know the imam of his time with a person who died during the Age of Ignorance?

• The Age of Ignorance was a period where people lacked direction in life. It was an era characterized by confusion and perplexity.

• Since the imam directs us towards God by teaching us the inner meanings of the Quran and bringing clarity to that which is ambiguous in the Quran, to not have an imam is to be deprived of being oriented toward God.
The Belief in Imamate

• Why is there so much emphasis on knowing the imam of the time?
• We need direction and guidance in every generation.
• Knowing the Imam of one’s era is a dynamic and ongoing process, unlike the belief in God and the Prophet which is fixed for all times.
• With respect to imamate, every generation must discover the living Imam of their era so they know what is expected from them in that particular time.
The Belief in Imamate

• For instance, there were people who believed in the first imam, Imam Ali, but not the second imam. For those who continued to live after Imam Ali passed away, it was not sufficient to follow only him; it was their responsibility to determine and follow the imam of their time—that is, Imam al-Hassan.

• Thus, every person, in addition to all the other doctrines, must find the imam of their time.

• All Muslims, except for the Khawarij, believe in the necessity of having an imam. They differ, however, regarding the significance, scope, role and the selection process that qualifies someone to be an imam.
The Belief in Imamate

• What does it mean for us to “know” the imam of our time, which is Imam al-Mahdi?

• In Dua al-‘Ahad, we read:

 آلّهُمَّ اجْعَلْني مِنْ أُنْصَارِهِ وَ أَعْوَانِهِ وَ الدَّابِئِينَ عَنْهُ وَ الْمُسَارِعِينَ إِلَيْهِ فِي قَضاءِ حَوائِجهِ، وَ المُمْتَلِئِنَّ لَأوَامِرِهِ وَ الْمُحَامِينَ عَنْهُ، وَ الْسَّابِقِينَ إِلَى ارْتَدَتِهِ

“O God make me among his helpers, his aides, and his protectors. Those who hasten to fulfill his commands and obey his orders. Those who are his defenders and those we complete with each other to [implement] his will.”
The Meaning of “imam”

• Imam in its lexical meaning refers to a “leader” in its broadest terms. It can refer to the leader of prayer, the leader of a government, and it can refer to both righteous leaders as well as corrupt leaders.

• In this sense, even corrupt rulers like Pharaoh and Yazid are called imams.

وجعلناهم أئمة يدعون إلى النار ويوم القيامة لا ينصرون

“And We made them imams inviting [people] to the hellfire and on the Day of Resurrection they will not be helped.” Quran 28:41
The Meaning of “imam”

• Righteous imams guide people to the straight path by God’s command as indicated by the following verse:

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمُ أُمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ فَعَلَ الْخَيْرَاتِ وَإِقَامَ الْصَّلَاةَ وَإِيَتَّاءَ الرَّكَاتِ وَكَانَوا لَنَا عَابِدِينَ

“And We made them leaders guiding by Our command. And We inspired to them the doing of good deeds, establishment of prayer, and giving of alms; and they were worshippers of Us.” Quran 21:73
The Meaning of “imam”

• Every human being on the Day of Judgement, regardless of their moral standing, will be resurrected with, and identified by their leader, rather than individually.

يَوْمَ نَدْعُو كُلًّا أُنَاسٍ بِإِمَامِهِمْ

“The day that we will call every group of people with their imam.”
Quran 17:71
The Meaning of “imam”

• “Imam” in its technical sense refers to one who is divinely designated to be responsible for all of the affairs of the people, whether it be political, religious, or economical.

• The Shia imams, in particular, are the spiritual and political successors of the Prophet. They are twelve in number, the first starting with Imam Ali and ending with the current one, Imam al-Mahdi.
The Meaning of ”imam”

• "Wilayat," "ولاية" derived from wila’, means power, authority or a right of a certain kind.

• In Shia theology, "wilayat" is the authority vested in the Prophet and the Ahlul Bayt as representatives of God on this earth.

• According to the late Ayatollah al-Mutahhari (d. 1979 CE), wilayat has four dimensions:
The Meaning of ”imam”

1. The right of love and devotion. This right places the Muslims under the obligation of loving the Ahlul Bayt.

2. The authority in spiritual guidance. This reflects the power and authority of the Ahlul Bayt in guiding their followers in spiritual matters.

3. The authority in socio-political guidance. This dimension of *wilayat* reflects the right that the Ahlul Bayt have to lead the Muslims in social and political aspects of life.

4. The authority of the universal nature. This dimension reflects universal power over the entire universe that the Prophet and Ahlul Bayt have been vested with by the grace of God.
The Meaning of “imam”

• **The First Dimension: The Right of Love**

• All Muslims unanimously accept the first dimension of *wilayat* of Ahlul Bayt. Loving the Ahlul Bayt is one of the ضروريات الدين "dharuriyyat ad-din, the essential parts of the Islamic faith.

• The inclusion of *salawat* in the daily ritual prayers is a sufficient proof of this.

• Love for the Ahlul Bayt is enshrined in the Quran:

  قُلْ لَا أَسْأَلَكُمْ عَلَيْهِ أَجْرًا إلَّا المَوْدَةَ فِي الْقُرْبَى

  “Say: I do not ask of you any reward for it but love for my near relatives” Quran 42:23
The Meaning of “imam”

قال علي: والذي فَلَق الحَبَّة، وَبَرَأ النَّسَمة، إنَّهُ لَعَهْدُ النبيِّ الَّذِي صَلَّى الله عليه وسلم إلَى: أنَّ لا يُحِبِّي إلَّا مُؤْمِنٌ، ولا يُبغِضْني إلَّا مَنَافِقٌ.

“Imam Ali said, "By Allah the One who has spilt the grain and created the soul, verily the Prophet has promised that none shall love me but the believer and none shall hate me but the hypocrite.”

Source: Sahih Muslim
The Meaning of “imam”

• **The Second Dimension: The Spiritual Guidance**

• The second dimension of the *wilayat* is a commonly held belief of the Shias as well as majority of the Sunnis who belong to Sufi orders.

• Other than the Naqshbandi order, all Sufis trace the chain of their spiritual masters back to the Imams of the Ahlul Bayt, ending with Imam Ali as the spiritual authority after the Prophet.

• The Naqsbandi order traces its spiritual leadership back to Imam al-Sadiq and then follows the line through his mother to Muhammad b. Abi Bakr and then to Abu Bakr.
The Meaning of “imam”

• This diversion from Imam al-Sadiq to Abu Bakr is, however, not valid because Muhammad b. Abi Bakr was raised from a very young age by Imam Ali who married Muhammad's mother, Asma' bint Umays, after Abu Bakr's death.

• Thus, the only spiritual master that Muhammad b. Abi Bakr knew was Imam Ali.
The Meaning of “imam”

• **The Third and Fourth Dimensions: Socio-Political and Universal Authority**

  The third and fourth dimensions of *wilayat* are unique Shia beliefs, and they are considered as part of the ضروريات المذهب "*dharuriyyat al-madhhab*, the essential parts of Shia sect."

• It is the common view of our scholars that anyone who rejects one of the *dharuriyyat al-madhhab*, is not considered a member of the Shia sect.
The Meaning of “imam”

| THE STATUS OF AHLUL BAYT AMONG MUSLIMS |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                | Sunnis | Sufis | Shi‘as |
| Love of Ahlul Bayt | ✓      | ✓     | ✓     |
| Spiritual Guidance of the Ahlul Bayt | ✗      | ✓     | ✓     |
| Political Leadership of the Ahlul Bayt | ✗      | ✗     | ✓     |
| Universal Authority of the Ahlul Bayt | ✗      | ✗     | ✓     |
The Meaning of “imam”

• It is important to note that whenever the Shias use the term "Imamate" or "Imam", it encompasses all the four dimensions of wilayat. It excludes neither the spiritual and universal authority nor the social and political leadership.

• In this sense, the Shi'i term "Imamate" or "Imam" is more comprehensive than the Sunni term "khilafat" or "khalifa".
The Meaning of “imam”

• Shaykh Mufid (d. 413 AH) defines an "Imam" as follows:

"The Imam is the person who has the comprehensive leadership in religious as well as worldly matters as the successor of the Prophet."

• 'Allama Hilli (d. 726 AH) defines "Imamate" as follows:

"The Imamate is a universal authority in the things of religion and of the world belonging to some person and derived from the Prophet."
The Meaning of ”imam”

• In Shia theology there is no difference between "imamate" and "khilafat". The implication of these two titles is simple: Imam Ali, in relation to the Prophet, is his khalifa and successor; and Imam Ali, in relation to the ummah, is their Imam and leader.

• So defining "imamate" as a religious succession and "khilafat" as a political succession goes against the implications of "Imam" and "Khalifa".

• Imam Ali is the imam of the Muslim ummah in religious as well as political matters, and likewise Imam Ali is the Khalifa of the Prophet in religious as well as political matters.
The Meaning of ”imam”

• Being wrongfully deprived of his political position does not diminish the reality of the truth. In the words of Sayyid al-Khu'i, "Not exercising [the authority] does not prove non-existence of the wilayat.”

• Division of leadership into religious and political has actually happened in the Sunni version of Muslim history.

• The first four caliphs assumed the political and the religious leadership which is why that era is described as “the rightly guided caliphs”.
The Meaning of ”imam”

• After that, the caliphs assumed the political leadership but the religious leadership was assumed by others.

• In jurisprudence, for example, the four Imams emerged as the leaders even while there were caliphs who ruled in their times.

• In theology, Abul Hassan al-Ash'ari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi emerged as the leader.

• In spiritualism, various masters (and even some Shia Imams) were accepted as guides and leaders by Sufi orders.
The Meaning of "imam"

• The Shias did not subscribe to the division of leadership in political and religious realms; the Imams are their ultimate guides and leaders in all spheres of life: religious and political, legal and theological.

• Therefore, Imam al-Sadiq (a) for example, is not just a legal guide for the Shias, he is their ultimate leader in the fullest sense of the word, even if some dimensions of his leadership was not manifest.