



The Infallibility of Prophets

LESSON 1: PROPHETIC INFALLIBILITY IN SUNNI AND SHIA ISLAM



Points of Discussion

Topics to be Covered In This Course

Prophetic Infallibility in Sunni and Shia Islam
Rational and Scriptural Proofs of Infallibility
The Case of Adam
The Cases of Abraham, Moses, and Jonah
The Infallibility of Prophet Muhammad

Topic Introduction

العصمة

WHAT IS ISMAH?

The word 'ismah literally means “protection”. In Islamic terminology, it means “infallibility”. Infallibility is defined as “a spiritual grace (lutf) of Allah to a person which enables him to abstain from sins by his own free will..

A person who has been given that grace of God is called a ma'sum , infallible, sinless.

This power of **'ismah** does not make the **ma'sum** person incapable of committing sins. A **ma'sum** refrains from sins and mistakes by his power and will. If it were otherwise, then there would be no merit in being **ma'sum!**

Topic Introduction

العصمة

WHAT IS ISMAH?

A **ma'sum** is able to abstain from sins because of three main factors:

1. Highest level of righteousness,
2. Ever-present consciousness and love for God
3. Certain knowledge about the consequences of committing sins.

Topic Introduction

العصمة

WHAT IS ISMAH?

We come across some ordinary people who are very upright in their character and would not even dream of committing certain sins or crimes. The strength of their character makes them relatively an infallible person.

Similarly, though a **ma'sum** has the ability to commit sin, he never even imagines of committing a sin because (a) the love for God in his heart leaves no room for displeasing Him by committing sins, and (b) he is full aware of the consequences of committing sins.

Muslims & Belief in Ismah

Sunni Islam

As far as the Sunnis are concerned, they have a great difference of opinion among themselves. Their views are as follows:

On lying & infidelity (kufr): all Sunnis believe that prophets could not tell a lie, neither intentionally nor by mistake, nor could they be infidel before or after the declaration of their prophethood.



Muslims & Belief in Ismah

Sunni Islam

Other sins intentionally: all Sunnis believe that the prophets could not commit other sins intentionally.

Major sins unintentionally: majority believes that the prophets could commit such sins; however, a minority says that this is not possible.

Minor sins: majority believes that the prophets could commit minor sins, though not such minor sins which would disgrace them in public's eyes.



Muslims & Belief in Ismah

Shia Islam

The Shíás Muslims believe that all the prophets were **ma'sum**, sinless and infallible; they could commit no sin— neither a major sin nor a minor sin; neither intentionally nor inadvertently; and this applies to them from the beginning to the end of their lives.



Muslims & Belief in Ismah

Shia Islam

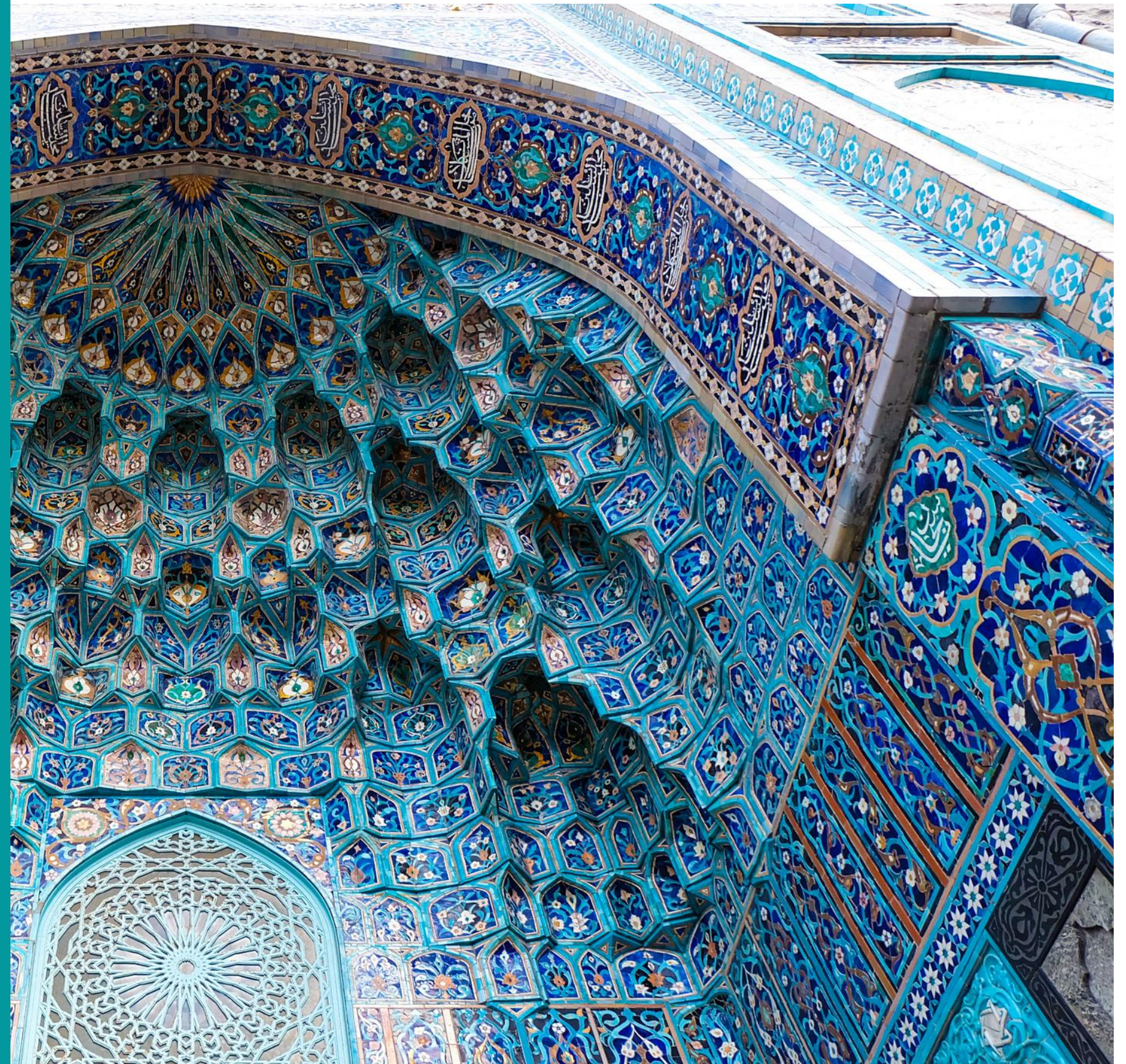
This is the belief of the Shí'a Ithna-'Ashariyyah.
What follows is three quotations from the Shía scholars of
early days to the present century that shows the
consistency of this belief among the Shías.



Shaykh Al-Saduq

d. 381 AH

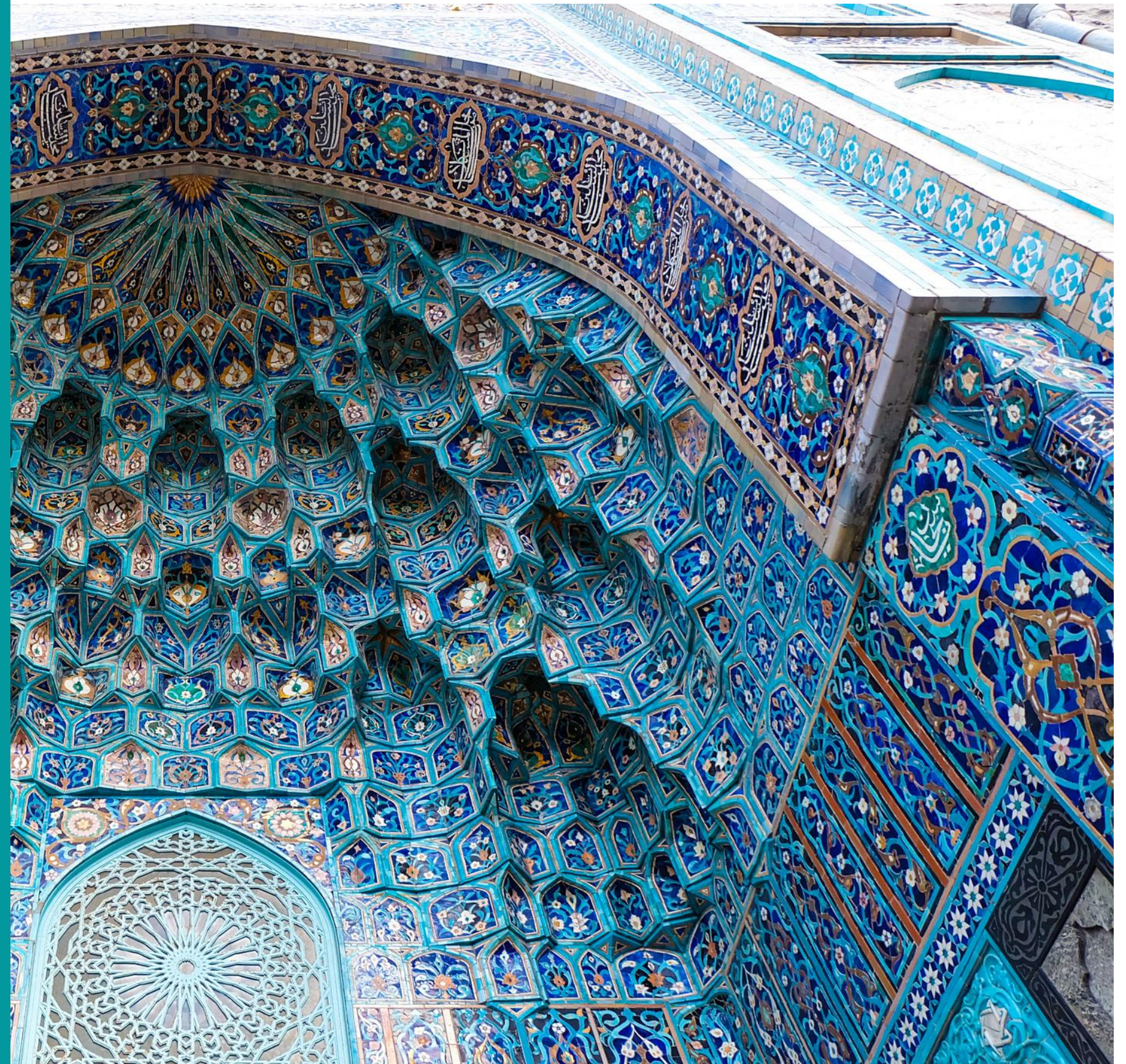
“Our belief concerning the prophets, apostles, Imams and angels is that they are infallible (ma'sum), purified from all defilement (danas), and that they do not commit any sin, whether it be minor or major...He who denies infallibility to them in any matter appertaining to their status is ignorant of them. Our belief concerning them is that they are infallible and possess the attributes of perfection, completeness and knowledge, from the beginning to the end of their careers



Allamah Al-Hilli

d. 728 AH

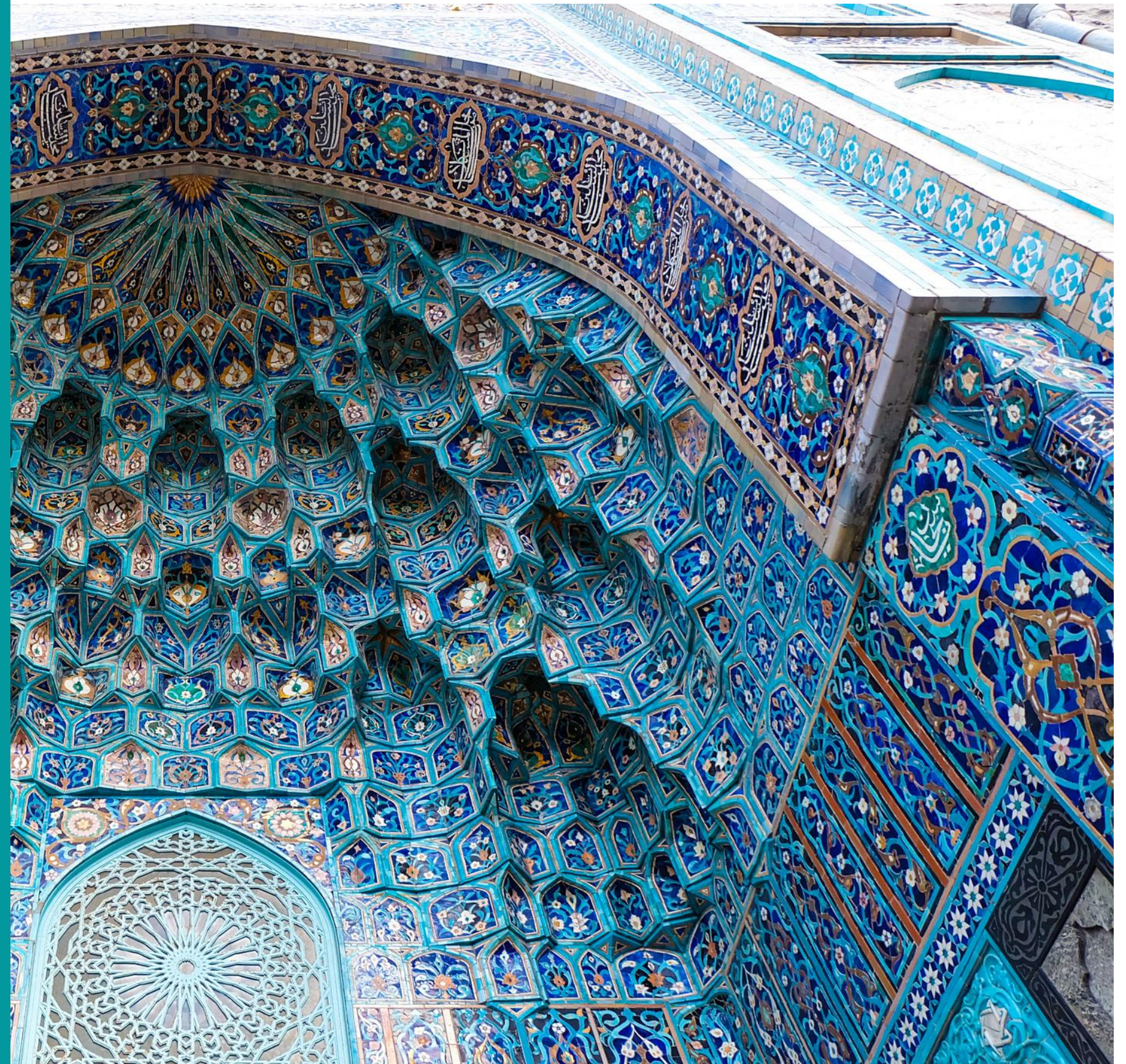
“He is immune to sin from the first of his life to the last of it.



Shaykh Al-Mudhaffar

d. 1964 C.E

We believe that all the prophets are infallible...
Infallibility means purity from all sins, both major
and minor ones, and from mistakes and
forgetfulness.



Humanism & Infallibility

Some Muslims intellectuals, swayed by the idea of humanism, relativity and pluralism, have attempted to present the prophets and messengers of God as fallible in order to justify the moral weaknesses found among ordinary people.

This motive can also be observed in the early history of Islam when the scholars attached to the political establishments tried to water down the infallibility of the Prophet (S) in order to explain away the moral weakness and ethical wrongdoings of the rulers of their time. We have such examples in the modern era also.



Humanism & Infallibility

Malcolm X, when he was a Minister in the Nation of Islam movement, describes how he attempted to justify the adultery of the self-proclaimed prophet, Elija Muhammad.

He says:

“I thought of one bridge that could be used if and when the shattering disclosure should become public. Loyal Muslims could be taught that a man's accomplishments in his life outweigh his personal, human weaknesses. Wallace Muhammad [Elija's son] helped me to review the Qur'an and the Bible for documentation. David's adultery with Bathsheba weighed less on history's scales, for instance, than the positive fact of David's killing Goliath....”



Humanism & Infallibility

Thinking of Lot, we think not of incest, but of his saving the people from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Or, our image of Noah isn't of his getting drunk—but of his building the ark and teaching people to save themselves from the flood. We think of Moses leading the Hebrews from bondage, not of Moses' adultery with the Ethiopian women. In all of the cases I reviewed, the positive outweighed the negative.”



Humanism & Infallibility

When he described his damage control strategy to Elija Muhammad, the leader said, “Son, I am not surprised...You always have had such a good understanding of prophecy, and of spiritual things. You recognize that's what all of this is—prophecy. You have the kind of understanding that only an old man has. I am David...When you read about how David took another man's wife. I'm that David. You read about Noah, who got drunk—that's me. You read about Lot, who went and laid up with his own daughters. I have to fulfill all of those things.”



Humanism & Infallibility

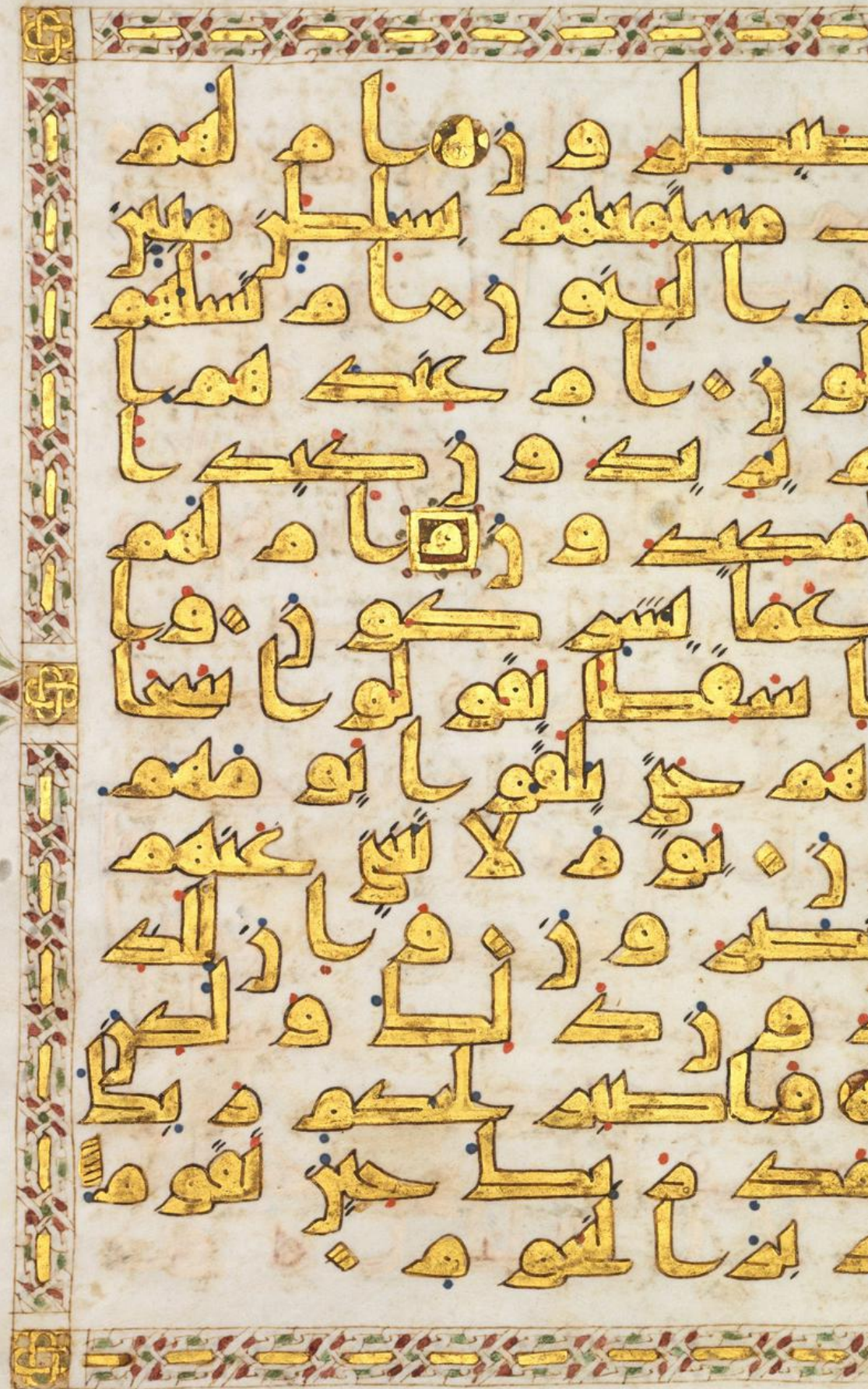
Tom Harpur, a theologian, an ex-Minister of the Church, and a columnist of the religious column of the Toronto Star, wrote the article “Not even Jesus claimed infallibility” in May 1993.

Once Jesus was stripped of infallibility, Harpur published another article a year latter entitled as “Gospels could support speculation that Jesus might have been gay.”



Humanism & Infallibility

This is what happens when you take away the infallibility from the prophets and the messengers of God! Instead of looking up to them as models and guides, people –especially those in position of power– justify their own immoral behaviour and lifestyle by presenting the prophets as fallible and sinners.



EARLY WORKS ON INFALLIBILITY

- **The first scholar to publish an independent book on the topic of ismah Al-Sayyid Al-Murtadha (d. 436 AH). His book is titled تنزيه الانبياء (The Impeccability of the Prophets) in which he appended a portion on the infallibility of the twelve imams.**
- **Thereafter, Fakhr Al-Din Al-Razi (d. 606 AH) penned his work عصمة الأنبياء (The Infallibility of the Prophets). Like Sayyid Al-Murtadha's book, it also contains proofs to establish the infallibility of the prophets and refutes misconceptions surrounding the topic.**