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The Accusation of "Exaggeration" (Ghuluww) Against the Shi'a

Question:

Some writers classify certain sects of the *ghulat* as Shi'a and may very well accuse the Shi'a of exaggerating the status of the Ahl al-Bait (peace be upon them). We know this is a false accusation that even in our times the Wahhabis resort to by publishing and disseminating pamphlets among those unfamiliar with Shi'a beliefs. If possible, shed some light on this topic.

Answer:

The issue of exaggerated beliefs has precedence among previous religious communities. About the Jews and Christians the Qur'an says,

وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ عُزَيْرٌ ابْنُ اللَّهِ وَقَالَتِ النَّصَارَى الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ اللَّهِ.

"And the Jews said, 'Uzair is the Son of God,' and the Christians said, 'The Messiah is the Son of God.'"¹

This disease is also found among the Muslims in various forms, as the hadith denotes:

لَتَسْلُكَنَّ سُبُلَ مَنْ كَانَ قَبْلَكُمْ حَذْوِ النَّعْلِ بِالنَّعْلِ وَالْقُدَّةِ بِالْقُدَّةِ حَتَّى لَوْ أَنَّ أَحَدَهُمْ دَخَلَ حِجْرَ ضَبٍّ لَدَخَلْتُمُوهُ.

*Verily you will follow the paths of those who have gone before you in an exact manner, to the extent that if one of them were to enter a lizard's hole, you would enter it (too).*²

One form of the above is the situation that came about regarding Amir al-Mu'minin (peace be upon him).

One group began believing in his divinity and praised him in their poetry as their deity. For example, they said

أَنْتَ خَالِقُ الْخَلَائِقِ مَنْ زَعَزَعَ أَرْكَانَ خَيْبَرَ جَذْمًا

قَدْ رَضِينَا بِهِ إِمَامًا وَمَوْلَى وَسَجَدْنَا لَهُ إِلَهًا وَرَبًّا

You created the universe,
the one who uprooted Khaybar's firm foundations,
We are happy with him as a leader and master,
and prostrate to him as our God and Lord

A few said such words and poems out of hyperbole and exaggeration, not that they truly considered him their God. In addition, it has been narrated from Imam 'Ali (peace be upon him) himself that he said,

هَلَكَ فِيَّ رَجُلَانِ: مُحِبٌّ غَالٍ وَمُبْغِضٌ قَالٍ.

*"Two groups of people will be destroyed on my account: the friend who exaggerates in his friendship and the enemy who dislikes me."*³

In any case, throughout history there have been and there are individuals who have had exaggerated beliefs, though not all of them to the extent that they raise someone to the status of Allah. In any case, these ideas are a form of deviation from Islam and the proper Shi'a creeds. Such beliefs have more often been found among the Sufis, most of who are considered among the Ahl al-Sunnat; ideas such as transmigration (*hulul*), unity (*ittihad*), and so forth tend to be found in their writings.

Fortunately, thanks to the guidance of the Imams (peace be upon them), not only did the issue of sufism not spread as much among the Shi'a as among the Ahl al-Sunnat, rather it was also repudiated and condemned by the Imams (peace be upon them), their followers, and the major scholars.

Thus, associating these issues to the Shi'a is slander; the Shi'a beliefs in regard to each of the issues of

Divine unity, prophecy, *Imamah*, and resurrection are free of such exaggerated and devious matters, since the Imams (peace be upon them) as protectors of the Divine religion acted in such a way over two and half centuries as to close the path for idolatrous beliefs to penetrate, and the limits and boundaries of the fundamentals of Shi'a thought and doctrine became known. Afterwards, the scholars clearly explained all of these beliefs by compiling and writing books of doctrine, such as the *I'tiqadat* of Majlisi.

A small group of Sufis was indeed found among the Shi'a who put forth exaggerated beliefs in the name of *wilayah* and love of 'Ali (peace be upon him), and in every case with the efforts of the mindful 'Ulama appropriate answers were given them. As a result, they were not able to offer much resistance.

The Shi'a consider none a partner to Allah in the His qualities of Majesty and Beauty. They believe the Prophet and Imams (peace be upon them) to be creatures and worshippers of Allah who are in need of Allah from all aspects and regard only Allah as free of need by His essence.

Of course, the qualities, distinctions, elevated status, and ranks of perfection that the Shi'a mention for these personalities in accordance with reliable verses and traditions – for example they consider them the authority (*hujjat*), Imams, rulers (*wali al-amr*), and possessed of miracles – in no way have even the scent of exaggeration or polytheism. All of them represent their perfection, apex of servitude, and degree of submission to the commandments of Allah.

In short, the principle of *Imamah* is one of the original principles of Islam that is understood from the verses of Qur'an and abundant traditions narrated from the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) himself; passage of time, conquests, and defeats played no role in its spread and development.

In addition, belief in this principle does not necessitate any form of exaggerated beliefs. All of the qualities that the Imam, in accordance with the traditions, possesses are not incompatible with the Imam being a servant of Allah and, like the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family), being in need of Allah.

وَلَا يَمْلِكُ لِنَفْسِهِ نَفْعًا وَلَا ضَرًّا.

“And he controls neither his own benefit nor his loss.”⁴

In fact, the Imam is not even a prophet, meaning that a code of law and rules is not revealed to him, though he is *muhaddath* (addressed), meaning that angels speak with him. However, his relation to the angels is not like the relation of the prophet to the angel of revelation, who communicates the Divine commands to the prophet, since the principles of all the commands have previously been explained, and messengership and prophecy have been sealed with the demise of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family).

In recognizing the Imam, it is important that one recognize the Imams who were introduced and

appointed to the *Imamah* by Allah through the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) and regard them, like the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family), as having general rule and absolute authority (*wilayat*) over all religious and worldly affairs, and as possessing, with the exception of the prophecy, all of the Prophet's qualities, like knowledge and infallibility. In short one must recognize the Imams (peace be upon them) as the true successors of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) in both religious and mundane matters.

From the point of view of materialists and those who don't believe in the unseen world, belief in the unseen world, Divine religions, and the qualities which the faithful attribute to the prophets and friends of Allah are all mingled with exaggeration. Since the faithful believe in qualities, actions, and traits with respect to them that the materialist is unable to comprehend, he considers them to be the exaggerations of the believers with respect to the prophets and friends of Allah.

For example, from the materialists' point of view, the miracles of Ibrahim, Musa, and `Isa (peace be upon them), in which the faithful believe, are all a form of exaggeration, though no exaggeration exists in these beliefs. All of these form a chain of realities that show the elevated status of their possessors.

Exaggeration is to associate the Prophet or Imam with Allah, or regard Allah as unified with them, and so forth.

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1. Surah Tawbah (9), Verse 30
 2. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 21, p. 257
 3. Nahj al-Balaghah, edited by Subhi al-Salih, Short Sayings, no. 117
 4. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 76, p. 167, footnote 7

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