

Chapter 32: Significance of Imamah

The subject of our present discussion is Imamah. We know that for us, the Shi'ah though it is a question of extraordinary importance, other Muslim sects do not attach so much importance to it. The reason is that the conception of Imamah which we have is different from that conception of it which other sects have. There is no doubt that there are some common features too, but those features of Imamah, which have given extraordinary importance to it, are peculiar to the Shi'ah creed. For example when we, the Shi'ah want to enumerate the cardinal principles of religion according to the Shi'ah doctrine, we say that these principles are Monotheism, Prophethood, Divine Justice, Imamah and the Hereafter.

We regard Imamah as a cardinal principle of religion. In a sense the Sunnis also do not reject the idea of Imamah totally, but according to their belief, Imamah is not a cardinal principle of religion. They regard it only as a collateral matter. In fact there exists a basic difference of opinion with regard to Imamah. We believe in one sort of Imamah and the Sunnis believe in another sort of it. The reason why the Shi'ah regard Imamah as a cardinal principle of religion whereas the Sunnis regard it as a collateral matter, is that the Shi'ah conception of Imamah is quite different from the Sunni conception of it.

The Meaning of Imam

Imam means a leader or one who goes in front. The word Imam in Arabic does not imply any sense of sanctity. And Imam is the person who has some followers irrespective of the fact whether he is virtuous or depraved. The Qur'an itself has used the word in both the senses. At one place it says: **"We appointed them Imams who guide with our permission."** (Surah Anbiya, 21:73)

At another place it says: **"The Imams who invite people to the Hell."** (Surah al Qasas, 28:41)

In respect of Fir'aun the Qur'an has used a phrase which conveys a sense similar to that of an Imam or a leader. It says: **"On the Day of Judgement he will lead his people down into the Hell fire."** (Surah Hud, 11:98)

Thus Imam literally means simply a leader. But at present we are not concerned with a bad leader. Let

us now discuss the conception of Imamah.

The word *Imamah* is applied to several cases. Some concepts of it are acknowledged by the Sunnis also. But they differ with us as to who is an Imam and what qualities he must possess. They totally disbelieve in certain concepts of Imamah. It is not that they believe in Imamah in the sense in which we believe but disagree as to the person who holds this assignment. The Imamah in which they believe is nothing but social leadership and this is the sense in which this word has been used in the books of the old scholastic theologians.

Khwaja Nasiruddin Tusi in *at-Tajrid* defines Imamah as general charge of society. Here it seems necessary to mention another point also:

Various Aspects of the Holy Prophet

The Holy Prophet in his lifetime by virtue of his special position in Islam had several aspects as is indicated by the Qur'an and his own life account. At one and the same time he held several assignments. In the first instance he was a Prophet of Allah and in this capacity he conveyed, Allah's message and commandments to the people. The Holy Qur'an says:

"Whatever the Messenger gives, take it, and whatever he forbids abstain from it." (Surah al Hashr, 59:7)

In other words, whatever instructions and orders the Prophet gives to the people, he gives them on behalf of Allah.

From this point of view the Prophet communicates only that which has been revealed to him. Another assignment of the Holy Prophet was that he held the post of the supreme judge, by virtue of which he administered justice among the Muslims. According to Islam every Tom, Dick and Harry cannot be a judge, for from the viewpoint of Islam arbitration is a Divine affair. Allah has enjoined justice and a Judge is the person who administers it in cases of disputes and differences. This assignment was also expressly conferred on the Holy Prophet by the Qur'an, which says: **"By your Lord, they will not believe in truth until they make you judge of what is in dispute between them and find within themselves no dislike of that which you decide and submit to your decision whole-heartedly."** (Surah an Nisa, 4:65)

The Holy Prophet was appointed a judge by Allah and hence this assignment was not an ordinary one; it was Divine. Practically also he was the Prophet-judge. The third assignment which he officially held and which was conferred on him by the Qur'an was that of the head of the State. He was the head of the State and leader of Muslim society. In other words in Muslim society he was the policy maker as well as the administrator. It is believed that it is this aspect of the Holy Prophet which is visualized by the Qur'anic verse: **"Believers, obey Allah, and obey His Messenger and your (qualified) leaders."**

(Surah an Nisa, 4:59)

In fact, the three positions held by the Holy Prophet were not merely formal or ceremonial. The directions which we have received from him are basically of three kinds.

(i) The first kind comprises Divine revelations, in regard to which the Holy Prophet could do nothing of his own accord. His sole function was to convey to the people what was revealed to him.

(ii) In the field of religious instructions, for example, he told the people how to offer prayers and keep fast. But when he administered justice his judgements were not revealed. In the case of a dispute between two persons, he decided the matter according to the Islamic standards and judged who was right and who was wrong. In such a case Jibra'il did not bring any revelation to him. Exceptional cases are a different matter.

On the whole he decided all judicial cases on the basis of available evidence in the same way as others do. At the most it may be said that his judgements were better than those of others. He himself said that he had orders to pronounce judgement on the basis of what appears to be specious. Suppose a plaintiff and a respondent appear and the plaintiff produces two irreproachable witnesses. The Prophet would decide the case on the basis of their evidence. Evidently this judgement will be the Prophet's own judgement and not a judgement revealed to him.

(iii) In this third capacity also when the Prophet issued an order as the leader of society, the nature of this order of his was different from the nature of what he conveyed as Divine revelation. Allah appointed the Holy Prophet the leader of society and authorized him to work as such. In this capacity he sometimes consulted others also. We see that he consulted his companions on the occasion of the Battles of Badr and Uhud and on many other occasions. Evidently there can be no consultation about a Divinely revealed order. The Holy Prophet never consulted his companions as to how the dusk time (Magrib) prayers should be offered. There have been occasions when the Holy Prophet said about certain questions referred to him that Allah had commanded thus and hence he had to abide by His command.

But on matters in which he had received no Divine injunction, he often consulted others and asked for their opinion. If in such cases he issued his own orders, he did so because he was authorized by Allah to do so. In a few cases connected with social administration also he received revelation, but those were exceptional cases. Otherwise as a rule he did not receive any detailed instructions on social and political questions and he did not work as a mere messenger in respect of these questions. It is an undisputed fact that the Holy Prophet worked in all these capacities concurrently.

Imamat in the Sense of Leadership of Society

The first meaning of Imamat as mentioned above is the general charge of society. One of his

assignments which fell vacant on the demise of the Holy Prophet, was the leadership of society. There is no doubt that society needs a leader. Who was the leader of society after the Holy Prophet? Both the Shi'ah and the Sunnis agree that society is in need of a leader and a supreme commander. It is here that the question of *Khilafat* arises. The Shi'ah say that the Holy Prophet himself nominated his successor and announced that after him Imam Ali would take the reins of the affairs of the Muslims in his hands.

The Sunnis who have a different logic do not accept this view at least in the form in which the Shi'ah accept it. According to them the Holy Prophet did not designate any particular person as his successor and it was the duty of the Muslims themselves to elect their leader. The Sunnis accept the principle of Imamatus when they say that the Muslims need a leader. All that they say is that the leader was to be chosen by the Muslims. In contrast, the Shi'ah claim that the Holy Prophet himself appointed his successor by Divine revelation.

Had the question of Imamatus been merely that of political leadership after the Holy Prophet, we the Shi'ah also should not have regarded it as a cardinal principle of religion. It would have been fit to include this question in the collateral matters. We could say that the question of Imamatus in which the Shi'ah believe is confined to declaring that Imam Ali was one of the companions of the Holy Prophet like Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and so many others or even like Abuzar and Salman, but he was better, more learned, more pious and more capable than all of them and that the Prophet designated him to be his successor. But the Shi'ah do not stop here. They believe in two tenets in which the Sunnis do not share with them at all. One of these two tenets is Imamatus in the sense of religious authority.

Imamatus in the Sense of Religious Authority

We have said that the Holy Prophet conveyed the Divine revelations received by him to the people who were at liberty to ask him whatever they wanted to know about the teachings of Islam. Similarly they asked of him what they did not find in the Qur'an. Now the question is whether what the Qur'an contains and what the Holy Prophet has told the general people is all that Islam wanted to convey of its instructions; teachings and knowledge? Evidently the Holy Prophet did not have time enough to convey all the teachings of Islam.

Therefore, he trained Imam Ali, his successor as an extraordinary scholar and taught him everything about Islam, at least all the principles and the general rules of it. Imam Ali was the most outstanding of his companions. He was infallible like himself, and knew even that which was not expressly told by Allah.

Introducing him, the Holy Prophet said: *"O' People, after me refer all religious questions to Ali and ask him and my other successors whatever you want to know."* In this respect Imamatus is a sort of specialization in Islam, but an extraordinary and Divine specialization, far above the degree of the specialization which a *mujtahid* (jurist) can acquire. The Imams are experts in Islam but their special knowledge of it is not derived from their own thinking and reason which are liable to commit mistakes.

They receive their knowledge in a mysterious and secret way unknown to us. Imam Ali received his knowledge of Islamic sciences direct from the Holy Prophet and the subsequent Imams received it through him. In the case of each Imam this knowledge was infallible and impeccable. It was handed down by each Imam to the subsequent Imams.

The Sunnis do not believe that anybody holds such a position. In other words they do not believe in the existence of any Imam in this sense. It is not that they do not accept Ali as an Imam but say that Abu Bakr is an Imam instead of him. In fact they do not admit that any of the companions of the Holy Prophet, neither Abu Bakr, nor Umar nor Uthman, holds such a position. That is why they attribute so many mistakes in religious matters to Abu Bakr and Umar. In contrast the Shi'ah believe their Imams to be infallible, and will never admit that any of their Imams has ever committed a mistake. But the Sunnis in their books say that on such and such occasion Abu Bakr said so, but he was wrong. When he realized his mistake he said that he had a Satan (Devil) who overwhelmed him from time to time. Similarly the Sunnis say that once Umar made a mistake and then referring to certain women declared that they were more learned than him.

It is said that when Abu Bakr died the women of his family, including his daughter – the Holy Prophet's wife, 'Ayishah began to weep and cry. When Umar heard the din of their lamentation, he sent a message to the women, asking them to be quiet, but they did not comply with his request. He again sent a message and then threatened to punish them. At last 'Ayishah was told by some women that Umar was threatening them and asking them to become quiet. She sent for Umar and when he came to her asked him what he wanted to say and why he was sending a message after message. Umar said that he had heard the Holy Prophet saying: "If any one died and his people wept over him, he would be punished."

'Ayishah said: "You haven't understood. You are mistaken. That's a different matter. I know what's that. Once a wicked Jew died. His folk were weeping over him. The Holy Prophet said that they were weeping and he was being punished. The Holy Prophet did not say that he was being punished because they were weeping. He said that they were weeping over him, but didn't know that he was being punished. What connection has it with this question? Even if weeping be prohibited, why should Allah punish an innocent person for the sin which we commit?" "Strange!" said Umar. "Was that the case?" "Yes", said 'Ayishah, "that was the case". Umar said: "Hadn't these women been there, Umar would have been ruined."

The Sunnis themselves say that on seventy (very many) occasions Umar said: "*Had there not been Ali, Umar would have been ruined.*" He himself confessed on so many occasions that Ali often rectified his mistakes, and Umar used to confess his mistakes.

In short, the Sunnis do not believe in any Imam in the sense in which we believe. Anyhow it is an indisputable fact that it was the Holy Prophet alone who received the celestial revelation. We do not say that revelation is received by the Imams also. The message of Islam was delivered to mankind by the Holy Prophet alone and to him alone Allah revealed all the necessary teachings of Islam. There are no

injunctions of Islam which were not revealed to him.

But the question whether all injunctions of Islam were conveyed to the people at large, is a different matter. The Sunnis say that the Holy Prophet conveyed all Islamic injunctions to his companions. But still the Sunnis find themselves in a fix when they face problems about which nothing has been reported from the companions of the Holy Prophet. To resolve this situation they have introduced the law of analogy, by means of which they claim that they complete what is missing. In this connection Imam Ali says: "*Do you mean to say that Allah's religion was incomplete and you have come to complete it?*" (See Nahjul Balagha – Sermon 18)

The Shi'ah on the other hand say that neither Allah revealed the Islamic injunctions incompletely to the Holy Prophet, nor did the Holy Prophet convey them incompletely to the people. He conveyed them completely but he did not say everything to the general people. In fact many questions did not arise during his lifetime. Anyhow, he conveyed all injunctions which he received from Allah to his special disciple, Imam Ali and asked him to pass them on to the people as and when necessary.

It is here that the question of infallibility arises. The Shi'ah say that just as the Holy Prophet could be neither intentionally nor unintentionally wrong in what he said, similarly his special pupil Imam Ali also could not go wrong, for just as the Holy Prophet was backed by Divine support in many ways, this special pupil of his also enjoyed Divine support. This was one more feature of Imamatus.

Imamat in the Sense of Wilayat

This is the third sense of Imamatus and the highest sense for that matter. Great stress is laid on this sense in the Shi'ah doctrine. In a way *Wilayat* is a common point between Shi'ism and mysticism (*tasawwuf*). But when we say so, we should not be misunderstood, for you may come across what the orientalist have said in this respects. They say that *Wilayat* is a question in which the mystics are greatly interested and which has been of interest for the Shi'ah also from the early days of Islam. I remember that some ten years back an orientalist interviewed Allama Tabataba'i. One of the questions he put was whether the Shi'ah had borrowed the idea of *Wilayat* from the mystics or the mystics had taken it from the Shi'ah. The fact is that the doctrine of *Wilayat* existed among the Shi'ah even when mysticism had not emerged yet.

If it is supposed that either of these two have borrowed the idea from the other, it must be said that the mystics have adopted it from the Shi'ah. The question of *Wilayat* is analogous to the questions of the perfect man and the master of the time. The mystics have laid great stress on this point. Moulavi says that in every age there exists a *wali*, *qa'im* or the master of the age. In every age there exists a perfect man possessing all human qualities. There is no age in which, a perfect *wali*, often described as '*qutb*' (pole, pivot, authority) is not present. The mystics believe that a perfect *wali* is also a perfect man.

They ascribe to him many positions some of which are unintelligible to us. One of his positions is his control of the hearts in the sense that he is the universal spirit transcending all spirits. Moulavi hints at

this position in his story of Ibrahim Adham. This story is no more than a fictitious tale. But Moulavi narrates tales to make his points clear. His aim is not to narrate history. He tells a story only to press his point. Moulavi says that Ibrahim Adham went to the river and threw a needle into it. Afterwards he recalled the needle. The fish put their heads out of the river. Each fish had a needle in its mouth. Continuing, Maulavi says: 'O you having no endowments, take care of your heart in the presence of those who are gifted with the qualities of heart.'

Continuing further he says: "That Shaykh (spiritual guide) became aware of that which was in the heart of the other people. The Shaykh could know that because he was like a lion and the hearts of other people were his dens."

The Shi'ah generally use the word Wilayat in its most exalted sense. They believe that the Wali and Imam is the master of the time, and there has always been and there will always be one perfect man in the world. In most of the *ziyarat* (homages) which we recite, we acknowledge the existence of Wilayat and Imamate in this sense, and believe that the Imam has a universal spirit. In the *ziyarat* which we all recite and which we regard as a part of Shi'ah doctrine we say: "I testify that you see where I stand; you hear what I say and return my salutation." It is to be noted that we address that to an Imam who is dead. From our point of view in this respect there is no difference between a dead and a living Imam. It is not that we say so to a dead Imam only. We say: "Peace be on you, Ali ibn Musa al-Riza. I admit and testify that you hear my salutation and return it."

The Sunnis with the exception of the Wahhabis, believe that only the Holy Prophet is endowed with this quality of knowing and hearing. According to them nobody else in the world occupies such a high spiritual status and has such a spiritual comprehension. But we, the Shiites believe that this position is held by all our Imams. This belief is a part of our religious principles and we always acknowledge it.

In short the question of Imamate has three degrees and if we do not make a distinction between these degrees, we may be faced with difficulties in respect to certain inferences in this connection. Based on these degrees Shiism has three groups. Some Shiites believe in Imamate only in the sense of social and political leadership of society. They say that the Holy Prophet designated Imam Ali to the leadership of society after him, and that Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman could not claim this position. These people are Shiites only to this extent.

They either do not believe in the two further degrees or keep quiet about them. Some others believe in the second degree also but do not believe in the third one. It is said that the late Sayyid Muhammad Baqir Durchal who was Ayatullah Burujardi's teacher in Isfahan, disbelieved in this third degree. Anyhow, the majority of the Shi'ah and the Shi'ah scholars believe in the third degree also.

If we want to discuss Imamate, we should discuss it in three stages: Imamate according to the Qur'an, Imamate according to the tradition and Imamate according to reason. First of all let us see whether the Qur'anic verses relating to Imamate indicate that sense of Imamate in which the Shi'ah believe. And if they

do so, do they indicate Imamah in the sense of political and social leadership only, or do they indicate it in the sense of religious authority and spiritual Wilayah also. After explaining this we should see what do the Prophetic traditions say about Imamah.

Finally we should analyse Imamah from the viewpoint of reason and see what reason says about each stage of it. Is the Sunni point of view that the Holy Prophet's successor should be elected by the people more reasonable or is it a fact that the Holy Prophet himself has nominated his successor? Similarly what is agreeing to reason in regard to the other two sense of Imamah.

A Tradition about Imamah

Before mentioning the verses of the Qur'an in regard to Imamah. We would like to quote a tradition which has been reported by the Shi'ah as well as the Sunnis. Normally a tradition upon which both the Shi'ah and the Sunnis agree cannot be ignored, because this agreement shows that the tradition is substantially authentic, though its wording may differ in different reports. We the Shiites usually report this tradition in the following words: *"He who dies without recognizing the Imam of his time, would die a pre-Islamic death."* These are very serious words, for in the pre-Islamic period people neither believed in the unity of Allah (monotheism) nor in Prophethood. This tradition (hadith) is found in most of the Shi'ah books of traditions including the Kafi which is regarded as the most reliable collection of the Shi'ah traditions.

The important fact is that this tradition is found in the Sunni books also. According to one report they quote the following wording: *"He who dies without an Imam, will die a pre-Islamic death."* Another wording is this: *"He who dies and has no bayah (oath of allegiance) in his neck, will die a pre-Islamic death."* Still another text says: *"He who dies and has no Imam, will die a pre-Islamic death."* There are several other versions, and that shows the great importance which the Holy Prophet attached to the question of Imamah.

Those who take Imamah only in the sense of social leadership say that the Holy Prophet has attached utmost importance to the question of leadership because the implementation of the Islamic injunctions depends on the presence of a virtuous and sound leader and the strong allegiance of people to him. Islam is not an individualistic religion. Nobody can say that as he believes in Allah and His Prophet, he has nothing to do with anybody else. Everybody must know and understand who the Imam of his time is, and must carry out his activities under his leadership.

Those who take Imamah in the sense of religious authority, say that he who is interested in his religion, must recognize his religious authority and must know whom he should follow in religious matters. It is absolutely un-Islamic to believe in the religion but to acquire it from a source which is contrary to it.

Those who believe in Imamah in the sense of spiritual Wilayah say that this tradition shows that a man who is not under the care of a perfect *wali* (guardian) is just like him who died in pre-Islamic days. As

this tradition is a *mutawatir* hadith (reported by continuity of numerous authorities) we mentioned it first so that you may keep it in mind while we discuss the question of Imamah further. Now we look at the verses of the Qur'an.

Imamah in the Holy Qur'an

Several verses of the Qur'an are cited by the Shi'ah in connection with Imamah. One of them is the verse which begins with the words, "***Your guardian can be only Allah***". Incidentally in all these cases there exist Sunni traditions which support the Shi'ah point of view. In the Qur'an this verse runs as follows: "***Your guardian can be only Allah and His messenger and those who believe, who establish prayers, pay the zakat while bowing.***" (Surah Mai'dah, 5:55)

The word used in this verse is Wali, which means a guardian. Hence Wilayah means guardianship. According to the teachings of Islam zakat is not paid while bowing in prayers. Hence the payment of zakat while bowing cannot be called a general rule applicable to many individuals. This verse refers to a particular incident, which took place only once and which has been reported both by the Shi'ah and the Sunnis. Once Imam Ali was bowing while offering prayers when a beggar appeared and began to ask for alms. Imam Ali beckoned and called his attention to his finger. The beggar promptly drew Imam Ali's ring from his finger and left the place. In other words Imam Ali did not wait till his prayers were finished.

He was so particular to give alms, that while he was still praying he told the beggar by gesture that he might pull out his ring, sell it and spend the money to meet his needs. Both the Shi'ah and the Sunnis agree that Imam Ali did so, and that this verse was revealed on this occasion. It may be noted that giving alms while bowing in prayers is not included in the teachings of Islam. It is neither an obligatory nor a commendable act. Hence it cannot be said that several persons might have done so. Therefore (those who do so) is an obvious reference to Imam Ali. The Qur'an at several places has used the expression, 'they say. . .', while that thing was said by only one individual. Here also 'those who do so' means the individual who did so. Therefore by means of this verse Imam Ali was appointed the guardian of the people. Anyway, this verse needs further discussion, which we are going to undertake later.

There are other verses which concern the event of Ghadir. This event itself is a part of the Islamic traditions, but we are going to discuss it later. One of the verses revealed in connection with the event of Ghadir says: "***O Messenger! Make known that which has been revealed to you from your Lord, for if you do it not, you will not have conveyed His message.***" (Surah al-Mai'dah, 5:67)

The tone of this verse is as serious as that of the tradition: "*He who died and did not recognize the Imam of his time, died a pre-Islamic death.*" Briefly it may be said that the verse itself shows that its subject is so important that if the Prophet does not make it known, that would mean that he has not conveyed the message of Allah at all.

The Shi'ah and the Sunnis agree that Surah al-Mai'dah is the last surah (chapter) revealed to the Holy

Prophet, and this verse is one of the last verses of this surah. In other words it was revealed when the Holy Prophet had already conveyed all other injunctions and teachings of Islam during his 13 years' stay in Makkah and 10 years' stay in Medina as the Prophet. This verse was among the last instructions of Islam. Now the Shi'ah ask what that instruction could be which was so important that if it was not conveyed all that the Holy Prophet did in the past would become void.

You cannot indicate any subject connected with the last years of the Holy Prophet's life which may be so important. But we say that it is the question of Imamah, which is so important that if Imamah is lost, nothing remains. Without Imamah the whole structure of Islam would crumble down. Moreover, the Shi'ah cite the reports and the traditions of the Sunnis themselves in support of their claim that this verse was revealed in connection with the Ghadir Khum event.

In Surah al-Ma'idah itself there is another verse which runs as follows: ***"This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour to you and have chosen Islam for you as religion."*** (Surah al-Ma'idah, 5:3)

This verse shows that on that day something happened, which was so important that it perfected religion, completed Allah's Favour to mankind and without which Islam could not be as Allah wanted it to be. The Shi'ah argue that the stringent tone of the verse shows that the thing to which it refers is so important that the very existence of Islam as a true religion depends on it. Now the question is what that thing can be. The Shi'ah say that they can point out that thing; whereas others cannot. Furthermore, there are reports which confirm that this verse was revealed in connection with the question of Imamah. We have put forward these three verses as the gist of the Shi'ah arguments.

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