

An Inquiry into Religious Dissimulation

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Dissimulation or Taqiyyah is a practice emphasized by the Ahlul Bayt on several occasions. This article discusses about its meaning, the types of dissimulation and its legal rulings.

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An Inquiry into Religious Dissimulation

Azizah Adib

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Abstract

Dissimulation is a practice emphasized by the Ahlul Bayt on several occasions. Dissimulation is protecting oneself or one's family or innocent people from harm by doing or avoiding something or by doing or saying something which is not recommended or permissible under normal conditions. Using Islamic sources and documents, Shi'a scholars divide dissimulation into three types: prohibited, mandatory, and permissible.

In the Holy Qur'an, we can find some instances – such as the believer of the Pharaoh's people – based on which dissimulation can be regarded as permissible. There is also some evidence in Sunni traditions suggesting that dissimulation is religiously legal and rational. Among the permissible conditions whereby dissimulation can be practiced referred to in traditions by the Ahlul Bayt are a) saving the life of the believers, b) elevation of man's status and his perfection, and c) preserving Islamic unity.

Introduction

Shi'ism, one of the two major Islamic sects, entails particular teachings and messages, and it is a duty upon its believers to defend them. Some of these teachings concerns the Shi'a beliefs while others are concerned with their practice.

Among these teachings is dissimulation – or *taqiyyah* – which is considered a definite and undeniable Shi'a principle. Also, in many traditions, the Imams advised the Shi'as to act upon it. Imam Baqir said, "Dissimulation is the belief of me and my forefathers; the one who does not act upon it has no faith."¹ Moreover, up until now, numerous praiseworthy articles and books have been written on it, indicating its importance.

In this article, three areas will be covered: 1) the meaning of dissimulation, 2) a probe into its traditions, and 3) responses to doubts and misconceptions cast on it.

Literal meaning

The Arabic word for dissimulation is *taqiyyah*, derived from the root 'wa-qa-ya' and '*wiqayah*.' According to Raghib in his book *Mufradat*, '*wiqayah*' means protecting something from harm.² Accordingly, *taqiyyah* (dissimulation) literally means avoiding evil and warding it off. Its infinitive means 'protecting'³

and its gerund means 'keeping'.⁴ However, in traditions, it generally refers to any action that keeps man immune from the evils of others.⁵

Technical meaning

Both Sunni and Shi'a scholars have given similar technical meanings for dissimulation.

According to Shaikh Mufid, Dissimulation is "hiding our inner beliefs from the opposition to avoid religious and worldly harms."⁶

Shaikh Ansari defined dissimulation as follows: "Dissimulation consists of protecting oneself from harm by other person and agreeing with his words and actions; this is actually disagreeing with the truth."⁷

Sunni scholar, Sarakhsi Hanafi said regarding dissimulation, "Dissimulation is to protect one's life from danger and harm through revealing something opposed to one's inner beliefs."⁸

Similarly, according to Ibn Hajar 'Asqalani Shafi'i, "Dissimulation means refraining from expressing one's inner beliefs to others."⁹

Shaikh Muhammad Abu Zuhreh also gave a similar definition as follows: "By dissimulation, one hides his belief to ward off harms and damages."¹⁰

Thus, the technical definition is summed up as follows: "Dissimulation is protecting oneself from harm through doing or giving up an action or saying something impermissible under normal circumstances."¹¹

Dissimulation: A rational principle

Like other religious recommendations, dissimulation enjoys the required rational support; in addition to religion, common sense also decrees dissimulation. All over the world, particular security measures are taken to protect vital information. Likewise, in political, military, and economic information, some codes are used to conceal secrets and goals.

Dissimulation is also a strategy and method for protecting one's beliefs, life, reputation, and property or those of other innocent people. In fact, it is considered a defensive measure. The right for self-defense is recognized by divine religions, human doctrines, and intellect.

Thus, there is no doubt that dissimulation and concealment of one's inner beliefs is a method confirmed by the intellect as an effective rational technique and is a basis for the actions taken by wise people worldwide.

Types of Dissimulation

As said before, protecting one's life and belief is considered a key element in dissimulation. Naturally, the issue of self-protection is raised when one's life is threatened. However, by referring to the legitimate applications of dissimulation, we find out that in some cases one's life is in no actual danger, but in order to protect the great interests of Islam and Islamic society, concealing one's beliefs is recommended. Accordingly, dissimulation can be divided into three types: a) dissimulation out of fear, b) dissimulation for concealment, and c) dissimulation out of lenience. In what follows, each type is briefly explained:

1. Dissimulation out of fear

1. **Dissimulation out of fear** is dissimulation when facing pagans and enemies of Islam through doing something in accordance with their opinions.¹²

As the definition indicates, the aim of this kind of dissimulation is to prevent the spiritual ability of the faithful person from being wasted and to save his life, because he may put his life at risk to reveal his inner belief. Under such a circumstance, both religion and intellect decree that one protects his life and property through dissimulation.

2. Dissimulation for concealment

2. **Dissimulation for concealment** refers to safeguarding the fundamentals of Islam through hiding one's sect before the oppressive governments and the tyrants.¹³

Hiding one's belief is considered a tactic used by the righteous minority to safeguard the fundamentals of Islam against tyrannical governments. This kind of dissimulation was common in the early Islam, such as the migration of the Holy Prophet to Medina and the hidden and gradual movement of Muslim migrants to Abyssinia.

3. Dissimulation for lenience or for preserving Islamic unity

3. **Dissimulation for lenience or for preserving Islamic unity** consists of mixing with Muslims brothers and sisters from other schools of Islam, good conduct in life, and attending Sunni meetings and circles to preserve Islamic unity and defend Islam.

Thus, this kind of dissimulation adopted from the Sunnah is not due to fear or apprehension; rather, it is to establish an amicable relationship among the Muslims. It is applied when one gives up doing certain Shi'i deeds and acts upon the Sunni sect to show lenience to Sunnis while there is no fear. Therefore, unifying measures of the Shi'as should not be deemed to be out of fear, because sometimes the Shi'a Imams have taken such measures; this cannot be considered to be due to their fear. For instance, Imam Ali, known for his valor, did not perform prayer with his opponents out of fear, although he overlooked inter-religious disagreements for the continued existence of the Islamic system.¹⁴

The Legal Rulings of Dissimulation

Using the Islamic sources, Shi'a jurists divide dissimulation into three types: a) prohibited dissimulation, b) mandatory dissimulation, and c) permissible dissimulation.

A. Prohibited dissimulation

The philosophy of dissimulation is to safeguard and elevate the truth and to preserve a correct belief. If something against this purpose is done through dissimulation, it is not permissible to dissimulate; in fact, it is prohibited to do so. Such circumstances include the following:

1. When the truth is at risk: When covering and hiding, one's belief spreads corruption, strengthens atheism and disbelief, extends disorder, and undermines the pillars of Islam; as a result, if it misleads people, erases Islamic rituals, and violates Islamic legal rulings, it is obligatory not to dissimulate. Thus, it is a grave mistake to assume that dissimulation is allowed under such circumstances. These kinds of dissimulation are destructive and negative. Only when dissimulation is constructive, positive, in line with achieving the goal, and not in the reverse direction, it is permissible or obligatory.

2. It is forbidden to dissimulate in murder: If somebody comes under pressure to kill one or more innocent people, otherwise, his life will be at risk, he is not entitled to kill others even though he is certain that he will lose his own life if he does not listen.¹⁵ In this respect, Imam Baqir said, "Dissimulation has been made legitimate to save lives; if it causes murder, it is not permissible."¹⁶

B. Obligatory dissimulation

The above-mentioned kinds of dissimulation – dissimulation out of fear, for concealment, and out of lenience for preserving Islamic unity – can be considered obligatory.¹⁷

C. Permissible dissimulation

One can dissimulate in some permissible actions if abandoning them does not cause any harm.¹⁸

Dissimulation in the Holy Qur'an

In the Noble Qur'an, there are some verses that recommend dissimulating:

لَا يَتَّخِذِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ۗ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ فَلَيْسَ مِنَ اللَّهِ فِي شَيْءٍ إِلَّا أَنْ تَتَّقُوا مِنْهُمْ تُقَاةً ۗ وَيَحْذَرِ اللَّهُ نَفْسَهُ ۗ وَإِلَى اللَّهِ الْمَصِيرُ

The believers must not make friend with disbelievers instead of believers: if anyone does so, in nothing will there be help from Allah: except by avoiding them, that you may guard yourselves from them. But Allah cautions you [to remember] Him; for the final goal is to Allah. (3:28)

This verse first warns the believers that if they select disbelievers as their guardians, their relation with God is completely broken off, but it also makes an exception to this fundamental rule, saying that there is no problem with the relation with disbelievers if it is established because of dissimulation. This is because Islam only seeks to revive the truth, and sometimes dissimulating is in the interests of Islam and its life more so than abandoning dissimulation.

In addition to the verses that explicitly permit Muslims to dissimulate in order to safeguard Islam and their beliefs, some other verses tell the story of the true followers of the previous religions and Muslims and praise them for dissimulating. They include:

1. ‘Ammar Yasir

مَنْ كَفَرَ بِاللَّهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ إِيمَانِهِ إِلَّا مَنْ أُكْرِهَ وَقَلْبُهُ مُطْمَئِنٌّ بِالْإِيمَانِ وَلَكِنْ مَنْ شَرَحَ
بِالْكُفْرِ صَدْرًا فَعَلَيْهِمْ غَضَبٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ

Anyone who, after accepting faith in Allah, utters disbelief – except under compulsion, with his heart remaining firm in Faith – but such as open their heart to disbelief, on them is Wrath from Allah, and theirs will be a dreadful punishment. (16: 106)

This verse indicates that if somebody expresses disbelief forcefully, although he has no doubt about God in his heart, he is not deemed guilty and sinful. Interpreting this verse, Qurtabi said, “There is consensus among scholars that if he expresses disbelief forcefully and out of fear for his life while his heart is replete with faith, he is not to blame.”¹⁹

Although a minority of Sunni scholars relate this verse to the Meccan Muslims who were under intolerable pressure from the Qurayshites, most Sunni scholars attributed it to the great companion of Prophet Muhammad – ‘Ammar Yasir – who uttered some words opposed to his belief under the brutal torture by the Qurayshites of Mecca.²⁰

This word by the Sunni commentator in the 7th century, Qurtabi, demonstrates that dissimulation is not a Shi'i innovation and has its roots in the Qur'an and Sunnah.

2. The Believer of the Pharaoh's People

وَقَالَ رَجُلٌ مُؤْمِنٌ مِنْ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ يَكْتُمُ إِيمَانَهُ أَتَقْتُلُونَ رَجُلًا أَنْ يَقُولَ رَبِّيَ اللَّهُ وَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ ۗ وَإِنْ يَكُ كَاذِبًا فَعَلَيْهِ كَذِبُهُ ۗ وَإِنْ يَكُ صَادِقًا يُصِيبْكُمْ بَعْضُ الَّذِي يَعِدُكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي مَنْ هُوَ مُسْرِفٌ كَذَّابٌ

A believer, a man from among the people of Pharaoh, who had concealed his faith, said: "Will you slay a man because he says, 'My Lord is Allah'? – When he has indeed come to you with Clear [Signs] from your Lord? And if he be a liar, on him is [the sin of] his lie: but, if he is telling the Truth, then will fall on you something of the [calamity] of which he warns you: truly Allah guides not the one who transgresses and lies! (40:28)

Based on the above verse, it can be said that although the believer of the Pharaoh's people believed in the Prophet Moses, he expressed disbelief and hid his faith out of dissimulation.²¹ The important point is that the practice of a believer who had no way but to conceal his belief due to the particular situation of his time is praised, and in this way people are taught that they should follow the example of such people in life and act like them.²²

3. Prophet Abraham

فَنظَرَ نَظْرَةً فِي النُّجُومِ فَقَالَ إِنِّي سَقِيمٌ فَتَوَلَّوْا عَنْهُ مُدْبِرِينَ فَرَاغَ إِلَى آلِهِتِهِمْ فَقَالَ أَلَا تَأْكُلُونَ مَا لَكُمْ لَا تَنْطِقُونَ فَرَاغَ عَلَيْهِمْ ضَرْبًا بِالْيَمِينِ فَأَقْبَلُوا إِلَيْهِ يَزْفُونَ قَالَ أَعْبُدُونَ مَا تَنْحِتُونَ وَاللَّهُ خَلَقَكُمْ وَمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

Then did he cast a glance at the stars. And he said, "I am indeed sick [at heart]!" So they turned away from him, and departed. Then did he turn to their gods and said, "Will you not eat [of the offerings before you]? What is the matter with you that you speak not [intelligently]?" Then did he turn upon them, striking [them] with the right hand. Then came [the worshippers] with hurried steps, and faced [him]. He said, "Worship you that which you have [yourselves] carved? But Allah has created you and your handwork!" (37:88-96)

Prophet Abraham did not reveal his plan to break the idols to the people of city; rather, he told them he was sick. However, he was, in fact, upset at their idol-worshipping and took the golden opportunity to destroy the idols and awaken people through dissimulating and hiding his belief. That is why Imam Sadiq said, "By Allah, dissimulation is a part of the divine religion. [Out of dissimulation], Prophet Abraham said, 'I am sick,' also, [out of dissimulation], Prophet Joseph said, 'O you [in] the Caravan! You are thieves, without doubt!' (12:70) while by God, they had not stolen anything."²³

Dissimulation in Sunni traditions

Although nowadays dissimulation is known as a Shi'a teaching, Sunni hadiths also imply permissibility of dissimulation and its enjoyment. This in itself gives us a reason that dissimulation is not limited to the Shi'a, but it is a religious principle that is confirmed by Islam. In what follows, several Sunni traditions are listed:

1. In *Kanz ul-'Ummal*, there is a famous hadith by the Holy Prophet known as the Hadith of Raf': "In mistakes, oblivion, and actions they are forced to take, my Ummah is not to blame."²⁴

This hadith indicates that when one is coerced into doing something, its verdict is overturned, and he is not rebuked. Hence, if in order to save his life and safeguard great interests a person one is to express something opposed to his heartfelt belief, he has committed no sin and will face no punishment. Hence, this narration clearly indicates the permissibility and legitimacy of dissimulation.

2. Regarding dissimulation, Hasan Basri is quoted as saying: "Until the Day of Judgment, the believer is permitted to dissimulate except for murder because Allah has forbidden it."²⁵

3. Abdullah ibn 'Umar quoted Prophet Muhammad as saying, "It is not proper for the believer to make himself abject." Then the Holy Prophet was asked, "How does he do so?" He replied, "He gets involved in unbearable incidents."²⁶

Dissimulation and its positive effects in the Infallibles' hadiths

In the hadiths by the Holy Imams, besides references to dissimulation in danger, we can find a number of its benefits some of which are mentioned below.

1. Man's elevation to a higher status

Imam Sadiq quoted his father, Imam Baqir as saying, "By Allah, there is nothing on the Earth more beloved by me than dissimulation. O' Habib! The one who dissimulates will be elevated to the higher status by Allah, and anyone who does not dissimulate will be demoted."²⁷

2. A shelter for the believers

According to Imam Ali, "Dissimulation is among the best **deeds** of the believers who save both themselves and their brothers in faith from sinners through it."²⁸ Likewise, Imam Sadiq said, "Dissimulation is the shield of believer; it is a means of safeguarding him in the struggle."²⁹ Similarly, Prophet Muhammad said, "The believer who abandons dissimulation resembles a headless body."³⁰

3. The protector of Islamic unity

Hadiths on dissimulation imply that it **safeguards** Islamic unity. Imam Sadiq said in this regard, “The one who performs prayer on the first line of [Sunni] public prayer, it is as if he performed public prayer on the first line with the Messenger of Allah.”³¹ In another hadith, he said, “Visit their [Sunnis] sick people, attend their funerals, and perform prayer in their mosques.”³²

In short, we can see dissimulation is a necessity because it revives Islam and brings about Islamic unity. However, abandoning dissimulation when it is necessary causes disunity and rancor among Islamic sects; it also strengthens the enemies of Islam.

Response to doubts on dissimulation

Some have questioned dissimulation; some of these doubts will be mentioned and responded to below.

1. Dissimulation: an unjustified fear

Dissimulation is to protect one’s own interests, to sacrifice the interests of others, and to abandon nobility and magnanimity. This is contrary to the Islamic teachings.

Response: This claim that dissimulation means giving up magnanimity is contrary to the conduct of Prophet Muhammad, because his call to Islam was secret for three years.³³ In addition, his leaving secretly from Mecca – where he was surrounded by enemies – his hiding in a cave in Mount Thawr, his secret migration to Medina, walking during the nights and concealing himself throughout the days are all considered dissimulation.³⁴

2. Dissimulation: a factor in the spread of telling lies

Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad ibn ‘Abdul-Wahhab, and their followers have condemned dissimulation because it may be accompanied by lying; they have introduced it as a factor in the spread of lying.³⁵

Response: Instances of dissimulation appear in both Islamic history and its rulings. If it involves lying, it is considered permissible based on the principle of prioritization. In this respect, Imam Ghazali said:

... So whatever good purpose can be achieved through telling both the truth and a lie, it is prohibited [haram] to tell lies for it. If achieving this purpose is only possible through lying, then it is permissible to tell lies provided that this purpose is permissible, and it is obligatory to tell lies provided that it is obligatory; for example, to save the lives of Muslims. Thus, whenever truthfulness causes a Muslim who is hiding from a tyrant to lose his life, it is definitely not permissible to tell the truth and it is obligatory to tell lies. Likewise, if the purpose – in war, making peace between two people, and solacing an oppressed one – is not achieved but through lying, it is necessary to make use of lies and lying is obligatory....³⁶

Moreover, based on Prophet Muhammad's saying – "It is not forbidden for a person who seeks to make peace between people to tell lies,"³⁷ – one can decree that dissimulation is permissible even though it involves lying.

3. Dissimulation: A corollary to hypocrisy

As dissimulation is to express something or do something opposite to the heartfelt belief, it is a kind of hypocrisy, because hypocrisy means pretention contrary to belief.

Response: The answer to this doubt is obvious, since based on the Holy Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah, dissimulation means expressing disbelief and hiding faith or pretending to believe in falsehood and concealing the truth. This is the opposite of hypocrisy, because hypocrisy consists of expressing faith and hiding disbelief or pretending to believe in the truth and concealing falsehood.

In addition, the Qur'anic verses and Hadiths deprecate hypocrisy, while they emphasize that dissimulation is permissible and obligatory.

Dissimulation before Muslims: an Innovation

Dissimulation before Muslims: an Innovation³⁸

It may be assumed that the permissible dissimulation is the one before the pagans, but dissimulation before Muslims is an innovation introduced by the Shi'as.

Response: The dissimulation considered permissible by the Shi'as is based on its criterion and advisability which are saving one's life, face, property, etc. Whenever this criterion is met, it can be decreed that dissimulation is permissible. Thus, it does not make any difference whether it is before pagans or Muslims, Sunnis or Shi'as.

As Imam Shafi'i said, "In order to save one's life, dissimulation is permitted. As it is allowable among the pagans, it is permissible among Muslims."³⁹

Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can conclude that:

1. Dissimulation is a rational action.
2. Both Sunnis and Shi'as agree on legitimacy of dissimulation.
3. In Islamic hadiths, dissimulation is called the Sunnah of the divine prophets, the requisite for safeguarding faith, and a defense mechanism that preserves Islamic unity.

4. Dissimulation by no means contrasts with magnanimity, since the Prophet of Islam also dissimulated.
5. Dissimulation is not considered hypocrisy, because hypocrisy involves expressing faith and hiding disbelief, while dissimulation involves expressing disbelief and concealing faith unwillingly.
6. Whenever the religious obvious and necessary matters are tainted or murder occurs by dissimulation, it is not permissible.

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