

Imamat in Shi'ism : a Spiritual Approach

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There are different interpretations about Shiism in the course of history and due to the shortage of time I would like to explain to you what I benefited from my master the late Allamah Tabatabaee who is considered to be one of the greatest exegetes of the Holy Quran. He is the author of twenty volumes entitled "al-Mizan" concerning the interpretation and the exegesis of the Holy Quran. He was a great sage-philosopher, jurisprudent, well-versed in speculative and practical gnosis (Irfan). He has moreover authored many books in the domain of the principles of jurisprudence, Islamic philosophy and wisdom.

In my opinion, before anything else, the necessary condition for understanding shiism, is a deep grasp of the reality of Islam and the prophetic message. The main question here is this: what is the reality of the messenger hood (risalah) of our Holy Prophet Muhammad? (Benedictions and salutations of Allah be upon him). I think that our Holy Prophet possessed many spiritual ranks and it is incumbent upon us to delve more deeply into those spiritual ranks and stations and gain a deeper knowledge of them.

The question poses itself: what is our authentic reference for such knowledge?

The sole reliable authority concerning our knowledge of the prophecy of prophets generally and the prophethood of the Holy Prophet of Islam in particular is no doubt the Glorious Quran, the Holy scripture of all Muslims. Referring to it we shall find that he has been endowed with the following spiritual ranks in the Holy Quran.

1- Messengerhood (al-Risalah).

Allah, Glorious and Transcendent is He says: “Muhammad was but a messenger who was preceded by other messengers.”

2- Jurisdiction: “Nay! I swear by your Lord that they shall never believe unless they make you an arbiter in their disputations.”

3- Sovereignty and management of the public affairs “Be obedient to God and be obedient to the Messenger and those who have command among you.”; “And consult with them in their affairs and when you make a conclusive decision, then trust in God.”

4- Imamate and Walayah: “verily your protector (or superintendant) is God and His Messenger.” etc.

5- Divine vicegerency: “Remember when God said to His angels: I want to install a vicegerent on the Earth.” etc.

There is no doubt that the first rank (messengerhood” came to an end and was sealed after the demise of the Holy Prophet and his return to God the Almighty.

This is evidenced by several verses mentioned in the Holy Book and also by the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet. In addition in the Glorious Quran God says that indeed messengerhood is a rank which is totally in His hands

“And God knows better where to put His message.” So if a messenger is appointed by God after our Holy Prophet it is incumbent upon him to demonstrate and to prove to people the veracity of his message with the same reasons which proved the messengerhood of our Holy Prophet, when he was chosen by God. In other words messengerhood and prophecy depend totally on the person of the messenger or the prophet and are not transmissible to a deputy by proxy.

It is impossible for a messenger to transfer his function of messengerhood to another person. He cannot appoint a messenger of God to people on his part.

But what became of the other ranks after the demise of the Holy prophet?

There is no doubt that the rank of jurisdiction is a rank that can be delegated to the scholars of the Islamic community.

That is why the Holy Prophet during his lifetime sent Muadh ibn Jabal to Yemen as a judge and he also dispatched Ali Ibn Abi Talib elsewhere. Again governance, administration and sovereignty is an affair that can be actualized with the allegiance of the people as God says: “Indeed God was well- pleased with believers when they paid allegiance to you under the tree.” But the main issue concerned in this essay is the question of *Imamah* and *Walayah*. To give an appropriate answer to this question it is necessary to understand what these two terms mean. Again the word *khilafah* has been used synonymously with these two terms. “I am appointing a vicegerent on earth.” First the words “I am appointing” signify that it was by no means an accidental and transient event but on the contrary it was an everlasting and permanent affair. Second “on earth” indicates that it had to do with the Global at large and not with a particular zone. Third, what was the answer to the angels’ protest “Do you put in it him who makes corruption and sheds blood?” The response came after Adam presented his knowledge and his perfections to the angels. Therefore the proper answer to this question is that the vicegerent of God (khalifa-ta-Llah) is the Perfect man who does not make corruption, nor does he shed blood. To him belongs the guidance of all other human beings and it behooves him to deliver the Message of God to the humankind. He is the Friend of God and the most proximate being to Him on earth. In some verses of the Quran this is the same rank that has been mentioned as protectorship (walayah) or Friendship as when He says: “Indeed your protector (or friend) is God and His Messenger and those...”

This rank is no doubt a spiritual rank that belongs to the Holy Prophet.

It is the same spiritual rank as the Divine viceregency spoken about in the Glorious Quran as implied in the following verse: “God, is not to chastise them while you are among them.” What was the reason for the non-chastisement of the people?

Was it due to his messengerhood or rather to his Divine and spiritual rank?

Here I would like to mention the views of my beloved master the late Allamah Tabatabaee in the dialogue which he had with the late philosopher- Islamicist Prof. Henry Corbin.

In the beginning I should mention that in the 1970s the great French philosopher Henry Corbin came to Iran intending to make some research about Islam and especially Shiism. He knew certain religious scholars in Iran. He consulted them, seeking a person who would answer his questions about Islam and Shiism. All his discussions and dialogues with Shiite scholars have been collected and published in Persian. Our master Allamah Tabatabaee wrote an introduction to this collection in which he mentioned that the great French philosopher in his last sessions with him and in his valuable discussions intimated to him (Tabatabaee) what he understood of Shiism.

In the introduction of the book the late Allameh Tabatabaee wrote: “Prof. Corbin in his last exchanges with me made the following statement:

“In my opinion, Shiism is the only creed which has permanently preserved the relationship of Divine guidance between the creator and the creatures and has incessantly established and consolidated **walayah** as a living reality.” He explained further and said: “Judaism has confined prophecy which is a real link between God and human beings in Moses. It does not avow the prophecy of Jesus, nor that of the prophet Muhammad. That is why Jews have cut off that relationship between the

creator and the creatures. Such is the case with Christians who stop short and go as far as the Messiah. Shiism is the only creed that considers Muhammad to be the seal of prophets as other Muslims do, but at the same time believes that after the demise of the Holy Prophet, even if the chain of prophecy is for ever sealed but the light of Divine guidance, shall ever remain as a living reality through **walayah**, and shall continue to the end of time”.

That relationship which reveals the connecting link between the two realms of humanity and Divinity through the Divine religions before Moses and again through the messages of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, is preserved in the Walayah of his vicegerents (according to the Shiite view) and will remain as a permanent reality for ever. It is a reality which science cannot consider it to be false and reckon it among fictitious and fabricated superstitions.”

“I believe that all religions are real. All of them pursue a single reality and all of them share in common the function of establishing and consolidating the truth. But shiism is the only creed which has dressed this reality with the garb of permanence and continuity and believes in a permanent bond of unity between the two domains of humanity and Divinity and believes that this bond shall continue forever.”

Then he (Prof. Corbin) said: “This is my view. Do you share with me the same view?”

Our master Allamah Tabatabaee, answered him as follows:

“From the Islamic point of view, the theory of demonstrating God’s existence is common among all the ancient religions. But a religion worthy of the name is one in which the unique God is worshipped and establishes the link of prophecy between God and the human beings and in addition maintains the existence of a Hereafter (i.e establishes the three articles of Divine unity, Prophecy and belief in a future life).

These threefold articles of faith are maintained in Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Islam.

Islam pays Judaism and Christianity the respect and reverence which is permissible and due to any religion. Islam sanctifies and hallows the prophetic rank of Moses and the prophecy and the immaculate birth of Jesus and also confirms their religion, their scripture and their Divine Law.

Islam again pays due respect to Zoroastrianism. It considers all these religions to be on the straight path of Divine guidance, which were sent by God to different generations of humankind and gradually caused their spiritual perfection. Islam moreover believes that the ascription of man to religions is a necessity. As to other religions, Islam does not believe that they are able to preserve and safeguard human felicity in this world and in the next, despite the fact that one could possibly find in those religions traces of monotheistic ideas such the demonstration of God's existence, moral virtues and a true spirituality which are not to be denied in religions.

“Nonetheless from an Islamic viewpoint, true value and worth of humans depends on their pure and unadulterated faith and on their righteous deeds, not on their name and fame and their formal affiliations. That is why Islam has been quite tolerant to those to whom true articles of faith and religion have not been sufficiently expounded, or they have been expounded, but they have not been able fully to grasp it and called them “The weak and the oppressed.”

The late Allamah Tabatabaee as you see, corroborated Prof. Corbin's understanding of shiism and the core and kernel of its spirituality. But as to his view concerning religion in its entirety, he wrote his preceding eloquent statement about religious toleration and Islam's broad and far-reaching view about it. It is evident that our

master's views are all based on the verses of the Glorious Quran, but in accordance with his own exegesis which in certain points are peculiar to his noble and profound reflections, founded on his exegetic principle that the Holy Quran is self-interpretive. From the following verse he deduced the unity of the true path and the validity of faith associated with the righteous deeds and the unworthiness of the name and fame and merely formal affiliations. "Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans- whoever believes in God and the last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve" (Quran. I:81)

As you see, in the above verse "faith" is repeated a second time, when he says *whoever believes*, after having said in the beginning *those who believe*. Now the question is: why is the word repeated twice?

He answers the above question in his very valuable commentary (al-Mizan), under his exegesis of this verse which corroborates what I understood of his words.

The repetition of faith (al-iman) a second time which means to be qualified by the reality of faith gives us to understand that the purport of *Those who believe* in the beginning of the verse, refers to those who are qualified by faith outwardly and are only named by that name. The upshot of the argument is that name, and to be named by names such as "believers" "jews" "Christians" and "Sabeans" does not make it necessary for them to have a reward from God or security from chastisement, as they themselves claimed that "No one shall enter" paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian". Indeed the real criterion for the whole affair and the cause of nobility and beatitude is in reality true faith in God and the last day and righteous deeds. That is why He did not say *whoever believes from (among) them*, by referring the personal pronoun to the relative pronoun mentioned earlier.

In many verses of the Quran, it is repeatedly mentioned that nobility, felicity and beatitude revolve upon the axis of servanthood.

Therefore no name of these names benefits in any way those who merely have those names. No attribute of the attributes of perfection would remain with its possessor and would save him unless it is accompanied by servanthood; there is no difference in this respect between prophets and those who are below them in spiritual rank.

In another verse in chapter *women*, we read: “O you who believe! Believe in God and His Messenger, and the Book He sent down upon His Messenger, and the Book He sent down before. Whosoever does not believe in God and His angels and His Books and His messengers and the Last Day has wandered far astray” (Qur.I:136)

The above verse states that to believe in certain messengers and to refuse others cannot be counted as real faith and is not acceptable to God. The reality of faith consists in faith in God, His angels, His Books, His Messengers and in doing righteous deeds. It is this faith which bears the fruits of eternal happiness.

Still in another verse we read. “It will not be in accordance with your desires nor the desires of the people of the Book. Whosoever does evil shall be requited for it, and he will find no protector or helper for himself apart from God.” (Qur. 4:123)

This verse is an explicit refutation of what God has called “Vain desires” which were concocted by some people of the Book as God the Almighty has recounted of them in His Holy scripture.

“And the Jews and the Christians say, We are the children of God and His beloved ones.” (Qur. 5:18)

“And they say, Be Jews or Christians and you shall be rightly guided.”

(Qur. 2:135) and again: “That is because they say, there is nothing to stop us when it comes to non-Jews.” (Qur. 3:75)

So God refuted this group of believers for what they surmised and attached them to the people of the Book and He called their conjectures “vain hopes” because like the latter they are nothing but pleasant and pleasurable imaginary forms which have no corresponding object in the external reality. So he said: it is not in accordance with your desires, O you the community of Muslims’ or in accordance with the desires of a party of Muslims, nor in accordance with the desires of the people of the Book. The whole affair revolves upon the axis of your acts.

If they are good, so much the better and if they are bad, so much the worse.

Finally his allusion to the view of Islam concerning the weak and the oppressed is based on the following Quranic verse: “But not so, the [truly] weak are oppressed among the men, women and children, who neither have access to any means, nor are guided to any way.” (Qur. 4:98)

From the above verse it is evident that ignorance of religious sciences when it is due to incapability or weakness where the human has no choice, will be forgiven by God the Almighty.

