

Core Curriculum

2 Foundations of Islam - Theology

2.6 **Imāmah or divinely guided leadership in Islam after the Prophet Muhammad.**

INTRODUCTION

Bismillāhir Rahmānir Rahīm, As-salāmu ‘Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh. Peace be upon you brothers and sisters.

Welcome back to the Muslim Converts Channel! Last time we spoke about the role and importance of nubuwwa, or Propethood, in Islam.

According to Islam, the last of these Prophets was the Prophet Muhammad (s). The Prophet Muhammad was the last of the Prophets because the divine message he delivered was complete.

It was a universal message for all peoples in all places and in all times. This does not mean that previous messages were somehow faulty, but it just means that the fullness of divine revelation had to wait until the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad (s).

But isn't this unfair? How can he be the last Prophet? Shouldn't humanity always have a divine guide on earth to guide them to God? Shouldn't God have emissaries on earth to protect His last religion?

The answer to these questions is a loud yes!

In Islam, we believe that the Prophet Muhammad (s) was succeeded by twelve divinely appointed emissaries or leaders who were tasked to protect the final religion of God and guide humankind to salvation. These

non-Prophet emissary leaders are what we call “Imāms” who work within the framework of an already revealed religion.

In this lesson, we will go into the meaning of Imāmah and why it is so important in Islam. Given the hot discussions that this subject often generates among Muslims, we will also delve into how Imamah differentiates the two major expressions of Islam today, namely Sunni and Shia Islam.

BODY OF TEXT

...We raised among them Imāms guiding [people] by Our command when they were patient and had sure faith in Our signs (Chapter 32, verse 24 of the Holy Qur’an)

The point of religion is to guide humans to salvation. A religion without a guiding person cannot fulfill this task. For this reason, we need God to send people human examples and role models who can properly convey, interpret and embody God’s guiding principles. Islam was the peak of God’s revelation on earth. It was revelation at its fullest.

The task of conveying this final message was given to God’s last Prophet, the Prophet Muhammad (s). The Prophet Muhammad was indeed the last Prophet as there was no more need for new revelation. Revelation in Arabic is called wahī.

The institution of non-prophetic guidance after the Prophet Muhammad (s) is called Imāmah in Islam. Imāmah literally means “leadership” and the one who embodies the institution is called an Imām, which literally means “leader.”

When the Prophet Muhammad (s) was nearing his death, he appointed ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib as his successor. Imam Ali was his #1 and life long student. He was also his son-in-law who married to the Prophet’s (s) only daughter Fatima al-Zahra (as). This meant that after the Prophet’s (s) death, ‘Alī (as) was to assume the title of Imām. An Imām is a divinely guided leader who is infallible from sins and mistakes.

Although the Prophet Muhammad (s) was also an Imām, Imām ‘Alī (as) differed in so far as he was not a Prophet, meaning that he did not receive revelation. Prophetic wahi usually contains a new message for humankind. As the Imams did not received prophetic wahi, the only message they preached was that of the Prophet Muhammad (s) and nothing new.

According to Islam, Imām ‘Alī (as) was the first Imām in a line of 12 Imāms. These 12 Imams were to guide humankind until the Day of Judgment. These Imāms were all to be from the Ahl al-Bayt, that is, the Holy Household of the Prophet (s).

The Imāmah of the first 11 Imāms lasted approximately 249 years, beginning with Imām ‘Alī (as) after the demise of the Prophet Muḥammad (s) 632 A.D

These two and a half centuries were the formative years of Islam. All of Islam’s major schools of law and theology can be traced back to that time. One feature of these formative years is that they were ripe with disagreements and differences of opinion.

This of course is natural as these opinions were produced by fallible people who had no access to divine knowledge. However, the Imāms who succeeded the Prophet (s) were present during these years and helped preserve authentic Muhammadan Islam. This Islam can still be found today in the Muslim school of the Ahl al-Bayt (as).

Muslims have Twelve Imāms:

The first of these Imāms was ‘Alī b. Abī Tālib, (b. stands for bin) the first

and foremost of the Prophet's students. The second Imām was Imām 'Alī's (as) son Imām al-Ḥasan (as).

The third Imām was Imām 'Alī's (as) other son Imām al-Ḥusayn (as). The fourth Imām was Imām al-Ḥusayn's (as) son Imām 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-'Ābidīn (as).

The fifth Imām was Muhammad b. 'Alī al-Bāqir (as), the sixth was Imām Ja'far b. Muhammad al-Ṣādiq (as), the seventh Imām was Mūsā b. Ja'far al-Kāẓim (as), the eighth Imām was 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Ridā (as), the ninth was Imām Muhammad b. 'Alī al-Taqī al-Jawād,

The tenth Imām was 'Alī b. Muhammad al-Naqī al-Hādī, the eleventh was Imām Ḥasan b. 'Alī al-Askarī (as).

And finally the twelfth Imām, who is our current Imam, is called Muhammad b. Hasan al-Mahdī (aj).

The only Imām who was not directly present in public was the 12th Imām (may Allah hasten his return). The 12th Imām, due to political persecution, went into occultation or hiding and will emerge during the end of times to restore justice and peace all around the world.

He will rise as the Mahdī, or the promised messiah and savior of the world. The Imām has been in occultation for centuries now, but this is not something to raise eyebrows over as God can make anyone live as long as He wants.

Now the following question may be asked: if we always need a divinely appointed Imām to guide humankind, doesn't the absence of the 12th Imām defeat its purpose? What use is an Imām whom no one, or at best, very few people have access to?

The answer is the following: guidance comes in many shapes and forms. Guidance may be direct, where an individual goes and asks an Imām a particular question. At other times the Imām may come to that individual, or group of individuals, and give them advice.

In the case of the 12th Imām, we know that he will always have a number of individuals whom he has under his wing and through them guides humankind to salvation.

Another form of guidance is esoteric. Here the Imam is also able to guide humankind from a metaphysical frequency. In other words, just like Satan can whisper in the hearts of millions of people in the world, the guiding light of an Imām can also instill and inspire millions of hearts with good thoughts.

One day, one of the Prophet's companions, Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh, was informed about the coming of the 12 Imāms. When the Prophet reached the subject of the 12th Imāms, he said the following:

...he it is who will remain hidden from his followers and friends for a such a long period that no one will remain firm on the belief of his Imamah except he whose heart has been tested by Allah for faith...

For which Jābir asked:

'O Messenger of Allah! Will his followers get any benefit from him during his occultation?' (The Prophet, s.a.w.a.) said: 'Certainly, by Him Who has sent me with prophethood! they will be guided by his light and benefit from his mastership during his occultation as people benefit from the sun when it is hidden in cloud. O Jabir! this is part of the hidden secrets of Allah. So keep it hidden except from the people who deserve to know.¹

So when we look at it this way, present or not, people can always count on the Imām of the time to guide them!

A final topic we would like to touch on is the role of Imāmah as a dividing

marker between Sunni and Shia Islam, that is, the two major sects or expressions of Islam today.

So far our description of Imāmah has been in line with the school of the Ahl al-Bayt (as), which is also known as Shia Islam or Shi'ism. Sunni Islam does not believe in a divinely guided succession of Imāms from the Holy Household of the Prophet.

For most Sunnis, Imāmah, when discussed, can refer to various things. These include, among other things, the political leadership of regular people, or the holding of religious leadership roles by fallible people.

These people are no different than lay men and lay women except that they have received higher training in the religious sciences. Ideally, this group of individuals are supposed to be more pious than your regular folk.

Examples of these kinds of imams are Friday prayer leaders, scholars of law, scholars of theology.

1 The original Arabic of this hadith can be found in al-Shaykh al-Sadūq's Kamāl al-Dīn, volume

1 p. 253. The translation used is from Saeed Akhtar Rizvi.

In its literal sense of leadership or religious leadership, Shia Islam also accepts the existence and need of such an "Imāmah." But Imāmah, as a divinely appointed form of guiding leadership, is what really distinguishes it from other expressions of Islam.

Just like Islam would not make sense without tawhīd, Shia Islam would not make sense without Imāmah. For Shia Islam, without the presence of an Imām along with his guiding light on earth, guidance and salvation would not be possible and the world would come to an end. With the death of the 12th Imam, Shia Islam believes that the world will end and Judgment Day will begin.

Until Next Time, Thank you for watching. As-salāmu 'Alaykum wa

rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh