

The Ismaili Imam

The last in the line of the Abrahamic family of revealed traditions, Islam emerged in the early decades of the seventh century. Its message, addressed in perpetuity, calls upon a people that are wise, a people of reason, to seek in their daily life, in the rhythm of nature, in the ordering of the universe, in their own selves, in the very diversity of humankind, signs that point to the Creator and Sustainer of all creation, Who alone is worthy of their submission.* It was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s.) in Arabia from where its influence spread rapidly and strongly, bringing within its fold, in just over a century after its birth, inhabitants of the lands stretching from the central regions of Asia to the Iberian peninsula in Europe. A major world religion, Islam today counts a quarter of the globe's population among its adherents, bound to their faith by the affirmation of the witness that there is no divinity except God, and Muhammad is His messenger.**

¹ The Holy Quran 2:164; 3:190-191; 30:22 etc; 51:20-21.

² The Holy Quran 2:143; 2: 256; 109:2-7; 16:125; 49:13; 107:1-7; 42:40, 43.

Muslims are those who submit to God. They are a community of the middle path, of balance, which is taught to avoid extremes, to enjoin good and forbid evil, using the best of arguments. Such a community eschews compulsion, leaves each to their own faith and encourages all to vie for goodness: it is the nobility of conduct which endears one in the sight of God. In its pristine sense, Islam refers to the inner struggle

of the individual, waged singly and in consonance with fellow believers, to engage in earthly life, and yet, to rise above its trappings in search of the Divine. But that quest is only meaningful in tandem with the effort to do good for the kin, the orphan, the needy, the vulnerable; to be just, honest, humble, tolerant and forgiving.(2)

The spiritual dimension of Islam varies from individual to individual according to their inner capacities as conditioned by the external environment. Equally, in the collective domain, a divergence of views has persisted since the demise of the Prophet among the pious and the learned, on what constitutes the best community. The very comprehensiveness of the vision of Islam, as it has unfolded over time and in a multiplicity of cultures, has rendered a monolithic conception of the ideal society difficult. Nevertheless, whatever the cultural milieu in which Islam takes root, its central impulse of submission to the Divine translates into patterns of lifeways and acts of devotion, which impart a palpable impress of an Islamic piety to whichever spheres Muslims occupy.

Shia Islam: Historical Origins

Within its fundamental unity, Islam has elicited, over the ages, varying responses to its primal message calling upon man to surrender himself to God. Historically, these responses have been expressed as two main perspectives within Islam: the Shia and the Sunni. Each encompasses a rich diversity of spiritual temperaments, juridical preferences, social and psychological dispositions, political entities and cultures. Ismailism is one such response integral to the overall Shia perspective which seeks to comprehend the true meaning of the Islamic message, and trace a path to its fulfilment.

All Muslims affirm the unity of God (tawhid) as the first and foremost article of the faith, followed by that of Divine guidance through God's chosen messengers, of whom Prophet Muhammad was the last. The verbal attestation of the absolute unity and transcendence of God and of His choice of Muhammad as His Messenger constitutes the shahada, the profession of faith, and the basic creed of all Muslims.

During his lifetime, Prophet Muhammad was both the recipient of Divine revelation and its expounder. His death marked the conclusion of the line of prophecy, and the beginning of the critical debate on the question of the rightful leadership to continue his mission for the future generations. The debate ensued as a result of the absence of consensus, in the nascent Muslim community, on the succession to the Prophet.

A variety of viewpoints on the nature of the succession continued to be expressed before being consolidated into systematic doctrine, propounded by legal scholars and theologians, towards the end of the ninth century. From the beginning, however, there was a clear distinction of views on this matter between those, known as Shi'at Ali or the "party" of Ali, who believed that the Prophet had designated Ali, his cousin, as his successor, and those groups which followed the political leadership of the caliphs. These latter groups eventually coalesced into the majoritarian, Sunni branch, comprising several different juridical schools.

In essence, the Sunni position was that the Prophet had not nominated a successor, as the revelation, the Quran, was sufficient guidance for the community. Nevertheless, there developed a tacit recognition that the spiritual-moral authority was to be exercised by the ulama, a group of specialists in matters of religious law, the shariah. The task of the ulama came to be understood as that of merely deducing appropriate rules of conduct on the basis of the Quran, the [Hadith](#) or the Prophetic tradition and several other subordinate criteria. The role of the [caliph](#), theoretically elected by the community, was to maintain a realm in which the principles and practices of Islam were safeguarded and propagated.

The Shia or "party" of Ali, already in existence during the lifetime of the Prophet, maintained that while the revelation ceased at the Prophet's death, the need for spiritual and moral guidance of the community, through an ongoing interpretation of the Islamic message, continued. They firmly believed that the legacy of Prophet Muhammad could only be entrusted to a member of his own family, in whom the Prophet had invested his authority through designation. That person was Ali, Prophet Muhammad's cousin, the husband of his daughter and only surviving child, [Fatima](#), and his first supporter who had devoutly championed the cause of Islam and had earned the Prophet's trust and admiration. Their espousal of the right of Ali and that of his descendants, through Fatima, to the leadership of the community was rooted, above all, in their understanding of the Quran and its concept of qualified and rightly guided leadership, as reinforced by Prophetic traditions. The most prominent among the latter were part of the Prophet's sermon at a place called Ghadir Khumm, following his farewell pilgrimage, designating Ali as his successor, and his testament that he was leaving behind him "the two weighty things", namely the Quran and his progeny, for the future guidance of his community.

Among the early Shia were the pious Quran readers, several close Companions of the Prophet, tribal chiefs of distinction and other pious Muslims who had rendered great services to Islam.

Their foremost teacher and guide was Ali himself who, in his sermons and letters, and in his admonitions to the leaders of the tribe of Quraysh, reminded Muslims of his family's right, in heredity, to the leadership for all time "as long as there is among us one who adheres to the religion of truth".

The Shia, therefore, attest that after the Prophet, the authority for the guidance of the community was vested in Ali. The Sunni, on the other hand, revere Ali as the last of the four rightly-guided caliphs, the first three being Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman. Just as it was the prerogative of the Prophet to designate his successor, so it is the absolute prerogative of each [Imam](#) of the time to designate his successor from among his male progeny. Hence, according to Shia doctrine, the Imamatus continues by heredity in the Prophet's progeny through Ali and Fatima.

Evolution of Communities of Interpretation

In time, the Shia were sub-divided. The Ismailis are the second largest Shia Muslim community. The Ismailis and what eventually came to be known as the Ithna ashari or Twelver Shia parted ways over the succession to the great, great grandson of Ali and Fatima, Imam Jafar as-Sadiq, who died in the year 765 CE. The Ithna asharis transferred their allegiance to as-Sadiq's youngest son Musa al-Kazim and after him, in lineal descent, to Muhammad al-Mahdi, their twelfth Imam who, they believe, is in occultation and will reappear to dispense perfect order and justice. Led by mujtahids, the Ithna asharis are the largest Shia Muslim community, and the majority of the population in Iran.

The Ismailis gave their allegiance to Imam Jafar as-Sadiq's eldest son Ismail, from whom they derive their name. Throughout their history, the Ismailis have been led by a living, hereditary Imam. They trace the line of Imamatus in hereditary succession from Ismail to His Highness the Aga Khan, who is their present, 49th Imam in direct lineal descent from Prophet Muhammad through Ali and Fatima.

There was also divergent growth among the Sunnis. From the early decades, various embryonic systems of law began to emerge in response to concrete situations of life, reflecting initially the influence of regional custom in the way the Quran was interpreted. Eventually, these were consolidated into four major schools, which came to command the allegiance of the majority of Sunni adherents.

The history and evolution of Islam, thus, witnessed the growth of different communities of interpretation with their respective schools of jurisprudence. However, whatever the differences between the Shia and the Sunni or among their sub-divisions, they never amounted to such fundamental a divergence over theology or dogma as to result in separate religions. On the other hand, in the absence of an established church in Islam and an institutionalized method of pronouncing on dogma, a proper reading of history reveals the inappropriateness of referring to the Shia-Sunni divide, or to interpretational differences within each branch, in the frame of an orthodoxy-heterodoxy dichotomy, or of applying the term "sect" to any Shia or Sunni community.

Principles of Shi'ism

The essence of Shi'ism lies in the desire to search for the true meaning of the revelation in order to understand the purpose of human existence and its destiny. This true, spiritual meaning can never be fettered by the bounds of time, place or the letter of its form. It is to be comprehended through the guidance of the Imam of the time, who is the inheritor of the Prophet's authority, and the trustee of his legacy. A principal function of the Imam is to enable the believers to go beyond the apparent or outward form of the revelation in search of its spirituality and intellect. A believer who sincerely submits to the Imam's guidance may potentially attain the knowledge of self. The tradition attributed to both the Prophet and Imam Ali: "He who knows himself, knows his Lord", conveys the essence of this relationship between the Imam and his follower. The Shia thus place obedience to the Imams after that to God and the Prophet by virtue of the command in the Quran for Muslims to obey those vested with authority.

The succession of the line of prophecy by that of Imamatus ensures the balance between the shariah or the exoteric aspect of the faith, and its esoteric, spiritual essence. Neither the exoteric nor the esoteric obliterates the other. While the Imam is the path to a believer's inward, spiritual elevation, he is also the authority who makes the shariah relevant according to the needs of time and universe. The inner, spiritual life in harmony with the exoteric, is a dimension of the faith that finds acceptance among many communities in both branches of Islam.

Intellect and Faith

The intellect plays a central role in Shia tradition. Indeed, the principle of submission to the Imam's guidance, explicitly derived from the revelation, is considered essential for nurturing and developing the gift of intellect whose role in Shi'ism is elevated as an important facet of the faith. Consonant with the role of the intellect is the responsibility of individual conscience, both of which inform the Ismaili tradition of tolerance embedded in the injunction of the Quran: There is no compulsion in religion.

In Shia Islam, the role of the intellect has never been perceived within a confrontational mode of revelation versus reason, the context which enlivened the debate, during the classical age of Islam, between the rationalists who gave primacy to reason, and the traditionalists who opposed such primacy without, however, denying a subordinate role for reason in matters of faith.

The Shia tradition, rooted in the teachings of Imam Ali and Jafar as-Sadiq, emphasizes the complementarity between revelation and intellectual reflection, each substantiating the other. This is the message that the Prophet conveys in a reported tradition: "We (the Prophets) speak to people in the measure of their intelligences". The Imams Ali and Jafar as-Sadiq expounded the doctrine that the Quran addresses different levels of meaning: the literal, the alluded esoteric purport, the limit as to what is permitted and what is forbidden, and the ethical vision which God intends to realise through man, with Divine support, for an integral moral society. The Quran thus offers the believers the possibility, in accordance with their own inner capacities, to derive newer insights to address the needs of time.

An unwavering belief in God combined with trust in the liberty of human will finds a recurring echo in the sermons and sayings of the Imams. Believers are asked to weigh their actions with their own conscience. None other can direct a person who fails to guide and warn himself, while there is Divine help for those who exert themselves on the right path. In the modern period, this Alid view of Islam as a thinking, spiritual faith continues to find resonance in the guidance of the present Imam and his immediate predecessor. Aga Khan III describes Islam as a natural religion, which values intellect, logic and empirical experience. Religion and science are both endeavours to understand, in their own ways, the mystery of God's creation. A man of faith who strives after truth, without forsaking his worldly obligations, is potentially capable of rising to the level of the company of the Prophet's family.

The present Imam has often spoken about the role of the intellect in the realm of the faith. Appropriately, he made the theme a centrepiece of his two inaugural addresses at the Aga Khan University: "In Islamic belief, knowledge is two-fold. There is that revealed through the Holy Prophet and that which man discovers by virtue of his own intellect. Nor do these two involve any contradiction, provided man remembers that his own mind is itself the creation of God. Without this humility, no balance is possible. With it, there are no barriers. Indeed, one strength of Islam has always lain in its belief that creation is not static but continuous, that through scientific and other endeavours, God has opened, and continues to open, new windows for us to see the marvels of His creation".

Muslims need not be apprehensive, he said, of these continuing journeys of the mind to comprehend the universe of God's creation, including one's own self. The tendency to restrict academic inquiry to the study of past accomplishments was at variance with the belief in the timeless relevance of the Islamic message. "Our faith has never been restricted to one place or one time. Ever since its revelation, the fundamental concept of Islam has been its universality and the fact that this is the last revelation, constantly valid, and not petrified into one period of man's history or confined to one area of the world."

Crossing the frontiers of knowledge through scientific and other endeavours, and facing up to the challenges of ethics posed by an evolving world is, thus, seen as a requirement of the faith. The Imam's authoritative guidance provides a liberating, enabling framework for an individual's quest for meaning and for solutions to the problems of life. An honest believer accepts the norms and ethics of the faith which guide his quest, recognises his own inner capacities and knows that when in doubt he should seek the guidance of the one vested with authority who, in Shia tradition, is the Alid Imam of the time from the Prophet's progeny.

http://www.iis.ac.uk/hhak/imamat_intro.htm