The Structure of the Doctrine of Imamate in Shiite Thought: A Developmental Approach

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Abstract

In this article, I provide an overview of the idea of Imamate in Shiite thought and its development through *Kalami* (theological) debates and literary works. To achieve this goal, I have limited my study to the early basic books and have organized my discussion into five parts: (1) the structure of the discussion of Imamate within Shiite and the Sunni communities, (2) the concept of Imamate, (3) the relation between Imamate and the principles of faith, (4) the necessity of imamate, and (5) who the Imam is in person, and the traits of the Imam. Indeed, we cannot discuss or understand Shia thought and theology without comprehending the idea of Imamate. Therefore, this idea has held a central position in Shia thinking throughout Islamic history, and numerous books have been written both in defense and in criticism of this concept. In this article, adopting a semi-phenomenological and developmental approach, I provide a clear and comprehensive depiction of the idea of Imamate by drawing upon the primary Shia sources. Furthermore, I aim to open a new area for approaching this Shiite doctrine through a different lens.

Keywords: Shiite, Imamate, Shiite theology, the proofs of Imamate, Shia Kalam.

Introduction

"Shīʿa" (Shiite or Shia), originally a Quranic term meaning partisan or follower, historically refers to an Islamic sect or denomination that asserts itself as the true and pure form of Islam.

The essence of Shiite thought lies in the belief in the leadership of certain, typically twelve, infallible individuals who guide the Shiite community from the time of the Prophet Muhammad's death until the Day of Judgment.

Historically, the primary issue that divided the Islamic community into two major factions was the matter of succession. Following the death of Prophet Muhammad, the majority of his followers, including the Muhajirun who migrated from Mecca to Medina along with the Prophet, argued that Muhammad did not explicitly designate a

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successor and left the decision to the Islamic community or Ummah. However, some of his closest family members, such as Ali, his cousin and son-in-law who also served as the Fourth Caliph, contended that Muhammad had fulfilled his duty by appointing Ali, the first person to believe in his message and wholeheartedly follow him, as his true and immediate successor. Although the majority prevailed over this minority and elected Abu Bakr, Muhammad's father-in-law, as his successor, this event gave rise to numerous practical conflicts and theoretical inquiries. Gradually, the issue of Imamate or leadership emerged as the most pivotal matter in Islamic thought, prompting many scholars to delve into in-depth discussions.

It is worth noting that every Muslim believes in the principle of Imamate, and there is no denial of its importance. However, differences arise regarding the definition of Imamate and the source of its legitimacy. Among the various and conflicting interpretations of Imamate, two views emerged as prominent. Firstly, those who supported the election of Abu Bakr through a council, which later became known as Saqifa, identified themselves as *Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jamaʿa* (the people of tradition and community). Secondly, a rival faction known as the Shiite, or at times derogatorily labeled as Ahl al-Rafd, the people of refusal or rejection, resisted the decision of the Islamic community.

With this historical background in mind, we can proceed with our discussion, which will be divided into the following five parts: (1) the structure of the discussion of Imamate within the Shiite and Sunni communities, (2) the concept of Imamate, (3) the relationship between Imamate and the principles of faith, (4) the necessity of Imamate, and (5) the identity of the Imam and the characteristics associated with the Imam.

The Structure of the Discussion of Imamate within Shiite and Sunnis Communities

When it comes to the debate on Imamate, Muslim theologians tend to adopt a uniform approach towards it. Regardless of being Shiite or Sunni, they often share the same assumptions and presuppositions regarding Imamate. As a result, it is not uncommon for a Shiite theologian to reference a Sunni scholar and defend their position, and vice versa. For example, one of the most significant books on Shiite theology, *Tajrid al-iʿtiqad* (The Purification of beliefs), written by Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, a medieval Iranian Shiite theologian, has been interpreted by a Sunni theologian named Qushchi.

This structural similarity is particularly evident among theologians with a philosophical background and approach. They systematically organize the problems and issues of Imamate into five fundamental questions and address them in a sequential manner: (1) What is the nature of Imamate? (2) Does Imamate exist, and is it necessary? (3) What are the essential characteristics required for Imamate? (4) What is the underlying rationale for the necessity of Imamate and why is it deemed necessary? And finally, (5) who is the rightful Imam in terms of personal identity?

As an example, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1359 Sh, 425), Ibn Maytham al-Bahrani (1406 AH, 173), and al-Suyuri (1397 AH, 256) approach their discussions by addressing the following five questions for didactic purposes: What? (The essence of Imamate), Whether? (The existence of Imamate), Why? (The necessity of Imamate), How? (The qualities and characteristics of Imamate), and Who? (The identity of the Imam).

Other works explore this issue on two levels: firstly, at the theoretical level, they delve into the essence and characteristics of the Imam in a general sense. Secondly, at the practical level, they seek to identify and present the true Imam in the real world, providing arguments in support of their choice. At the first level, there are no significant differences among Muslim theologians. However, when we delve into the next level, stark contrasts and deep conflicts emerge between Shiite and Sunni denominations.

However, there are certain issues that Sunni theologians address regarding Imamate, which are not tackled by Shiite scholars. For instance, Sunni theologians like al-Taftazani (1375 AH, 5:257) discuss the possibility of the resignation of the Imam, or in the case of his insanity or mental instability, what would happen and whether it is permissible to obey him in such a state. According to the Shiite perspective, the Imam does not have the right to resign himself, and he is considered immune from illnesses such as insanity and other significant abnormalities. Furthermore, in Sunni theological texts, there are numerous discussions regarding the qualifications of the Imam, including being male, mature, and belonging to the Quraysh tribe (Iji 1998, 8:381). These issues appear to hold significance from a Sunni perspective, while they lose their importance in the Shiite approach. This is because, from the Shiite perspective, Imamate is viewed as a divine matter and should not be reduced to a merely human and political level. If we set aside these minor differences, the overall structure of the discussion on Imamate in Islamic literature remains the same.

Concept and Definition of Imamate

According to Shiite theologians, the essence of Imamate is the authority to govern over Muslims in both worldly and religious matters. Al-Muhaqqiq al-Hilli, a prominent Shiite jurist and theologian, defines Imamate as "the authentic right to general leadership in the world, not representing anyone else" (Hilli 1373 AH, 187). Likewise, Ibn Maytham al-Bahrani states, "Imamate is the general leadership in both worldly and religious matters" (Bahrani 1406 AH, 174). Other Shiite theologians, such as al-ʿAllama al-Hilli, provide similar definitions (Hilli 1415 AH, 289; 1365 Sh, 179; n.d., 62). Additionally, al-Lahiji, an Iranian theologian of recent centuries, asserts that "Imamate is nothing but the general leadership of Muslims in their worldly and religious affairs as the successor of the Prophet" (Lahiji 1383 Sh, 461).

In their definitions, Shiite theologians strive for precision and avoid any false or loose interpretations. Therefore, they employ clear and explicit language, and further elaborate on the meanings of their chosen terms. When referring to Imamate

or leadership, they specifically mean the authority to govern and guide people, particularly Muslims. However, they do not consider all forms of leadership and authority to be encompassed by Imamate. To emphasize this distinction, they add the qualification of "comprehensive" or "general" (ʿamma), indicating that Imamate is a universal or overarching form of leadership that surpasses other types of headship. It represents a supreme power to rule over Muslims. Furthermore, by specifying "in religious issues," they emphasize that Imamate is not merely a worldly power akin to earthly kingdoms, but fundamentally rooted in religious authority. To avoid any misconceptions or limitations of this type of sovereignty, they include "in their worldly issues." As a result, Imamate encompasses both the realm of heaven and Earth. The Imam is therefore a sovereign and leader in both worldly and religious matters, possessing dual forms of power: earthly and heavenly.

According to this definition of Imamate, the Imam possesses the same level of power as Prophet Muhammad, and their sphere of authority is equivalent. Shiite theologians acknowledge this conclusion and assert the same authority for both the Prophet and the Imam. However, the difference between them lies not in the extent of their power, but in the source of their power. The Prophet receives his power and legitimacy directly from God, possessing authentic power. On the other hand, the Imam acquires his power through succession from the Prophet. The Imam does not possess inherent power; rather, all the authority he has is secondary and granted to him by the Prophet. Hence, it originates from another source.

It appears that the definition of Imamate is a common point between Shiite and Sunni theologians, as they often employ the same terminology in their definitions. Some theologians, like al-Lahiji, have even stated that their definition of Imamate is accepted by both Sunni and Shiite denominations (Lahiji 1383 Sh, 462; 1362 Sh, 107). For instance, al-Taftazani, a Sunni theologian, defines Imamate as "the general leadership in worldly and religious matters on behalf of the Prophet" (Taftazani 1375 Sh, 5:232). Similarly, other Sunni theologians such as al-Amidi (2002, 5:121) and al-Iiji (1998, 8:376) provide the same definition for Imamate.

However, it appears that while Shiite scholars prefer the term "Imamate," Sunni scholars tend to use the word "Khilafa" or "Caliphate." Although these two terms refer to the same concept, the former emphasizes the inner or spiritual dimension of leadership, while the latter highlights its external or worldly aspect. It is crucial to note that Imamate encompasses both the religious and earthly affairs of Muslims.

Imamate as a Principle of Faith

One of the differences between Shiite and Sunni theologians lies in the significance of Imamate within the hierarchy of faith. Is Imamate considered a fundamental principle of Islamic faith that every Muslim must believe in, or is it merely a matter of personal belief? Sunni theologians assert that Imamate is a secondary branch of Islamic faith,

while all Shiite theologians maintain that Imamate is one of the foundational principles of faith. According to Shiite theologians, the Islamic faith is incomplete without a belief in Imamate, similar to the belief in the unity of God and the prophethood of Muhammad. Therefore, each Muslim should regard Imamate as one of the principles of faith. As stated by a Shiite theologian, "Imamate and recognizing the true Imam are among the principles of faith, without which religion is incomplete and Islam is unacceptable" (Halabi 1339 Sh, 93).

This difference, in turn, relates to the source of legitimacy for Imamate. If we believe that the Imam must be divinely appointed and introduced through the Prophet, it becomes a matter of faith that cannot be disregarded or denied. However, if we adopt the perspective held by the majority of Muslims, wherein the designation of the Imam is a communal decision that can be made by the Muslims themselves, then it is not considered a principle of Islamic faith, but rather a social choice within the public sphere. While Sunni theologians unanimously assert that Imamate is a worldly matter, and that it is the responsibility of Muslims to decide and determine who can be the Imam and under what conditions, Shiite theologians unanimously believe that Imamate is a divine appointment. According to their belief, no human being, not even Prophet Muhammad himself, has the authority to decide on this matter.

Many Shiite theologians provide arguments to support their positions, often citing the hadith where the Prophet is believed to have said, "He who dies without knowing the Imam of his time, dies the death of ignorance (*Jahiliyya*)." They interpret this hadith as indicating that Imamate is an integral part of faith, inseparable from it. They argue that since faith is a matter decided by God, Imamate, being an essential component of faith, must also be determined by God rather than human choice.

As a result, Shiite theologians approach the issue of Imamate as a theological matter, discussing it in their theological texts rather than in juridical works. On the other hand, Sunni theologians also address the topic in their theological writings, despite it being considered a jurisprudential issue in *fiqh*. Al-Amidi (2002, 5:119) argues that although the discussion of Imamate should ideally take place within the scope of *fiqh*, theologians have traditionally addressed it in their theological works out of habit. Al-Taftazani (1375 Sh, 5:232) further suggests that due to the prevalence of heresies and the significance of this matter, theologians, rather than jurists, have taken the responsibility of discussing Imamate in their books.

The Necessity of Imamate

All Muslim sects universally acknowledge the importance and necessity of Imamate for the prosperity of the Islamic community. However, a small minority of extremists, such as al-Khawarij, deviate from this consensus and deny the necessity of Imamate, considering it optional and dependent on specific conditions. Al-Khawarij, who revolted against Imam Ali, the first Imam of the Shiite and fourth caliph, attacked his army, and

challenged his rule, rejected the necessity of Imamate and believed it to be optional. Interestingly, they elected their own Imam and followed him, continuing to choose and obey subsequent Imams. Additionally, there were theologians like Abu Bakr al-Asamm (Hilli 1415 AH, 289) who argued that the presence of an Imam is only necessary during times of turmoil and warfare, but in periods of peace and security, they believed that Imams were not required. Conversely, others like Hisham al-Futi (Amidi 2002, 5:122) claimed that Imams are unnecessary during times of war but crucial during peacetime to ensure the correct performance of religious rituals. Despite these nuanced disagreements, it is evident that all Muslim denominations, at a practical level, acknowledge the necessity of Imamate and consider it an integral part of the Islamic community. However, the question remains regarding the source of this necessity and why Muslims must choose or obey their Imams.

There are numerous debates surrounding the source of the necessity of Imamate, but they can be distilled into one fundamental question. Is Imamate necessary based on reason or due to a divine command? We can essentially summarize all the disagreements within this single question: is Imamate obligatory by virtue of reason or by religion?

While all Sunni theologians maintain that Imamate is necessary solely based on transmitted tradition, without any direct command from reason, Shiite theologians argue that Imamate is dictated by reason itself and does not require additional religious justifications to prove its necessity.

Therefore, we are confronted with two different perspectives and chains of arguments regarding the source of the necessity of Imamate that we need to address. Let us begin with the Sunni viewpoint. They believe that Imamate is not rationally obligatory, and pure reason alone cannot lead to the conclusion that Imamate is necessary for the Islamic community. The sole source of its necessity, according to the Sunni perspective, is Islamic tradition and the actions and practices of Muslims. Al-Taftazani (1375 Sh, 5:235; also see Lahiji 1383 Sh, 471-73) puts forth three reasons to support the claim that Imamate is obligatory solely based on Islamic tradition. Firstly, there was a consensus among the Muslims of the first generation regarding the obligation of Imamate. This consensus was so strong that after the death of Prophet Muhammad, they immediately left his body and hastened to elect an Imam for themselves. Secondly, certain religious rituals, such as carrying out Islamic punishments, defending Islamic territories, and maintaining order in society, cannot be effectively carried out without the presence of an Imam. Therefore, Imamate is necessary as a means to fulfill these acts, as they themselves are deemed necessary. Thirdly, the process of electing the Imam allows for the acquisition of public interests and the avoidance of various evils. This is supported by the consensus among Muslims.

Alongside the prevailing Sunni perspective, there were also some Mu'tazilite theologians such as al-Jahiz, al-Kaʿbi, and Abu l-Husayn al-Basri (see Taftazani

1375 Sh, 5:235) who argued that reason alone can establish the necessity of Imamate. According to their view, due to the extensive benefits it provides, Imamate is rationally obligatory for the Muslim community.

The second perspective and chain of argument regarding the necessity of Imamate stems from the Shiite school of thought. According to this view, the necessity of Imamate is not solely based on Islamic tradition and history, but it is fundamentally rational. Even in the absence of explicit evidence from the practice of the early Muslim generations or the Islamic Sharia, one could still arrive at the conclusion that Imamate is necessary, and Muslims are rationally obligated to have an Imam. Furthermore, proponents of this viewpoint assert that not only can we comprehend this necessity through reason, but God Himself is also rationally obligated to appoint and declare someone as the Imam. Thus, it is not an optional act for God to designate an Imam, but rather a compulsory one. This unique position of Shiite thought distinguishes it from other Islamic perspectives (Hilli 1415 AH, 290).

Those who believe in the rational necessity of Imamate can be categorized into three sects: (1) The Ismailis or followers of Ismailism, (2) the Ghulat or Shiite extremists who hold exaggerated beliefs about the status of the Imams, and (3) the Imamiyya or the Twelver Shiites.

Firstly, the Ismailis assert that without the teachings of the Prophet or the Imam, it is impossible to know and perceive God. Therefore, it is deemed necessary for God to appoint and introduce the Imam (Lahiji 1383 Sh, 474). However, this perspective is not accepted by Shiite thought, as they maintain that it is possible to comprehend God through one's own reason, without the need for assistance from other human individuals (Lahiji 1383 Sh, 475).

Secondly, the Shiite extremists, or Ghulat, argue that it is necessary for God to appoint and introduce the Imam to humanity, as he is the source of knowledge regarding crafts, daily skills, useful foods, healthy drinks, and more (Lahiji 1383 Sh, 475). However, this reasoning is deemed unacceptable, as individuals can acquire necessary skills and knowledge through personal experience, trial and error, and other means.

It is important to highlight that within the history of the Islamic community, there have been sects and groups who have held radical beliefs and ascribed divine or extraordinary attributes to the Imams and members of the Prophet's Household. These groups, commonly referred to as al-Ghulat or people of exaggeration, were regarded as extremists and were isolated by the wider Islamic community.

Thirdly, the Imamiyya or the Twelver Shiites present two primary arguments to support the idea of rational necessity for Imamate. Firstly, they argue that the Sharia, or Islam as a whole, requires safeguarding and protection in order to remain preserved and intact until the Day of Judgment. Secondly, they contend that fully capable duty-bound Muslims (*al-mukallfun*) need to obey an infallible leader.

To support and substantiate their viewpoint, Shiite theologians employ three approaches. Firstly, they refute the argument that Imamate is merely optional and demonstrate its necessity. Secondly, they aim to establish that the necessity of Imamate stems from pure reason rather than reliance on Sharia alone. Lastly, they present arguments grounded in common sense to emphasize the rationality of Imamate.

Opponents of Imamate, particularly among the Khawarij, have contended that the purpose of introducing and electing an Imam is to prevent social unrest and insecurity. However, they argue that the very existence of the Imam can lead to insecurity, sedition (*fitna*), and civil war due to power struggles (Taftazani 1375 Sh, 5:242; Lahiji 1383 Sh, 476). A significant portion of both Shiite and Sunni theological literature (Amidi 2002, vol. 5) is dedicated to addressing and refuting this line of argumentation.

Advocates of Imamate have provided two responses to counter this line of reasoning. Firstly, they argue that the unrest and seditions caused by the sending of prophets are far greater in magnitude than any disputes related to Imamate. Therefore, if Imamate is deemed problematic and harmful, then the institution of prophethood would be even more problematic and should be abolished. Since the Khawarij believe in the necessity of prophethood, whatever answer they provide to address this issue can be applied to Imamate as well (Tabrisi 1422 AH, 121).

Secondly, advocates of Imamate argue that the absence of an Imam would undoubtedly lead to even more unrest, seditions, and civil wars. Throughout history, we can observe that wise individuals in almost every society have emphasized the necessity of government and leadership (Tusi 1416 AH, 130). Other Shiite theologians, such as Laihij (1362 Sh, 108) and Ibn Maytham al-Bahrani (1417 AH, 45), share a similar perspective albeit with slight differences in their approach and ultimately arrive at the same conclusion.

In the second step, Shiite theologians critique the divine or tradition-based necessity of Imamate. The arguments put forth by al-Taftazani and other Sunni theologians can ultimately be boiled down to two explanations: consensus among Muslims and reason. However, the first explanation is deemed inadequate as the consensus itself can be called into question. This is because while some of the Prophet's companions left his body on the ground to elect his successor, others, including Imam Ali, did not participate in that meeting and instead continued to wash his body and bury him. Thus, there is no genuine consensus regarding this issue (Lahiji 1362 Sh, 111). The reliance on reason is a form of rational argumentation, which is in favor of the Shiite, rather than the Sunni, position. Al-Sayyid al-Murtada, in his critique of Qadi ʿAbd al-Jabbar on the tradition-based necessity of Imamate, openly declares that Imamate is rationally necessary and that there is no need for tradition-based reasons to prove it (Sayyid al-Murtada 1410 AH, 1:104).

In the third and final step, Shiite theologians strive to establish the rational necessity of Imamate after rejecting the tradition-based justifications. They assert that through

our own reasoning, we can deduce the necessity of Imamate. According to al-ʿAllama al-Hilli (1415 AH, 290) and Lahiji (1362 Sh, 108), Imamate is considered a grace or "lutf," and it is necessary for God to bestow grace upon His believers. Therefore, Imamate is deemed rationally necessary.

Lutf, or grace, refers to any action or blessing that assists us in drawing closer to God's submission and avoiding sins. However, it is important to note that this grace should not interfere with our freedom, free will, or ability to make choices. It should not determine our actions or undermine our right to choose (Bahrani 1406 AH, 175-76).

The term "iljà" is used to describe a state in which an individual lacks any choice or free will, as all their actions are predetermined. *Iljà* contradicts the concept of grace, which is an act of mercy and benevolence from God towards human beings. Therefore, Imamate is considered a form of grace, as it enables Muslims to avoid mistakes, fulfill their obligations, and thrive freely with the assistance of the Imam. Based on this analysis, Imamate is rationally necessary for God, and it is incumbent upon Him to appoint and introduce the Imam to the people through His Prophet.

In their works, Shiite theologians undertake two steps in their lengthy discussions. Firstly, they aim to establish that Imamate is a form of grace. Subsequently, they seek to demonstrate that it is incumbent upon God to bestow this particular form of grace. The significance of this discourse lies in its contradiction to the views of Ash'arite theologians who deny any obligations upon God and assert that He has complete freedom to do as He pleases, with no room for argument regarding what He should or should not do.

Shiite theologians engage in debates regarding the notion that sending prophets and appointing an Imam are forms of grace. However, it is important to note that some Shiite theologians, such as Mula Ahamd al-Narqi, have raised questions about the interpretation and application of grace in this context. Al-Narqi argues that while grace may be incumbent upon God, it is essential to clarify what we mean by grace. Are we referring to genuine grace or our own understanding of grace? If it is the former, then we have no direct knowledge of what true grace entails. Conversely, if it is the latter, then it is not obligatory for God to conform to our understanding of grace. Therefore, appealing to grace alone may not be an adequate argument (Naraqi 1375 Sh, 705-10).

The Characteristics of Imam

All Muslim theologians unanimously agree that anyone who is to lead the Islamic community must possess certain qualifications and be competent for the position. Sunni theologians have extensively described the essential traits required for an Imam, including maturity, justice, manhood, bravery, proficiency in Islamic law and Sharia, good physical health, and sensory abilities such as hearing and vision (Taftazani 1375

Sh, 5:233). Additionally, there are some disputed conditions, such as being from the Quraysh tribe, from which the Prophet himself and the four caliphs hailed. While many Sunni theologians consider this condition necessary, some Mu'tazilite theologians disregard it (Amidi 2002, 5:193).

Shiite theologians hold a distinct viewpoint on the characteristics of an Imam, setting them apart from other Islamic denominations. According to this perspective, an Imam must possess impeccable physical health, magnanimity, closeness to God, and inner virtues such as knowledge, chastity, courage, and justice (Tusi 1359 Sh, 430-31; Bahrani 1406 AH, 179). These traits are not subject to dispute and do not create any divisions between Shiite theology and other Islamic denominations. However, Shiite theologians require three additional traits that differentiate them from other denominations: (1) infallibility, (2) being the most deserving, and (3) being the most knowledgeable, so that no one else can challenge the Imam in these qualities (Hilli 1373 Sh, 198).

Infallibility

Infallibility is a profound characteristic that entails the avoidance of any sins throughout one's entire life. Among different Muslim denominations, only Imami and Ismaili Shiites emphasize that infallibility is an essential trait for the Imam, and they believe that all Imams must possess complete infallibility. However, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, a prominent Sunni theologian, refers to Quranic verses such as "Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you" (Quran 4:60) and "Be with the truthful" (Quran 9:119) to argue that infallibility is indeed necessary for leadership and guidance. However, given that it is impossible to recognize individual infallible leaders, he concludes that the entire Islamic community as a whole must be regarded as infallible. Consequently, he considers consensus (*ijmaʿ*) as a valid proof of infallibility, attributing this trait to the Muslim rulers, governors, and the Islamic community as a collective entity (Razi, n.d., 10:227).

All Shiite theologians unanimously believe in the concept of "ʿisma" or infallibility of the Imams. Traditionally, they begin by providing a definition of infallibility, then establish its necessity for Imamate, and finally address objections raised against this condition. According to their definition, "infallibility" is described as the inherent trait or characteristic of completely avoiding any sins throughout one's entire lifetime (Naraqi 1369 Sh, 97).

There are five key components found in any definition of infallibility: (1) the avoidance of both minor and major sins in speech and actions, (2) the continuity of this avoidance before and after assuming the position of Imam, (3) the inability to commit any unintentional error or mistake, (4) the impossibility of the Imam engaging in any wrongful acts, meaning they are not only infallible but also incapable of acting

otherwise, and (5) infallibility being compatible with free will and the ability to choose alternate options (Lahiji 1383 Sh, 469; Fayd al-Kashani 2005, 208).

Certain Shiite theologians offer a rational analysis of infallibility. According to this perspective, as our knowledge of good and evil expands, we become more capable of making righteous choices and avoiding wrongdoing. Through self-monitoring and self-discipline, we can attain a level of self-control and self-direction, which can be considered a form of limited infallibility. The Imams, as I will further explain, possess a comprehensive and profound understanding of good and evil. As a result, they are capable of avoiding any sin throughout their lives and attaining the pinnacle of infallibility (Tabrisi 1422 AH, 127).

Superiority

The Imam must be the most deserving of the position, superior and better than other individuals in all aspects, in order to be suitable for leading the Islamic community (Hilli 1417 AH, 495). The most well-known argument supporting this idea is as follows: the Imam is either inferior, equal, or superior to others. There is no other possibility. If the Imam is inferior, it would mean that we allow unsuitable and weak individuals to lead us, even though there are competent and capable people available to lead the Islamic community. Similarly, if there are more learned and knowledgeable scholars, it would be unreasonable to obey laypersons. This option, known as "Imamat al-mufaddal" or Imamate of the inferior, may be acknowledged by some Sunni scholars in challenging situations. However, from a Shiite perspective, it is entirely unacceptable. The second option is to acknowledge that the Imam is equal to others, having no superiority or inferiority. But why should we obey someone who is just like us and possesses no special excellence? Choosing between two equals and favoring one without any reason is unreasonable, which is referred to as "al-tarjih bi-la murrajih" or preponderance without a preponderant in Islamic philosophical and legal terminology. While most Muslim philosophers and theologians deny its possibility or feasibility, some Ash'arite Sunni theologians accept and defend it. Thus, according to Shiite arguments, the only rational choice is the third option: the Imam of the Islamic community should be the most superior individual in the community, and his superiority cannot be doubted (Tusi 1362 Sh, 362; Sayyid al-Murtada 1410 AH, 2:7; Tusi 1359 Sh, 431; Hilli 1373 Sh, 198; Bahrani 1417 AH, 66; Lahiji 1383 Sh, 464; Lahiji 1362 Sh, 116; Naraqi 1369 Sh, 143).

Some Shiite theologians cite Quranic verses to bolster their position. They refer to a verse in which God debates the pagans, asking, "Is he then who guides to the truth more worthy to be followed, or he who himself does not go aright unless he is guided?" (Quran 10:35). It is important to note that this argument is not based on tradition or a mere appeal to the Quran, but rather a form of rational reasoning (Hilli 1417 AH, 495; Hili 1415 AH, 310; Naqari 1369 Sh, 143).

Being the Most Knowledgeable

The Imam must possess greater knowledge than others. This requirement not only distinguishes Shiites from other Islamic denominations, but it has also caused divisions within the Shiite community itself. While all Shiites agree that the Imam must be the most knowledgeable among his contemporaries, the challenge lies in defining the meaning and scope of this knowledge. It is evident that the individual who seeks to succeed the Prophet and assume his position must have sufficient knowledge to guide and lead the Muslims and the Islamic community. This is a widely recognized notion that cannot be denied (Tusi 1362 Sh, 359, 365). According to the Shiite perspective, this knowledge is not acquired through ordinary learning, but rather through prophetic teachings and education. At the core of this knowledge is religious knowledge and everything necessary for leading the community. Without such knowledge, it would be unreasonable to assume the role of guiding society. Therefore, the Imam must possess comprehensive knowledge of Sharia in both religious and worldly matters (Tusi 1359 Sh, 430).

To this extent, there is no debate regarding the Imam's knowledge. However, the question arises: does their knowledge extend beyond this? While some Shiite theologians, such as al-Sayyid al-Murtada (1410 AH, 2:8) and al-Muhaqqiq al-Hilli (1373 Sh, 209), limit the scope of this knowledge to religious matters alone, others broaden its scope to encompass all possible knowledge, including diverse skills such as proficiency of various languages (Halabi 1339 Sh, 103).

In contemporary times, there are intense debates surrounding the extent of the Imam's knowledge. These debates have resulted in various disputes and intellectual challenges, creating a fertile ground for the emergence of new and more convincing interpretations.

Conclusion

I have attempted to provide a comprehensive overview of Imamate in Islamic thought, with a focus on the Shiite view and its main points and reasons. In conclusion, we can summarize the key ideas of Shiite doctrine on Imamate as follows:

1. Imamate is the general and comprehensive leadership of Muslims in both worldly affairs and religious practices. This definition is accepted by both Sunni and Shiite schools of thought.

2. Imamate is considered one of the fundamental principles of faith and Islamic theology, as it ensures the protection and continuity of Sharia. Thus, the same reasons that justify the necessity of Prophets can be applied to the necessity of Imams.

3. The Imam must possess the necessary qualities and capabilities for leadership. This includes being infallible, the most knowledgeable, and the most virtuous among their contemporaries.

4. The Imam must be free from any intentional or unintentional wrongdoing, which requires his infallibility. As the protector and primary interpreter of religious principles, they must be safeguarded from errors and mistakes in order to fulfill their duties. Infallibility is a result of deep faith and righteous actions, making it voluntary and reasonable.

5. The Imam must excel above all others in order for their election to be justified. Therefore, the Imam is regarded as the most virtuous and superior to their peers.

6. The Imam must possess superior knowledge and understanding of Sharia in order to correctly interpret and communicate the duties of Muslims. Thus, they should be more knowledgeable than other Muslims.

7. Since infallibility is an unseen quality that cannot be discerned, the Imam must be designated by the Prophet or the former Imam. Therefore, a clear text or explicit statement is the only means of determining and identifying the Imams.

8. The existence of the Imam is a grace from God, and it is necessary for God to manifest and express this grace. This necessity is not merely based on transmitted tradition, but also based on rational reasoning.

9. The most important responsibilities of the Imam include protecting Sharia from distortion, interpreting and disseminating its commandments, and guiding the lives of believers both outwardly and inwardly.

10. Imamate signifies the continuation of prophethood and is always essential for the well-being of the community. Thus, no community can ever be without an Imam, although their presence may not always be apparent. Therefore, there may be situations where the Imam is hidden or absent.

11. Despite being infallible and the most knowledgeable, the Imam is still a human being. Shiites do not attribute any divine attributes to them, as blurring this distinction can lead to the emergence of extremist groups like Ghulat. Contemporary Shiite scholar and theologian al-Muzaffar emphasizes this point, stating, "The Imams are human beings like us, and they have their rights and obligations like us. They are simply the chosen servants of God" (Muzaffar 1417 AH, 326).

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