

Muharram Discussion, Part 3: Imam

Syed-Mohsin Naquvi

We reached the point in this discussion in Part 2, where we mentioned the situation that Imam Husayn considered himself the rightful Imam. In the various letters that Imam Husayn wrote to the people of Kufa and Basra, he mentions that himself.

The people of Kufa, who had been inviting Imam Husayn to come and lead them, were also addressing Imam Husayn as such. They complained that they did not have a proper leader among them and that they looked to him as their Imam.

That means that the people knew about the place of Imam and the concept of Imam, and Imam Husayn himself confirms that.

Why is it then that the larger Muslim community wants to reduce and actually ignore the place of Imam in the Islamic ideology?

In the general understanding, the Imam is a person who leads the daily prayers in the mosque.

Let us look at two specific verses of the Qur'an here to ease our understanding.:

The first verse is from Sura Nisa (chapter 4):

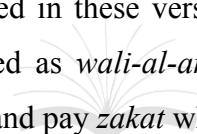
يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ فَإِنْ تَنَازَعْتُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ فَرُدُّوهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَالرَّسُولِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ۚ ذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا

“O you who believe, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority from among you; then if you quarrel about anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day. This is best and more suitable to (achieve) the end.” (Qur’an 4:59).

The second verse is from Sura Al-Ma’eda (Chapter 5):

إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَهُمْ رَاكِعُونَ

“Your ally is none but Allah and [therefore] His Messenger and those who have believed – those who establish prayer and give *zakah*, and they bow [in worship].” (Qur’an 5:55)

As we can see clearly, there is a parallel between the two verses. Three groups have been addressed in these verses, Allah, His *rasul* and a group of *mu’mineen*. In the first one, they are identified as *wali-al-amr* (people of authority) and in the second one are those who establish prayer and pay *zakat* while doing *ruku’*.  Generating Communities Through Education

When we look at the commentaries, we find a great discussion about the *wali-al-amr*. Who are those people who could be identified as such? Are they the governors and presidents of the countries where we live?

As compared to that, those who give *zakat* while in *ruku’* can only point to one person, that is, Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib.


These two verses that we have just cited, connect the concept of *wilaya* and that of *imamat*. That is the line of authority sanctioned by the Qur’an. That is the line that Muslims have to follow after the Prophet. But as we have seen, in the earliest times, as soon as the Prophet was

gone from this world, the Muslim community of that time, either by choice or by accident chose a path that was totally different.

We therefore address the concept of *imamat* in Islam in this part of the discussion.

In the introduction to this series, we mentioned a specific detail about the Prophet's *hijra* to Madinah. The Prophet put forward a condition for his coming to Madinah, that was that he was a prophet of Allah and all his actions would be governed by WAHY. The people of Madinah accepted the condition. Only then did the Prophet accept to go to Madinah.

This is the main concept of *wilaya* in Islam.

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That highlights the fact that the supreme force that governed all future Islamic ideology was spirituality (*ruhaniyya*).

However, once the Prophet settled in Madinah and began giving the new law, he also became the temporal ruler of the Muslim community, in other words, he became the political ruler of the Muslim community.

Every time there was any kind of dispute in the community, a verse or a number of verses would be revealed (which eventually became part of the holy Qur'an) and that was how disputes would be settled. All such discussions would be held in the mosque under the leadership of the Prophet. So much so, that once one of the wives of the Prophet was accused of adultery (Chapter 24 of the Holy Qur'an). The Prophet assembled the community in the mosque where a long discussion was held and Qur'anic revelation settled the matter.

However, as soon as the Prophet passed away, Muslims seemed to have forgotten that basic fact. The people of Madinah assembled at a place called the *saqifa* of Banu Sa'eda and started discussing the future of the community. The meeting was crashed by a handful of the Makkan *muhajirun* and Abu Bakr was chosen the *khalifa*, or the temporal ruler of the community.

The very basic question arises as to why that meeting was not held in the mosque. The logical answer would be, because the Muslims did not think the matter was religious in its nature. Obviously, they considered the political matters of the community quite separate from the religious matters.

Effectively, the prophetic custom of keeping all matters, including social and political, under the rubric of Islamic spirituality, was violated. Here the event of *saqifa* showed that politics became independent of spiritual guidance.

That is where the community began going wrong.

Did the Prophet leave a gap in his teaching and guidance that the Muslim community had to take that action?

No. not at all.

Both the holy Qur'an and the various extra-Qur'anic statements made by the Prophet are a testament that the teachings and the guiding principles were complete.

Let us look at it.

The Prophet had said many things other than the Qur'anic verses in his lifetime. One of those sayings, which the Prophet had repeated many times goes as follows:

- (1) I am leaving among you two valuable (heavy) objects, the Book of Allah and my AhlulBayt - my progeny; if you attach yourself to those two, never ever shall you go wrong. They will not separate from each other until they meet up with me at the Pond.
- (2) At the time of the very early, and in fact his first public announcement of his mission, he had pointed to Imam Ali and declared him to be his brother, his heir, his *wasi* and his *khalifa*.
- (3) During the last year of his life, the Prophet performed his last *haji*. While returning to Madinah after that *haji*, the Prophet stopped at a place called *Ghadeer Khum* and delivered a long message in which the above two things were repeated and then raising Imam Ali's hands he declared: To whomever, I am the *mawla*, so is this Ali *mawla*."

Let us now look at the Qur'anic explanation of the concept of Imamat:

This is a verse from Sura Isra (Chapter 17):

يَوْمَ نَدْعُو كُلَّ أُنَاسٍ بِإِمَامِهِمْ فَمَنْ أُوتِيَ كِتَابَهُ بِيَمِينِهِ فَأُولَئِكَ يَقْرَءُونَ كِتَابَهُمْ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ فَتِيلًا

(Remember) the day when We will call every people with their Imam; then whoever is given his book in his right hand, these shall read their book; and they shall not be dealt with unjustly. (Qur'an 17:71).

This is a clear warning to everyone to look for, recognize, and choose the right *imam* and follow him. The Sunni scholars, on the other hand, have opined variously when commenting on this verse. In their opinion, the word Imam could mean the leader, the apostle, the Book, or the list of deeds.

One of the great Sunni scholars, Mulla Ali Qari, has stated in his *Sharh-e-Fiqh-e-Akbar*, that there is a famous *hadith* of the Prophet (pbuh), which goes like this:

"من مات و لم يعرف امام زمانه فقد مات ميتة جاهلية"

"Anyone who dies without knowing the Imam of his time, dies the death of ignorance."

Please note that the Shi'a scholar Mulla Baqir Majlisi has quoted this same *hadith* from sixteen different sources in his monumental work *Bihar al-Anwar* (102 volumes), and they are all from our *imams* through the chain of Shi'a narrators. The wording of the *hadith* is exactly the same. We have given here the Sunni source. This *hadith*, when read in conjunction with the Qur'anic verse (17:71), does not leave any doubt for an intelligent person that the word "*imam*" here means for what it is - the *imam* of the time.

Abdullah Yusufali writes in reference to this verse, as follows:

Some understand the meaning to be that each people or group will appear with its leader, who will bear witness to its virtues or sins. Another view is that the *imam* is their revelation, their Book. A third is that the *imam* is the record of deeds spoken of in the next clause. I prefer the first. (Abdullah Yusufali, *Qur'an - Translation and Commentary*, Note: 2266).

The belief in divinely inspired infallible leaders, or Imams, is based on verses in the Holy Qur'an as explained by the Prophet himself and other members of the holy Ahl a--Bayt. There are twelve verses in the Qur'an which list the attributes, qualifications and requirements of an

Imam, and according to the Shi'a faith, there are twelve Imams after our Prophet (may Allah's peace and our salams be unto them all). What a beautiful coincidence that is! Or, maybe, that is also a subtle indication of the truthfulness of this belief for the followers of the Truth. The verses are listed: 2:124, 9:12, 11:17, 15:79, 17:71, 21:73, 25:74, 28:5, 28:41, 32:24, 36:12, 46:12.

The first indication of this concept in the Qur'an is in the story of Ibraheem:

وَإِذِ ابْتَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ رَبُّهُ بِكَلِمَاتٍ فَأَتَمَّهُنَّ فَقَالَ إِنِّي جَاعِلُكَ لِلنَّاسِ إِمَامًا ۖ قَالَ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِي ۖ قَالَ لَا يَنَالُ عَهْدِي الظَّالِمِينَ

"And when His Lord tried him with some words and he completed them, He said: I will make you an *imam* of men. 'And from my children?' asked Ibraheem. He said: 'My covenant does not include the unjust.'" (Qur'an, 2:124)

Then there are other verses in the Qur'an, which we listed above, which explain the station of an Imam in the community, his responsibilities and his rights and duties.

It is this concept that Imam Husayn has in mind when he mentions the term '*imam*' in his letters and speeches and it is that same concept that the people of Kufa mentioned in their letters to Imam Husayn while inviting him to come and lead them.

In later parts of this article, we shall see that the concept of an *imam* and *imamat* are so closely related to the Tragedy of Karbala.