



Knowing Your Imam

a brief article about why everyone should know their imam.

Knowing your Leaders:

And when your Lord said to the angels, “verily I am going to make in this earth a vicegerent”, they said, “wilt thou place in it such as will make mischief in it and shed blood, while we celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy holiness?”. He said, “surely I know what you do not know” [1]

As illustrated by this verse from the Quran, the goal of mankind and his reason for creation is to be the vicegerent of Allah (khalifat Allah) upon the earth. The definition of a vicegerent is one who represents the will of his Master perfectly at all times, independent of any direct orders from the Master in every specific situation. The qualifications for a khalif of Allah have been mentioned in other places in the Quran, and include [2].

- Complete and continuous remembrance of Allah
- Not being deviated by selfish desires, or the will of others, and perfect following of the revelation and establishment of every virtue
- Awareness of all of Allah’s moral and physical laws (as the khulafa must act in accordance with these laws in every second, they must understand what these laws are)
- Their hearts are in a state of “sakina” – whereby crisis and temptation do not sway them and cause them doubt or loss of faith
- They have pure birth, conduct, character, and are nearest to Allah
- They are just in ruling people

Clearly where all mankind have the potential to be khalifa of Allah, not all have attained it and fulfilled these criteria. Given his earthly and physical limitations - and as stated by the angels in the above verse - mankind is capable of shedding much blood and causing great mischief. And yet Allah has chosen him to be the khalifa above the perfectly obedient angels; not by some arbitrary choice, but as a result of some *merit*. There is a qualification possessed by mankind which makes him capable of shouldering the responsibility of vicegerency, referred to as a knowledge of some “names” in verses 31 to 33 of the same chapter. The grammatical structure of these verses indicates that the names belonged to a group of animate, conscious, living beings who were shown to the angels; and not to inanimate objects or abstract knowledge [3]. In verse 31 of chapter 2 Allah asked the angels to describe the subjects of the names, which they could not do, in order to prove the superior qualification of humankind. We therefore see that simply knowing the possessors of these names is enough merit to outweigh the chaos and mischief caused by mankind, and raise him to the highest rank.

The Holy Prophet (saw) has said according to a hadeeth, in regards to this verse [4].

“the objects shown to the angels were 5 lights. Allah informed the angels pointing to each light respectively: This is Muhammad, the most praised,

derived from My name, the Praised One. This is Ali, the high, derived from My name, The Most High. This is Fatima, the original, derived from My name, Originator of the heavens and earth. This is Hassan, the bountiful, derived from My name, the Benefactor. This is Husayn, the good, derived from My name, the Good in origin. O Angels! It is in love of these 5 that I have created the universe!"

Nabi Adam (as) was chosen as the first representative of Allah on the earth, and the first manifestation of these names in it: the first manifestation of the perfection of the human state which is found in the Prophet (saw) and his Ahlul Bayt (as). And so with each prophet in turn, coming as a guide and example for his people, as a reflection of the excellence of the Prophet (saw) and Ahlul Bayt (as): until the perfection of religion on earth with Islam, and the final, full manifestation of the most beloved creatures to Allah in creation. The final Messenger of Islam (saw) had sacrificed his life and happiness on earth in order to deliver the message of Islam, and bring the people out of darkness and into light by the will of Allah. Without leadership, upon the death of the Prophet (saw) conflict would threaten all progress which had been made, as corruption and self-interest creep into power once more. The Last Prophet (saw) made clear the importance of adhering to the Ahlul Bayt (as) in some of the last words he ever spoke, which are narrated to be as follows:

"It is probable that I be called soon and I will respond. Then, I leave behind me among you two weighty (very worthy and important) things: The Book of Allah, which is a stretched string from the heaven to the earth, and my progeny, my Ahlul-Bait; for verily Allah, The Merciful, the Aware, informed me that never, never, will these two get separated from each other until they meet me at the Houd of Kauthar (the Pond of Abundance). Therefore, be careful how you will treat due to those two in my absence." [5]

And in another narration, the following was added: ***"Never, never, shall you get astray if you attach yourselves to these two."*** [6]

Allah has said in the Quran, ***"If you do not know, ask the men of wisdom (among Ummah)"*** [7]. This verse was revealed in order to introduce the 5 holy lights of Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Hussein (as), to whom there have been added 9 descendants of imam Hussein (as). On different occasions according to various hadeeths, the messenger of Allah introduced these as the guiding Imams, torches in the darkness, and those upon whom Allah has bestowed 'knowledge of the Book' [8]. In order to be guided and fulfil our destiny as human beings, we must look to the true and most perfect representatives of Allah for help. The Prophet (saw) has been narrated to have said:

"The parable of my Ahlul-Bayt is similar to that of Noah's Ark. Whosoever embarks it certainly will get rescued, but the one who opposes the boarding of it, surely gets drowned" [9]

History too attests to the importance of the Imams (as) as leaders of humanity. In the difficult years after the death of the Prophet (saw), the imams continued to guide Muslims in spite of being robbed of their rightful status as leaders of the Islamic state. The corruption which emerged in the Imam's lifetimes (as) would have resulted in the loss of Islam from the face of the earth, had it not been for their numerous incredible sacrifices made in the name of Allah, for our sakes. One such example is the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (as), which shook the Islamic world and re-ignited the spirit of jihad and initiated the crumble of tyranny, with repercussions that are still visible to this day.

Knowing the Imam of the Age:

For Muslims: The importance of knowing the Imams (as) in general has so been confirmed by both Quran and hadeeth. However there is also a specific requirement and responsibility upon Muslims to know the imam of the present age.

Allah has said in the Quran:

(Remember) the day when We will call every people with their Imam... [10]

and in another verse:

And We made them Imams who call to the Fire, and on the day of resurrection they shall not be assisted [11]

We see that on the Last Day, people are classified according to who they followed in life, which will result in a painful chastisement if the wrong imam is followed. In order to protect ourselves from this, we must make a great effort to discover and know the imam of the age - our imam (as) - and follow him alone [12]. It is worth noting, the verse indicates **all people**, not just all Shia or all Muslims, will be called with their Imam; therefore the responsibility of knowing and following the Imam (as) is that of **every human being**, irrespective of background.

The Prophet (saw) has emphasised the importance of knowing the Imam (as) for Muslims in his statement, as narrated in hadeeth:

“Whoever dies and does not know the Imam of his age, he dies the death of Ignorance (Jahiliyya)” [13]

The power of these words is indicated by the sharp contrast between the teachings of Islam and the time of Ignorance. Jafar ibn Abi Talib (ra) has described the pre-Islamic state of Jahiliyya in the following terms:

“We were a people in a state of ignorance and immorality, worshipping idols and eating the flesh of dead animals, committing all sorts of abomination and shameful deeds. Breaking the ties of kinship, treating guests badly and the strong among us exploited the weak.” [14]

We see that according to this hadeeth, *someone who has admitted there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad (saw) is His messenger and practices Islam can be equated with someone of the worst ignorance if he does not know his Imam (as)*. In other words, the truth of Islam cannot be approached in ignorance of the Imam (as), and no benefit can be derived by actions without knowing him (as) [15]. This concept is logical in sight of the status of the Prophet (saw) and Imams (as) as perfection of the human state discussed previously.

For Believers: The present age poses a great number of challenges and temptations over and above simpler times in the past. In terms of the believer, there are no more Divine revelations or messengers with clear miracles as immediate examples. The examples of the lives of previous messengers are available to us, but do not cover all situations which may be encountered in the current age. The period of occultation of the imam (as) has been mentioned in traditions as the most difficult and severe test of God, and the faith of believers compared to that of the followers of Noah (as), who remained steadfast after a severe trial [16]. The concept of the awaited saviour of mankind has surfaced in many faiths such as Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism and Buddhism, but it is only Islam which gives a concrete form and structure to this hope upon which the gaze of all believers is transfixed [17]. Ayatullah Baqir as Sadr writes, *“The Mahdi is not to be born in the distant future. He is already living amongst us and shares our joys and sorrows: His appearance will mean not only the materialization of an Islamic aspiration, but will also be the realization of a hope cherished by the entire humanity.” [18]*

The Mahdi (as) is the imam of the time, who appreciates the trials and suffering of the people of this age, who witnesses the conflict and oppression upon his subjects and is eagerly awaiting the time of his own reappearance, just as his subjects await it. He is a leader for all believers, and may be known by any who wish to know him. He is concealed from sight, but still guides his followers, whether Muslim or not, when they need it [19]. His coming will herald the end of injustice upon earth and the fulfilment of the divine promise made in every revealed faith. Firm faith in

his reappearance (as) is a source of strength and motivation for all believers, to strive to possess the characteristics and qualities of the imam's (as) companions, as well as a comfort of faith in a happy future [20]. Even if death claims us before his (as) coming, awaiting the Mahdi (as) will in itself become our deliverance. Imam Jafar as Sadiq (as) has said according to hadeeth:

“One who awaits our order is like one who gives [his] life in the path of God”

and also,

“One who is zealous about the companionship of Imam Mahdi (a.s.) should wait and act piously and in a noble manner. Such people when they die before the reappearance of Imam Mahdi (a.s.) will have the reward of being his companion. Hence strive and wait. You deserve this, O Forgiven Ones!”[21]

Imam Hussein (as) has said, according to hadeeth:

“The Ninth of my descendants is the Imam who will rise with the Truth. God will grant life to earth through him after its death. The true faith will supersede all religions through him. His absence shall be lengthy during which many people will go astray. Only a few will remain on the Right Path. They shall suffer pains, people will put pressure on them, saying, “let us know when this promise of the Return of the Mahdi is fulfilled”. Those who will bear the pains and denials patiently will get the same rewards as those who accompanied the Prophet during his expeditions for Jihad.”

For Humanity: In terms of all mankind, the human race has developed such that men are able to manipulate natural resources to make life on earth simpler and more prosperous for the vast majority. Yet instead of the security this advancement should deliver, many individuals have not found contentment, and continue to feel a lack of direction and deep depression which have no relation to their material or financial condition. In pursuit of the material, the spiritual development of mankind has been neglected; leaving a void which cannot otherwise be filled. The lack of direction and leadership has been recognised in recent centuries, and a number of ideologies have surfaced in an attempt to address this, but have all failed [22]. Despite professing a disbelief in divine doctrines, many non-believers have recognised the ideological integrity of belief in a day when peace will prevail on earth [23]. Yet without the framework of religion this belief remains an abstract, unapproachable ideal, which leaves its followers powerless to work effectively towards its realisation.

Conclusion:

The imam of the present age (aj) is the last jewel in the crown of the Ahlul Bayt (as), the saviour of humanity promised and expected by many people irrespective of the bounds of faith or creed. In order to fulfil our destinies as humans, we too must strive to become reflections of these perfect people. In order to emulate them we must know them, we must learn as much about their natures as we can, and we can only be successful in our goal by following them. Love of them is derived from love of Allah, as they are his representatives on earth, and reflect His attributes. To be like them is to please Allah, as they are the perfection of the state of vicegerency for which mankind was created. To know them is, at its most basic, to be human; and at its best, to know them is to know Allah through their representation of His will. Although prophethood has ceased the line of prophets is still living in Allah's book and the practices of the Apostle (saw), embodied in the person of the Last Imam (as), the great Reformer who will implement what the Last Prophet (saw) has brought. We can never be happy or successful in ignorance of our Imam (as) because it will be ignorance of our most immediate and personal example, our Divinely appointed leader, the great

hope for all humanity, and the final manifestation of the Light of the most beloved of all creatures to Allah for whose sake the world was created. The results of his advent are recognised as global destiny by believers and non-believers alike, yet all ideologies which deny him are doomed to frustration and futility. Our responsibility is to strive to know him and to attain characteristics like his companions, and by doing so we will secure our prosperity even if we die before his blessed return.

[1] Holy Quran, 2:30

[2] taken from Pooya/ Ali Tafsir of 2:30-39, available online at www.al-quran.org.uk and www.al-islam.org

[3] Pooya/Ali tafsir, as previously cited, 2:31

[4] <http://www.al-islam1.org/quran/process.asp?tAliCommentary>

[5] <http://al-islam.org/flowers/2.htm>

[6] ibid.

[7] Quran 16:43 and 21:7

[8] <http://al-islam.org/flowers/2.htm>

[9] ibid.

[10] Quran, 15:71

[11] Quran, 28:41

[12] Imam Mahdi course, Lesson 1: Necessity of knowing Imam Mahdi (AJ), Etrat University, Autumn 2005

[13] ibid.

[14] http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Articles/companion/jafar_ibn_abi_talib.htm

[15] Imam Mahdi course, Lesson 1, as previously cited.

[16] <http://www.duas.org/SahifaMahdi/Index.htm>

[17] Originality of the concept of Mahdi (Messianic Leader), Imam Mehdi course, Lesson 2, Etrat University 2005

[18] www.al-islam.org/awaited

[19] <http://www.al-islam.org/kaaba14/15.htm> particularly the story of the Christian Major who sought imam Mehdi's (as) help in the desert, and was delivered.

[20] Imam Mehdi course, Lesson 2, as previously cited

[21] <http://www.duas.org/SahifaMahdi/Index.htm>

[22] Imam Mehdi (aj) course, Introduction, Etrat University 2005

[23] Imam Mehdi (as) course, Lecture 2, as previously cited