



# ISMA'ILISM XVII. THE IMAMATE IN ISMA'ILISM

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In common with all major Shi'ite groups, the Isma'ilis (q.v.) believe that the Imamate is a divinely sanctioned and guided institution, through whose agency Muslims are enabled to contextualize the practice of their faith and to understand fully the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of the Qur'ān. The Imamate exists to complement prophethood and to ensure that the divine purpose is fulfilled on earth at all times and in all places.

### THE PRINCIPLE OF THE IMAMATE

The historical underpinning for this vision of Islam is based on the cardinal principle of Shi'ite belief that, after the death of the Prophet Moḥammad, his cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali (q.v.), became Imam following a specific designation (*naṣṣ*) made by the Prophet, based on divine command, before his death (see [ĠADIR KOMM](#)). Shi'ite historical understanding thus locates itself within a framework of interpretation supported by Qur'anic verses and Prophetic Hadith. The institution of the Imamate is to continue thereafter on a heredity basis through 'Ali and his wife, Fāṭema (q.v.), the Prophet's daughter, succession being based on designation by the Imam of the time. Adherence to the doctrine of the Imamate as a pillar of faith meant not only acceptance of,



but also devotion to, the legitimate successors of the Prophet. The Imamate is therefore linked to the concept of *welāya*, devotion to the Imams. The two major branches of the Isma'ilis, the Nezāris and the Mosta'lis, affirm a shared belief in the Imamate, but give allegiance to different lines of Imams. The Nezāri Isma'ilis believe in the physical presence of a living Imam, who for them today is Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, the 49th Imam in direct descent from the Prophet through 'Ali and Fāṭema. The Mosta'lis believe that their 21st Hidden Imam went into physical concealment around 524/1130; while the Imamate continues in his line, in his physical absence authority is fulfilled by a vicegerent who acts on his behalf. At present this role is held by the 52nd *dā'i* (q.v.), Sayyednā Borhān-al-Dīn (b. 1333/1915) who leads the Dā'udi Ṭayyebi Bohras, while a smaller Solay-māni Bohra community found in Yemen is headed by their 51st *dā'i*, 'Abdallāh b. Moḥammad (Daftary, pp. 353-57).

One of the most systematic and succinct expositions of Isma'ili ideas of the Imamate is to be found in a work of Qāzi No'mān (d. 363/974) called *Da'ā'em al-eslām*. No'mān, a leading jurist of the Fatimid period of Isma'ili history, played a key role in the formation and elaboration of several legal as well as theological works that were regarded as definitive in his time. *Welāya*, as the basis for belief in the Imamate as defined by Qāzi No'mān, is the foremost among the pillars of Islam. However, prior to discussing the question of *welāya*, he differentiates between *eslām* (submission) and *imān* (faith), basing himself on a Qur'ānic verse: "The desert Arabs say 'we believe.' Say (to them) 'You have no faith (*imān*).' But rather they should say 'we have submitted (*aslama*)'" (Qur'ān 49:14). From this he deduces that one can thus be a Muslim (*moslem*, i.e., a member of the religion of Islam) without necessarily being a *mo'men*. The latter implies belief in and devotion to the rightful Imam; this, in fact, constitutes true faith. The Shi'ite and Isma'ili claim to *welāya* is deduced by No'mān on the basis of historical events revealing 'Ali's close proximity to the Prophet, as well as his being the most worthy among the Companions to succeed the Prophet. Then follows a discussion of the indications of preference for 'Ali made by the Prophet throughout his life and confirmed in the declaration at Ġadir Ḳomm after the so-called Farewell Pilgrimage (*koṭbat al-wadā*): "He whose *mawlā* (trustee, helper, lord) I am, 'Ali is his *mawlā*." According to this view, having been attached to the establishment of the Imamate, 'Ali was granted the authority to interpret the Qur'ān and to initiate change in society in accordance with these principles adapted to the context of the time. The importance of *welāya* in No'mān's scheme lies in the fact that the Imam deserves the love and allegiance of the community, quite apart from



whether, at a given time, the Imamate is a political office or not (Qāzi Mo'mān, *Da'ā'em* I, pp. 14-98; tr., I, pp. 18-122).

No'mān then goes on to give the Isma'ili concept far wider scope by relating it to Qur'ānic analogies and Islamic tradition. He argues that the tradition of designating and establishing the succession has been adhered to throughout the history of the earlier prophets and quotes the specific Qur'ānic instance where Jesus announced the coming of Moḥammad; he also cites other cases of prophets who had designated their legatee (*waṣi*). The Imamate therefore complements the cycle of prophethood (*nobuwwa*), sustaining the continuity of divine guidance until the Day of Judgment. In the Isma'ili view, the function of prophethood to convey God's message had ended, but the need for affirmation, interpretation, stewardship and spiritual leadership was not yet over: the Imamate fulfils this role.

While the juridical view, as stated in the *Da'ā'em*, establishes the foundational Qur'ānic and historical basis for the Imamate, Isma'ili thought also developed a philosophical approach for this concept. Ḥamid-al-Din Aḥmad Kermāni (d. ca. 411/1021), the Isma'ili philosopher and *dā'i*, who lived during the reign of the Fatimid al-Ḥākem (r. 386-411/996-1021), discusses the fusion of the philosophical basis of Imamate with its juridical aspects. For him, the essence of governing involves the organization of human beings, with all the variety of individual opinions and prejudices they represent, into a divinely ordered pattern. If such a pattern were to become understood and then followed, society as a whole would reflect greater order and consequently greater happiness. According to Kermāni, therefore, the *Imam* interprets the elements of the divine revelation so that each has its proper place within the integrity of the whole, assuming thereby that human beings and society will find proper equilibrium in both material and spiritual matters. Justice (*'adl*) then comes to be conceived as this state of equilibrium, at the individual and social levels. In the general definitions given by al-No'mān, as well as the philosophical exposition of Kermāni, a significant aspect of the Imamate links it to the achievement of justice in society, which in turn reflects the proper intellectual, spiritual, and social maturity of individuals in society. The concepts of *din* "religion" and *donyā* "the world," are both elements in the proper ordering of society and the Imam's guidance sustains a balance between the two dimensions of life (Walker, pp. 16-24, 62-79).

A further philosophical discourse is represented in Persian Isma'ili writings such as those of Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow (d. after 462/1070) and Naṣir-al-Din Ṭusi (d.



672/1274), where, in connection with their discussion of the concept of higher truths (*ḥaqā'eq*, sing. *ḥaqiqa*), or according to their work, it was through teaching (*ta'lim*) from the Imam that knowledge (*'elm*), in the fullest sense of the word, could be attained. Such knowledge encompassed the dimension of *zāher*, exemplifying the outward expression of Islam and its practice (as in the *Da'ā'em* of Qāzi No'mān) and the *bāṭen*, as embodied in the inner meaning of the *ḥaqā'eq* of revelation. The Imamate, through the symbolic interpretation (*ta'wil*) of the Qur'ān, enabled an understanding of the metaphysical, philosophical and symbolic dimensions of the faith, which is a composite of *shari'a* and *ḥaqiqa* (Hunsberger, pp. 72-90).

Nāṣer-e Kōsrow's philosophical writings and his literary work, the *Divān* (collection of poems), as well as the devotional literature preserved in several vernacular languages in the Isma'ili tradition, provide passages that illustrate how the Imamate is the gateway through whose intercession, an individual passes through the stages of knowledge that bring about attainment of spiritual goals and knowledge. In his work *Sayr wa soluk*, Ṭusi relates the concept of *ta'lim* to the instructional role of the Imamate. He states that after having reached a certain stage through action and individual intellectual effort, an individual becomes aware of the necessity of an authoritative teacher. He states: "Since the circumstances of this world are (always) changing, if at a certain time or under certain circumstances, the speaker of truth (*moḥeqq*) shows himself to Mankind in a different form expresses himself differently, manifests the truth differently, or institutes the divine law differently (from that of his predecessor), it will not mean that there is any difference in his truthfulness, because (in his essence) he is free from transformation and alteration. Transformation and alteration are the necessary attributes of this world" (Ṭusi, *Sayr*, text, pp. 4-18; tr., pp. 27-48).

History in Isma'ili thought, therefore, reflects varied patterns through which institutional order can be realized, according to the guidance of the Imam of the time. The dominant patterns of this process are characterized in the two eras that unfold over time and space: (1) periods of quiescence and interiorization, when circumstances may limit a broader engagement with the world, and (2) a more enabling time when it is possible to engage intellectually and institutionally in the world. In historical and human terms, society during these eras reflects a model of history in which justice remains a constant goal and the function of the Imamate is to give that goal personal meaning and institutional expression and coherence, within the context of faith and reason,



applied in diverse and changing circumstances.

The metaphors that underpin this view of history can be considered as elements that give a permanent imprint to Isma‘ili understanding of the sacredness of spiritual authority and knowledge, and to the view that, even when the processes of history might appear to temporarily inhibit the fulfilment of justice, the idioms inherent in these symbols retain their universality. The metaphors connect the social world, in this sense, with the cosmic world and represent a quest for, and the hope of, attaining “higher stages of perfection,” inner and outer, through the Imamate.

#### THE IMAMATE IN HISTORY

*The early Imams.* Following the death in 40/661 of ‘Ali, whom all Shi‘ites regard as the first Imam, the Isma‘ilis acknowledge his son Ḥosayn as having inherited the full authority of Imamate. Although ‘Ali’s eldest son Ḥasan is also acknowledged as a successor (in most Shi‘ite accounts), the Nezāri Isma‘ilis regard his role as having been custodial, until such time as Ḥosayn assumed the Imamate. Following Ḥosayn’s tragic death at Karbalā in 61/680, he was succeeded by his son ‘Ali Zayn-al-‘Ābedin and then Moḥammad al-Bāqer and Ja‘far al-Šādeq who died in 148/765). Though none of them exercised a political role, this early period is considered significant, as it is around the Imamate that the identity of the Shi‘ites as a group within the Muslim community comes to be consolidated.

*The Fatimid Caliph-Imams.* After the death of Imam Ja‘far-al-Šādeq, the Shi‘ites became eventually divided into two main groups. One accepted Musā al-Kāẓem, one of Imam Ja‘far’s sons, and these eventually came to be known as Imamis or Twelver Shi‘ites (\*q.v.), and others acknowledged another son Esmā‘il (q.v.) and his descendants. It is in this time that the Imamate appeared during the rise of the Fatimids, beginning with the public proclamation in 297/909 of the Imamate of ‘Abd-Allāh b. Ḥosayn al-Mahdi (r. 297-322/909-34), the first Fatimid caliph. The group of Imams prior to this, between Esmā‘il and al-Mahdi, are regarded as part of the period of public quiescence and concealment (*saṭr*), as they sought to escape persecution.

The Imams of the Fatimid era are well known, and this period of Imamate reflects the flowering of intellectual, cultural, and economic life that became the hallmark of the vast Fatimid empire. The Isma‘ili Imams now ruled as Fatimid caliphs, and their authority was acknowledged in many parts of the



Muslim world of the time. Isma'ili communities flourished in the Middle East, Central Asia, Persia, South Asia, and North Africa (Daftary, pp. 152-222).

*The Imamate in Persia.* Following the death of the Fāṭimid Caliph-Imam al-Mostaṣfer Be'llāh in 487/1094 (r. 427-97/1036-94), the Isma'ilis became divided into two major groups, one acknowledging continuity of the Imamate in his son Nezār (d. 488/1095), while others recognized a younger son, al-Mosta'li (r. 487-95/1094-1101). The latter group continued to follow al-Mosta'li's son al-Āmer (r. 495-524/1101-30). On al-Āmer's death in 524/1130, the majority of followers accepted his infant son al-Ṭayyeb, but believed that he went into concealment and that subsequent Imams succeeding him remain hidden, awaiting manifestation of the end of time.

The successors of Nezār inaugurated the Nezāri Isma'ili Imamate and a state in Persia and Syria, with its main base in the fortress of Alamut (q.v.). This period of the Imamate lasted until the Mongol invasion and destruction of the Isma'ili state in 654/1256. The Imamate continued thereafter in various parts of Iran, with the Imams maintaining a discrete profile and providing continuity and guidance through their representatives to the scattered communities in Persia, Syria, and Central and South Asia (Daftary, pp. 386-429; see also [FATIMIDS, relations with Persia](#)).

*The modern period.* The modern period, from the middle of the 19th century, is marked by the transition of the Imamate from Persia to India and then to Europe. It is largely dominated by the lives and activities of three Imams: Ḥasan 'Ali Šāh, Aga Khan I (q.v., d. 1881), Solṭān Moḥammad Šāh, Aga Khan III (d. 1957), and the present Imam, Prince Karim Aga Khan IV (b. 1936).

In its modern and contemporary context, the Imamate has been able to provide Isma'ili communities with guidance and structures to contextualize and implement their faith in a changing world. Among the Nezāri Isma'ilis, who have emerged in the last hundred years as a well-organized and coherent Muslim community, the Imamate has created new institutions for the governance, social development and religious continuity of the various worldwide communities, spread in some thirty countries. In addition, by creating a global network of institutions, under the umbrella of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), the Imam of the time, Prince Karim Aga Khan, building on the groundwork laid by his grandfather, the previous Imam, has sought to realize the social conscience of Islam, through programs that promote social, cultural, and educational development, encompassing some of



the poorest areas of Africa and Asia, to serve significant populations, regardless of their origin, gender, or religion. In this way, the Imamate continues to provide guidance and support to Ismaʿili communities and the populations among whom they live (Daftary, pp. 504-48).

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